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## Responsiveness in the Face of Sexual Challenges: The Role of Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs

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### ABSTRACT

Implicit—or lay—sexual beliefs have been associated with how people respond to sexual challenges in romantic relationships. People who endorse *sexual destiny beliefs* view a satisfying sex life as the result of finding the right partner and report poorer sexual, relationship, and personal well-being when there are sexual challenges. In comparison, people who endorse *sexual growth beliefs* view satisfying sexual relationships as requiring hard work and effort to maintain and tend to report high sexual, relationship, and personal well-being even when facing sexual challenges. High sexual responsiveness – being motivated to meet a partner’s sexual needs – is associated with maintaining high sexual satisfaction, even when couples face sexual challenges in a relationship. In the current research, we tested whether sexual growth and destiny beliefs are associated with general and sexual responsiveness and whether the associations are moderated by the presence of sexual challenges. Across three (clinical and non-clinical) samples ( $N = 820$ ) facing different types of sexual challenges (Study 1 ( $M_{age} = 31.64$ ,  $SD = 8.53$ ), clinically low sexual desire; Studies 2 ( $M_{age} = 32.63$ ,  $SD = 10.19$ ) and 3 ( $M_{age} = 32.40$ ,  $SD = 9.31$ ), unmet sexual ideals; Study 3, changes in sex since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), we found that sexual growth beliefs were associated with higher sexual responsiveness and perceived partner sexual and general responsiveness, even when couples were coping with sexual challenges, whereas sexual destiny beliefs were not associated with responsiveness, and at times were associated with lower sexual responsiveness and perceived partner sexual and general responsiveness. This research provides initial evidence about how implicit sexual beliefs are associated with sexual and general responsiveness when couples are coping with sexual challenges in a romantic relationship.

Romantic relationships involve the coordination of partners’ needs and preferences, which can lead to conflicts of interest and disagreements (Hsueh et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2016). One domain of relationships that may be particularly important, albeit challenging, for partners to coordinate their interests is the domain of sexuality (Papp et al., 2013; Rehman et al., 2017). Given that many established romantic relationships are sexually monogamous (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004), partners play a key role in meeting each other’s sexual needs. At the same time, many long-term couples experience sexual challenges at some point in their relationship, including desire discrepancies between partners, different sexual interests or preferences, unmet sexual expectations, or one or both partners coping with a sexual dysfunction (Bergeron et al., 2015; Mark, 2012; Santilla et al., 2008), all of which can be associated with lower relationship and sexual satisfaction (Bois et al., 2013; Mark & Lasslo, 2018; Rosen et al., 2018; Santilla et al., 2008). In fact, sexual differences are one of the most common sources of conflict between partners (Risch et al., 2003) and may be particularly difficult for couples to overcome as sexual issues are one of the most common reasons couples attend marital therapy (Henry & Miller, 2004) and end their romantic

relationship (Yeh et al., 2006). However, literature on relationship conflict emphasizes that the ways in which couples navigate and resolve conflict is more important for maintaining relationship quality than the conflict itself (Canary, 2003; Wagner et al., 2019). As such, sexual challenges, such as desire discrepancies between partners, do not always result in lower sexual and relationship satisfaction (Kim et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2021), suggesting that the ways in which couples respond to sexual differences may be more important for their relational and sexual well-being than the presence of sexual differences themselves.

According to the literature, people hold implicit beliefs about the stability (incremental, malleable or growth-oriented) and fixedness (entity, fixed, or destiny oriented; Dweck et al., 1995) of aspects of their personality (Costa & Faria, 2018), relationships (Knee, 1998) and sexuality (Maxwell et al., 2017). People’s lay beliefs about relationships and sexuality (i.e., growth and destiny beliefs; Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017) are particularly consequential to how people assign meaning to and respond to relationship and sexual conflict. Growth beliefs are associated with perceiving challenges as conquerable and responding to challenges with

more adaptive coping strategies (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018) and fewer destructive behaviors (Bohns et al., 2015). In contrast, destiny beliefs are associated with perceiving challenges as fixed and responding to challenges with maladaptive coping strategies (Bohns et al., 2015; Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017). Growth and destiny beliefs are not associated with using significantly different coping strategies at low levels of relationship and sexual conflict (Knee et al., 2001; Maxwell et al., 2017; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018; Wu & Zheng, 2022), suggesting that these beliefs may be most impactful in the presence of challenges (Maxwell et al., 2017; Raposo et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2022; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018).

### Implicit Theories of Relationships and Sexuality

Lay beliefs about relationships and sexuality (termed implicit beliefs of relationships and sexuality; Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017) are associated with how people respond to conflicts of interest in a relationship. People who are higher (vs. lower) in *destiny beliefs* view relationship and sexual satisfaction as the result of having a highly compatible partner with whom they were meant to be from the start and share natural sexual chemistry (Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017). As such, they tend to view conflict as a sign that the relationship is not meant to be and engage in more passive coping strategies (i.e., denying or avoiding the issue; Knee, 1998) when faced with relationship conflict. In contrast, people who are higher (vs. lower) in *growth beliefs* emphasize that relationship and sexual satisfaction is maintained through hard work and effort (Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017). As such, people higher in growth beliefs are more likely to endorse relationship maintenance strategies in the context of relationship conflict (Knee, 1998) such as active coping and planning (i.e., making a plan of action, discussing their feelings with their partner or others and prioritizing the issue) and they remain committed to their relationship even when conflict is unresolved and they view their partner less favorably (Knee et al., 2004). This may be because sexual growth beliefs view relationship difficulties as changeable and as an opportunity to work through issues to ultimately strengthen the relationship (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). These beliefs are independent of each other, rather than two ends of the same spectrum. As such, people can endorse both high (or low) sexual growth and destiny beliefs, although these beliefs tend to be negatively correlated with each other (Maxwell et al., 2017; Raposo et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2022).

A key difference between people higher in sexual growth and destiny beliefs is how they respond to sexual differences. When considering hypothetical sexual challenges, those who endorsed more destiny beliefs reported wanting to use less adaptive coping strategies (i.e., denying the problem or disengaging from the relationship; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018), and engaging in more destructive relationship behaviors (i.e., neglect and avoidance; Bohns et al., 2015; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018). Those higher in destiny beliefs also place greater importance on sex for relationship quality (Maxwell et al., 2017) and as such sexual dissatisfaction is more

detrimental to their relationship satisfaction (Sutherland & Rehman, 2018). In contrast, even when there are signs of sexual incompatibility or sexual challenges in a relationship, sexual growth beliefs are associated with higher sexual and relationship satisfaction (Böthe et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2017), higher sexual desire (Raposo et al., 2021), using more adaptive coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support and planning to resolve the issue; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018), and fewer destructive responses (i.e., neglecting a partner or avoiding the issue; Bohns et al., 2015). For couples transitioning to parenthood (a time period in which couples are at increased risk of experiencing sexual challenges such as low desire; see review by Haugen et al., 2004) sexual destiny beliefs are associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Maxwell et al., 2017) and poorer sexual well-being (Rossi et al., 2022). Similarly, research on community couples showed that on days couples reported a sexual disagreement, those higher in sexual destiny beliefs also reported more negative sexual experiences on that day (i.e., feeling frustration and disappointment) whereas those higher in sexual growth beliefs reported more positive sexual experiences in general and did not report more negative sexual experiences in response to sexual disagreements (Maxwell et al., 2017).

Implicit beliefs about sexual satisfaction are also associated with how partners respond to a clinical sexual issue (Raposo et al., 2021). In a sample of couples coping with Female Sexual Interest and Arousal Disorder (FSIAD; clinically low sexual desire), people higher in sexual destiny beliefs had poorer relationship, sexual, and personal well-being outcomes (Raposo et al., 2021). For example, the partners of women coping with FSIAD who had higher sexual destiny beliefs reported lower sexual desire, and both partners reported lower relationship satisfaction, more conflict, and more depressive and anxiety symptoms. The association between sexual destiny beliefs and negative outcomes in the context of low sexual desire may be because destiny believers view relationship challenges as unchangeable and as a sign that the relationship is not meant to be (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). In contrast, women diagnosed with FSIAD who were higher (vs. lower) in sexual growth beliefs reported higher sexual desire, even in the context of coping with a clinical sexual challenge (Raposo et al., 2021).

### Sexual Responsiveness in the Face of Sexual Challenges

One of the most common reasons couples seek sex therapy and most common and frequent sexual challenge couples face is sexual desire discrepancy (i.e., partners having different levels of desire than one another; Dewitte et al., 2020; Mark, 2015). Sexual desire in romantic relationships is highly interdependent (Prekatsounaki et al., 2022) and as such desire discrepancies can be associated with sexual distress for both partners (Jodouin et al., 2021). The partner with higher sexual desire may be vulnerable to the emotionally painful experience of sexual rejection when they express their sexual needs (Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Dobson et al., 2020; Ford & Collins, 2013). The partner with lower sexual desire may feel guilty about their low desire or may

feel obligated to comply with their partner's sexual advances to maintain their relationship (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Muise et al., 2012; Woo et al., 2011). In fact, women diagnosed with clinically low sexual desire (FSIAD) are more likely to engage in sex with their partners for avoidance goals (i.e., avoiding disappointing a partner or conflict; Bockaj et al., 2019) and report lower satisfaction and more distress than women without sexual problems (Rosen et al., 2019).

One factor that is associated with maintaining sexual satisfaction, even in the face of sexual challenges, is sexual responsiveness (i.e., understanding and attending to a partner's sexual needs or preferences or having a partner who is understanding and attentive to one's sexual needs; Muise & Impett, 2015). One assessment of a person's sexual responsiveness is their level of sexual communal strength or the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs (Muise & Impett, 2015). Both being a sexually responsive partner and having a partner who is highly sexually responsive is associated with a host of positive relationship qualities, including greater relationship and sexual quality, and higher sexual desire (Day et al., 2015; for a review, see Impett et al., 2020; Muise & Impett, 2015). Those who are higher in sexual responsiveness tend to be perceived by their partners as more responsive during sex (Muise & Impett, 2015) and in general (Muise et al., 2013). These perceptions may help maintain satisfaction in the face of sexual challenges because people feel more comfortable sharing their needs and vulnerabilities with a partner who provides responsive support (i.e., a partner that cares about, validates and understands their needs; Clark & Lemay, 2010; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis et al., 2017).

For people who are experiencing sexual challenges, having a partner who is highly responsive to one's sexual needs has been shown to buffer the negative associations between sexual challenges and relationship and sexual quality. That is, both partners in a relationship can maintain better relationship and sexual quality when one partner is highly sexually responsive even when experiencing common sexual challenges, such as sexual desire discrepancies, low sexual desire or unmet sexual ideals, (Balzarini et al., 2021; Day et al., 2015). One possible reason that people who are higher in sexual responsiveness maintain satisfaction in the face of desire discrepancies is that they are willing to engage in sex and meet their partner's sexual needs even when those needs oppose their own (Day et al., 2015) and they are more understanding and less resentful when a partner declines their sexual advances (Kim et al., 2018).

Sexual responsiveness is also a key factor in helping couples cope with clinical sexual issues such as vulvodynia (i.e., pain during sex; Bois et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2018, 2017a) and Female Sexual Interest Arousal Disorder (FSIAD) (i.e., low sexual desire or arousal accompanied by distress; Hogue et al., 2019). For couples facing clinically low sexual desire, those who are more sexually responsive are also more likely to engage in sex for approach-motivated reasons (i.e., to enhance intimacy in their relationship) and as a result, report higher sexual desire and satisfaction (Hogue et al., 2019). That is, those who are

more sexually responsive may be able to maintain satisfaction despite navigating distressing sexual challenges, like women's clinically low desire, than those who are less sexually responsive. Even for couples who are not facing sexual issues but are susceptible to low sexual satisfaction due to individual traits (i.e., attachment anxiety; Raposo & Muise, 2021) or external factors (i.e., couples transitioning to parenthood; Muise et al., 2017b), when one partner is sexually responsive or people perceive that their partner is sexually responsive, people can be buffered against low satisfaction.

Another specific challenge people tend to face in relationships is having a partner who does not always meet their expectations (Knee et al., 2001). People often hold ideal standards about the traits or behaviors they want in a partner or the features of a relationship they most desire (Fletcher et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2001), including ideals about their sexual relationship (Balzarini et al., 2021) but it is common for a partner to fall short, at least to some degree, from these ideals (Knee et al., 2001). In general, the greater the discrepancy between a person's actual partner and their ideal sexual and romantic partner, the more likely they will be to experience lower relationship and sexual satisfaction and commitment (Balzarini et al., 2021; Knee et al., 2001). Given that the majority of romantic relationships are sexually monogamous (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004), unmet sexual ideals may be particularly consequential in romantic relationships as partners often rely heavily on each other to meet their sexual needs. In fact, people's sexual ideals have been shown to fluctuate on a daily basis and are significantly associated with relationship quality such that on days people have more unmet sexual ideals, they feel less sexually satisfied and committed to their partners (Balzarini et al., 2021).

Though unmet sexual ideals are associated with poor sexual and relationship quality, people have partners who are responsive to their sexual needs are buffered against this negative association. One possible reason people who are either generally or sexually responsive are able to maintain satisfaction even when their partner does not meet their sexual ideals is because they are more approach motivated (i.e., focused on their partner's pleasure; Muise et al., 2013), more willing to make sacrifices for their partner's benefit (Visserman et al., 2021), and less avoidance motivated (i.e., focused on the costs of sacrificing their own sexual needs; Muise et al., 2013). Above and beyond having a sexually responsive partner, the *perception* that a partner is sexually responsive is a stronger buffer against the negative associations related to unmet sexual ideals. One possible reason for this association is that responsiveness in relationships creates a positive feedback loop such that when one partner is responsive, the other partner is more likely to perceive their partner's responsiveness and in turn, they are more willing to make sacrifices and view sacrifices as less costly (Visserman et al., 2021), invest in their relationship (Murray et al., 1996) and are less interested in pursuing alternative partners (Segal & Fraley, 2016). This suggests that when people have unmet sexual ideals, responsiveness may help couples maintain satisfaction



through shifting a person's focus from what a partner lacks to what a partner provides (i.e., feeling that their sexual needs are cared about, validated, and understood). Though the benefits of sexual responsiveness have been established, research has not yet explored *who* may be more sexually responsive in the face of sexual challenges.

### Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs and Sexual Responsiveness

Implicit relationship theories have also been associated with ideal partner preferences and relationship quality. When asked to think about the extent to which their current partner matched their ideal romantic partner, people who were higher in growth beliefs and lower in destiny beliefs (also known as being "cultivation oriented") and had a partner who does not meet their ideals are actually *less* likely to experience lower relationship satisfaction and more likely to report feeling happier and less depressed following discussions about such discrepancies (Knee et al., 2001). In contrast, individuals with high destiny beliefs and low growth beliefs (termed "evaluation orientation") have shown increased levels of hostility after such discussions (Knee et al., 2001), possibly because information that alludes to incompatibilities between partners may be associated with the dire notion that these challenges cannot be resolved, and that the relationship is doomed.

For people higher in sexual destiny beliefs, signs of sexual incompatibility are associated with their willingness to meet their partner's sexual needs. Whereas sexual growth believers are willing to make accommodations regardless of sexual compatibility levels, sexual destiny believers are only willing to make accommodations for their partner when they believe they are highly sexually compatible with them (Maxwell et al., 2017). It is suggested that sexual destiny believers are willing to make sexual changes for a partner when they perceive a strong match because they do not perceive meeting their partner's requests as hard work (Maxwell et al., 2017). In contrast, sexual growth believers may be more likely to make sexual accommodations regardless of perceived fit between partners because they view it as an opportunity to foster growth and closeness in their relationship (Maxwell et al., 2017). In fact, sexual destiny believers place higher importance on sex for relationship satisfaction regardless of their perceptions of sexual compatibility (Maxwell et al., 2017). The importance they place on sex paired with their willingness to accommodate their partner's sexual needs only when they perceive high sexual compatibility posits that sexual destiny believers may be both more strongly impacted by sexual challenges and less likely to invest effort in resolving the challenge. In contrast, sexual growth believers are more flexible on the importance of sex such that they rate it as more important when they perceive their partner to be highly sexually compatible and they perceive sex as less important when they perceive that they are sexually incompatible with their partner (Maxwell et al., 2017). This means that in response to low sexual desire or unmet sexual ideals, people higher in sexual growth beliefs might remain responsive to a partner's sexual needs, whereas those higher in sexual destiny may be less sexually responsive.

In line with these ideas about sexual growth beliefs, in a recent study conducted in China with individuals in romantic relationships who were sexually active, people higher in sexual growth beliefs were more motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs and were more satisfied with their sexual communication (Wu & Zheng, 2022). However, higher sexual destiny beliefs were also associated with being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs and satisfaction with sexual communication (Wu & Zheng, 2022). It is possible that the association between sexual destiny beliefs and high sexual responsiveness is contingent upon perceptions of partners' sexual compatibility and given that this previous study did not assess sexual incompatibilities or challenges, these findings may only apply to couples who believe they are highly sexually compatible (Wu & Zheng, 2022). Research including couples experiencing both non-clinical and clinical sexual challenges illustrates that sexual destiny beliefs are associated with poorer relationship and sexual wellbeing (Maxwell et al., 2017; Raposo et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2022), suggesting that destiny believers may respond differently when there are sexual challenges.

In the current research, we aimed to extend the literature on implicit beliefs of sexuality to investigate the role of sexual growth and destiny beliefs in coping with challenges in the sexual domain, given that might be when these beliefs are most consequential. Specifically, we proposed that people higher in sexual growth beliefs (those who believe sexual satisfaction requires hard work and effort to maintain) will be more generally and sexually responsive to their partner's needs and they will be perceived by their partners as higher in general and sexual responsiveness when faced with sexual issues such as low sexual desire and unmet sexual ideals. In contrast, people higher in sexual destiny beliefs (those who believe sexual satisfaction is a result of early compatibility and finding the right partner) will be less generally and sexually responsive and they will be perceived by their partners as less generally and sexually responsive when faced with the same sexual issues. Given that past research demonstrates that the ways in which couples cope with, navigate and resolve conflict may be most impactful for their relationship wellbeing (Canary, 2003; Wagner et al., 2019), understanding the role sexual growth and destiny beliefs play in responsiveness may help inform clinical and counseling interventions aimed toward couples facing common sexual challenges such as low sexual desire and unmet sexual ideals.

### The Current Research

Across three studies, we tested the associations between implicit sexual beliefs and general and sexual responsiveness amongst three different types of sexual challenges (low sexual desire, unmet sexual ideals, and changes in sex lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In Study 1, with a sample of couples in which a woman met diagnostic criteria for FSIAD (i.e., clinically low sexual desire), we tested associations between both partners' sexual growth and destiny beliefs and their general and sexual responsiveness, perceived partner general responsiveness, and perceived partner sexual responsiveness. We predicted that couples experiencing clinically low sexual desire with higher growth beliefs would also be higher in general and sexual responsiveness and perceived general and sexual

responsiveness, whereas those with higher sexual destiny beliefs would be lower in general and sexual responsiveness and perceived general and sexual responsiveness. In Study 2—a 21-day daily experience study of community couples – we tested the same associations as well as whether the associations differ based on daily reports of met versus unmet sexual ideals in the relationship. We expected that the association between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and general and sexual responsiveness would be moderated by unmet sexual ideals such that when there are more unmet sexual ideals, those higher in sexual growth beliefs would be more generally and sexually responsive and perceived by their partners as more responsive, whereas those higher in sexual destiny beliefs would be less generally and sexually responsive and perceived by their partners as less responsive. In Study 3—a longitudinal study of couples living together at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic—we tested the same associations as well as whether the associations differ based on weekly reports of met versus unmet sexual ideals in the relationship and positive versus negative changes in people’s sex lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had the same predictions as Study 2 for both unmet sexual ideals and negative sexual changes since the pandemic. Across all studies, the measures we assessed in the current research were from larger studies about relationships and sexuality; as such, the studies included different yet similar measures of our key constructs (general and sexual responsiveness; perceived general and sexual partner responsiveness). For a summary of the findings across studies, refer to [Tables 8 and 9](#).

## Study 1

In Study 1, in a sample of couples coping with FSIAD, we investigated links between both partners’ sexual growth and destiny beliefs, and their perceived general and sexual responsiveness.<sup>1</sup> Our pre-registered analytic plan can be accessed here: [https://osf.io/3pm5w/?view\\_only=b77d864924914bc89fc7355a2d3ae2ad](https://osf.io/3pm5w/?view_only=b77d864924914bc89fc7355a2d3ae2ad)

## Method

### Participants

In Study 1, we recruited women who met the diagnostic criteria for FSIAD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and their romantic partners. To determine whether women met the diagnostic criteria, participants were assessed in a clinical interview (described below under Procedure). We recruited participants through online and physical advertisements in Canada and the United States as part of a larger study (see Rosen et al., 2019). In addition to the women meeting FSIAD criteria, eligible couples had to either be living together or have in-person contact at least four times per week, be in a committed relationship for at least six months, have had previous sexual contact with their partner, be 18 years of age or older, not currently

pregnant or within one year post-partum, and be able to read and understand English. In this study, in line with average sample sizes in dyadic research, we aimed to recruit 100 couples (Kenny et al., 2020). After excluding participants due to suspicious responses ( $n = 14$ ) or failing any attention check ( $n = 26$ ), our final sample consisted of 97 women with FSIAD and their partners ( $N = 88$  men, 7 women, 2 non-binary). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 70 years ( $M = 31.64$ ,  $SD = 8.53$ ). The sample was primarily white (74.2%), heterosexual (77.3%), and married (41.8%), the average relationship length was 7.67 years ( $SD = 7.16$ ), and women were coping with FSIAD for 4.55 years on average ( $SD = 5.26$ ). For more information about this sample (see Rosen et al., 2019).

### Procedure

Couples were pre-screened for eligibility via telephone as part of a larger study (see Rosen et al., 2019). Then, women reporting low desire completed a clinical interview (30–45 minutes) to determine a diagnosis of FSIAD over the telephone with a doctorate-level clinical psychologist or graduate student in a clinical psychology program under the supervision of a clinical psychologist. Details about the clinical interview are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): [https://osf.io/mecrq/?view\\_only=28b389e4b1ac4fb2a6fb7c617abc6b6a](https://osf.io/mecrq/?view_only=28b389e4b1ac4fb2a6fb7c617abc6b6a). Once eligibility and consent were obtained, participants completed an online survey. If participants did not complete the survey within one week from receiving the link, they received a phone call from a research assistant and a reminder e-mail two and three weeks after. Surveys expired after four weeks. Each partner was compensated \$18 CAD (\$15 USD) as an Amazon giftcard for completing the survey.

### Measures

In addition to the key variables outlined below,<sup>2</sup> both partners reported their age and relationship duration (this is a couple-level variable calculated by taking the mean of partners’ reports). See supplement Table S1 for correlations between all measures.

### Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs

We measured implicit sexual beliefs using the short version of the Implicit Theories of Sex Scale (Maxwell et al., 2017, Study 5) with items rated on 7-point scales (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). Five items assessed sexual destiny beliefs (e.g., “A couple is either destined to have a satisfying sex life or they are not”; women with FSIAD:  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ; partners:  $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and five items assessed sexual growth beliefs (e.g., “In a relationship, maintaining a satisfying sex life requires effort”; women with FSIAD:  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = .85$ ; partners:  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = .99$ ).

<sup>1</sup>We preregistered sexual goals as an additional outcome, but focus on responsiveness for the current paper (see supplement for details).

<sup>2</sup>We preregistered sexual goals as additional outcomes in Studies 1 and 2, but we will only focus on responsiveness in this paper. We also preregistered sexual distress as an additional moderator. See our supplement for more information.

**Table 1.** Associations between implicit sexual beliefs and main outcomes in Study 1.

	Women's Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Partner's Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Women's Sexual Growth Beliefs		Partner's Sexual Growth Beliefs	
	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t
Women's PPGR	-.26(.11)	<b>-2.26*</b>	-.20(.11)	-1.71	.22(.15)	1.46	-.09(.13)	-.74
Partner's PPGR	-.10(.12)	-.82	-.25(.12)	<b>-1.99<sup>†</sup></b>	.26(.17)	1.56	-.07(.14)	-.54
Women's PPSR	-.16(.12)	-1.28	-.15(.12)	-1.17	.12(.17)	.70	.01(.14)	.07
Partner's PPSR	-.01(.12)	-.05	-.21(.13)	-1.64	.34(.17)	<b>2.06*</b>	-.003(.14)	-.02
Women's Sexual Responsiveness	.04(.06)	.55	-.07(.06)	-1.13	.13(.08)	1.51	-.05(.07)	-.76
Partner's Sexual Responsiveness	-.04(.05)	-.78	-.14(.05)	<b>-2.90**</b>	-.09(.06)	-1.36	.004(.05)	.08

<sup>†</sup> $p = .050$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Degrees of freedom ranged from 91.72 to 92.60. Women = women with FSIAD. PP Responsiveness = perceived partner general responsiveness. PP Sexual Responsiveness = perceived partner sexual responsiveness.

### Sexual Responsiveness

We measured sexual responsiveness using the Sexual Communal Strength Scale (SCSS; Muise et al., 2013) with six items (e.g., "How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?"; women with FSIAD:  $\alpha = .73$ ,  $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .65$ ; partners:  $\alpha = .66$ ,  $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) rated on a 5-point scale (0 = "not at all" to 4 = "extremely").

### Perceived Partner Responsiveness (General and Sexual)

We measured perceived partner general responsiveness (modified from Maisel & Gable, 2009) with three items (e.g., "In general, in your relationship how much do you feel cared for by your partner?"; women with FSIAD:  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 5.74$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ; partners:  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) rated on a 7-point scale (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "a lot"). We also measured perceived partner sexual responsiveness (Bois et al., 2013) with three items (e.g., "In general, during or immediately after a sexual activity with your partner how much do you feel cared for by your partner?"; women with FSIAD:  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ; partners:  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) rated on a 7-point scale (1 = "not at all" to 7 = "a lot").

### Analysis

Data were analyzed with multilevel modeling using mixed models in SPSS guided by the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM). We tested distinguishable (1 = "women with FSIAD," 2 = "partners") two-level dual intercept models in which persons were nested within dyads (Kenny et al., 2020). Separate models were tested for each outcome. We grand-mean centered all predictors in the models (i.e., actor and partner sexual destiny beliefs and sexual growth beliefs) and entered them simultaneously, which represents between-person differences. Unstandardized  $b$ s can be interpreted as the average change in the dependent variable for every one-unit change in the predictor value.

To test whether any of our key associations differ by how long the couple had been coping with FSIAD, we tested moderations by FSIAD duration (i.e., assessed by asking women with FSIAD how many months they have experienced low sexual interest/arousal) for all associations between sexual destiny beliefs and sexual growth beliefs and our key outcomes. This allowed us to test whether any of the associations are stronger for those who have been coping with FSIAD for a longer (vs. shorter) duration. We probed significant

interactions by calculating the simple slope effects using one standard deviation value below and above the sample mean of the moderator (Aiken et al., 1991).

### Results

#### Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs and Responsiveness in the Context of Women's Low Sexual Desire

As shown in Table 1, when women with FSIAD reported higher sexual destiny beliefs, they perceived their partner as less generally responsive to their needs ( $b = -.26$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t(92.01) = -2.26$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $CI [-.48, -.03]$ ). When partners of women with FSIAD reported higher sexual destiny beliefs, they were less sexually responsive ( $b = -.14$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(92.00) = -2.90$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $CI [-.23, -.04]$ ) and perceived their partner with FSIAD as less generally responsive ( $b = -.25$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(92.60) = -1.99$ ,  $p = .050$ ,  $CI [-.50, .00009]$ ). In contrast, when women with FSIAD reported higher sexual growth beliefs, their partners perceived them as more sexually responsive ( $b = .34$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t(92.06) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .042$ ,  $CI [.01, .67]$ ). Two of the associations between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and responsiveness were moderated by FSIAD duration. In both cases, the partners of women with FSIAD who had stronger sexual destiny beliefs perceived their partner as less generally and sexually responsive when they had been coping with FSIAD for a shorter versus longer duration (see supplement for details). Taken together, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with lower self-reported sexual responsiveness and perceived general and sexual responsiveness among couples coping with clinically low desire, whereas women with FSIAD who were higher in sexual growth beliefs were perceived as more responsive to their partner's sexual needs in the context of coping with low desire.

### Study 2

In Study 2, we tested the same associations between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and general and sexual responsiveness<sup>3</sup> in a community sample of couples who completed a 21-day daily experience study. We also tested whether associations differed based on the extent to which people

<sup>3</sup>We preregistered sexual goals as additional outcomes in Studies 1 and 2, but we will only focus on responsiveness in this paper. See our supplement for more information.



reported having daily met vs. unmet sexual ideals.<sup>4</sup> Our pre-registered plan can be accessed here: [https://osf.io/pj3ue/?view\\_only=68f2bb9b759f47c7b4bfff9b7a032dd2](https://osf.io/pj3ue/?view_only=68f2bb9b759f47c7b4bfff9b7a032dd2)

## Method

### Participants

In Study 2, we recruited couples who were currently living together or seeing each other at least five out of seven days per week, and sexually active in their current relationship, 18 years of age or older, residing in Canada or the U.S., able to read and understand English, and had daily access to a computer with internet. Both partners had to agree to participate. These data were collected as part of a larger study on community couples' daily lives. Data were collected at baseline, every day for 21 consecutive days, and again at follow-up three months later (note: our outcomes of interest were not assessed at the follow-up timepoint and thus, were not included in the current analyses). We aimed to recruit at least 125 couples based on an APIM power analysis and recommendations for achieving sufficient power with dyadic data by Kenny et al. (2006). One couple was excluded because they only completed the baseline survey of the study. Based on screening criteria and timing, our final sample consisted of 121 couples at baseline and the daily level ( $N = 115$  men, 124 women, 2 non-binary, 1 missing). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 78 years ( $M = 32.63$ ,  $SD = 10.19$ ). The sample was primarily White (65.3%), heterosexual (81.4%), and married (46.7%), and the average relationship length was 8.50 years ( $SD = 8.41$ ).

### Procedure

Participants were recruited through online (e.g., Reddit, Kijiji, Facebook, Craigslist) and physical (e.g., Canadian university campuses, public transportation centers) advertisements in Canada and the U.S. as part of a larger study (see Raposo & Muise, 2021). Couples were pre-screened for eligibility via e-mail and telephone. Once eligibility and consent were confirmed, each partner completed a 60-min online baseline survey, followed by 10–15-min online surveys for 21 consecutive days, and a 20-min online follow-up survey three months later. Participants were asked to complete the surveys before bed each night and to begin the study on the same day as their partner. Each partner was compensated up to \$60 CAD (\$48 USD). To promote retention, participants were compensated for the baseline survey and any daily surveys that they completed within the 21-day window.

### Measures

In addition to the key variables outlined below, both partners reported their age and relationship duration (this is a couple-level variable calculated by taking the mean of each partner's reports). See supplement Table S2 in our supplement for correlations between all measures.

**Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs.** We measured implicit sexual beliefs at background with the same measure as Study

1 (sexual destiny beliefs;  $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ , sexual growth beliefs;  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = .87$ ).

**Sexual Ideals.** We measured sexual ideals (Balzarini et al., 2021) daily with one item (e.g., “My partner matched my sexual ideals today.”;  $\alpha = .55$ ,  $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). We reverse scored this item such that higher scores indicated more unmet sexual ideals.

**Sexual Responsiveness.** We measured sexual responsiveness on days couples had sex using a shortened version of the SCSS (Muise et al., 2013) with three items (e.g., “During sex, I was focused on meeting my partner's needs.”;  $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”).

**Perceived Partner Responsiveness (General and Sexual).** We measured perceived partner general responsiveness (modified from Maisel & Gable, 2009) daily with three items (e.g., “Today I felt: Cared for by my partner.”;  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) rated on a 4-point scale (1 = “not at all” to 4 = “a lot”). We measured perceived partner sexual responsiveness (Raposo & Muise, 2021) daily with one item<sup>5</sup> (e.g., “Today, my partner was perceptive of my sexual needs.”;  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “very much”). In previous research the one item assessment of perceived partner sexual responsiveness loaded onto the same factor as a 6-item measure of perceived partner sexual communal strength (see Raposo & Muise, 2021).

## Analysis

To test our predictions, we conducted multilevel models using MIXED models in SPSS guided by the APIM. We ran two-level cross-models with random intercepts and random slopes in which persons were nested within couples, and persons and days were crossed to account for the fact that both partners completed the daily surveys on the same days (Kenny et al., 2006). Given that we did not have predictions about gender differences, that our sample was inclusive of mixed-gender and same-gender couples and a test of distinguishability indicated that couples were not distinguishable by gender on our key outcome ( $X^2(9) = 4.12$ ,  $p > .90$ ) we treated the couples as indistinguishable. We modeled separate random intercepts and slopes for each partner within the couple but treated the partners as indistinguishable and utilized compound symmetry matrices for the random effects to constrain the two partners to have the same parameters. Random slopes were modeled for time-varying predictors, but covariances between random effects were not modeled. Our predictor variables (sexual growth and destiny beliefs) were between-person variables assessed only in the baseline survey. Individuals received scores

<sup>4</sup>We also preregistered sexual distress as an additional moderator. See our supplement for more information.

<sup>5</sup>We used a truncated measure of perceived partner responsiveness because in another study researchers compared the single item that we used in Study 2 to the more comprehensive measure of sexual communal strength, and they found that these two measures were highly positively correlated ( $r = .67$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and loaded onto the same construct and were associated with other relationship, sexual variables in similar ways (Raposo & Muise, 2021).



for both sexual growth and sexual destiny, and both beliefs were entered simultaneously in statistical models. Both own and partner versions of these variables were grand-mean centered and entered simultaneously as predictors. The moderator variable (sexual ideals) was entered as both a within (i.e., change within people over the 21 days) and between person effect (i.e., difference between people over the 21 days) by entering both the person-mean centered and aggregated predictors in the model. We tested moderations by actor sexual ideals but not partner sexual ideals. Any significant moderations between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and unmet sexual ideals predicting sexual responsiveness were followed up with simple effects tests at high (+1SD) and low (−1SD) levels of sexual ideals.

## Results

### Sexual Destiny Beliefs and Responsiveness in Daily Life

Over the 21-day study, people higher in sexual destiny beliefs were less sexually responsive to their partners' needs and they perceived their partners as less generally responsive to their own needs (see Table 2). We tested whether any of the associations were moderated by the extent to which people felt their sexual ideals were met versus unmet that day (i.e., person-mean centered sexual ideals). None of the associations with sexual destiny beliefs were moderated by daily sexual ideals, suggesting that people who were higher in sexual destiny beliefs were also less sexually responsive in their sex lives, even on days when their sexual ideals were met. We also tested whether any of the associations were moderated by the extent to which people felt their sexual ideals were met versus unmet over the course of the 21-day study (i.e., the aggregate of sexual ideals). For associations with sexual destiny beliefs, one effect was moderated by overall levels of unmet sexual ideals (see Table 3). Over the course of the 21-day study, unmet sexual ideals moderated the association between partners' sexual destiny beliefs and how generally responsive they were perceived to be. When people had consistently unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks), those with partners higher in sexual destiny beliefs perceived their partners as less generally responsive to their own needs,  $b = -.08$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t(465.90) = -4.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-.12, -.04]$ . However, when people had more consistently met sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks), partners' sexual destiny beliefs were not associated with perceived general responsiveness,  $b = .03$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t(428.89) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .206$ , CI  $[-.02, .07]$ .

### Sexual Growth Beliefs and Responsiveness in Daily Life

There were no overall associations between sexual growth beliefs and responsiveness in daily life (see Table 2). None of the associations with sexual growth beliefs were moderated by daily sexual ideals; however, four of the associations were moderated by consistently unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks) (aggregated over the course of the diary study; see Table 3). Over the course of the 21-day study, unmet sexual ideals moderated the association between a person's own sexual growth beliefs and sexual responsiveness and perceptions of a partner's general responsiveness. When people had more unmet sexual ideals over the course of the diary

study, those with higher sexual growth beliefs were more sexually responsive,  $b = .35$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t(473.12) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .012$ , 95% CI  $[.07, .62]$ , and they perceived their partners as more generally responsive to their needs,  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(451.37) = 3.30$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI  $[.04, .17]$ . However, when people had met sexual ideals over the course of the study, sexual growth beliefs were not significantly associated with sexual responsiveness,  $b = -.04$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t(324.75) = -.46$ ,  $p = .646$ , 95% CI  $[-.21, .13]$ , or perceptions of a partner's general responsiveness,  $b = -.03$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(441.58) = -1.05$ ,  $p = .293$ , CI 95%  $[-.08, .02]$ .

Sexual ideals also moderated the association between a partner's sexual growth beliefs and perceptions of their partner's general responsiveness and a person's own sexual responsiveness (see Table 3). When people had more unmet sexual ideals, those with partners higher in sexual growth beliefs perceived their partners as more generally responsive to their needs,  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(431.09) = 4.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[.08, .21]$ , but there was no association with their own sexual responsiveness,  $b = -.18$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t(656.37) = -1.26$ ,  $p = .208$ , CI 95%  $[-.46, .10]$ , whereas when people had more met sexual ideals, partners' sexual growth beliefs were not associated with people's perceptions of their partners' general responsiveness,  $b = -.04$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(438.58) = -1.53$ ,  $p = .126$ , CI 95%  $[-.10, .01]$ , but they were associated with being more sexually responsive,  $b = .19$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t(355.23) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .028$ , CI 95%  $[.02, .36]$ .

## Study 3

In Study 3—a study of couples living together at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic—we tested the same associations between sexual growth and destiny and general and sexual responsiveness in a three-week experience study. We also tested whether the associations differed based on weekly reports of met versus unmet sexual ideals<sup>6</sup> in the relationship and positive vs. negative changes in people's sex lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our pre-registered plan can be accessed here: [https://osf.io/erc3q/?view\\_only=47649f5469f64f41a282006b9e705a3d](https://osf.io/erc3q/?view_only=47649f5469f64f41a282006b9e705a3d).

## Method

### Participants

In Study 3, we recruited couples as part of a larger study (see Goss et al., 2022; Study 3) from April to June of 2020 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, living with their partner, in a relationship for at least six months, have access to a computer with internet, and reside in the US or Canada. The final sample included 192 couples who completed an average of 3.92 surveys out of a possible five (baseline, three weekly surveys, and follow-up). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 77 years ( $M = 32.40$ ,  $SD = 9.31$ ). The sample was primarily white (70%), heterosexual (81%), and living together but not married (e.g., common law, dating, or engaged, 59%), and the average relationship length was 8.29 years ( $SD = 8.37$ ).

<sup>6</sup>We also preregistered sexual distress as an additional moderator. See our supplement for more information.

**Table 2.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and key outcomes in Study 2.

	Actor Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Partner Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Actor Sexual Growth Beliefs		Partner Sexual Growth Beliefs	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>
Sexual Responsiveness	-.10(.05)	<b>-2.03*</b>	.02(.05)	.33	.14(.07)	1.90	.09(.07)	1.27
PPGR	-.06(.02)	<b>-2.35*</b>	-.04(.02)	-1.52	.0002(.04)	.01	.04(.04)	.98
PPSR	-.05(.07)	-.68	-.02(.07)	-.36	-.16(.10)	-1.56	-.03(.10)	-.28

\**p* < .05. PPGR = perceived partner general responsiveness. PPSR = perceived partner sexual responsiveness.

**Table 3.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and main outcomes moderated by between person differences in unmet sexual ideals in Study 2.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						Low	High
Sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	-.03	.04	472.72	-.86	.391	-.11	.04
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.01	.01	410.21	.76	.449	-.01	.03
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.01	.03	420.50	-.45	.652	-.06	.04
Sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	.14	.06	469.88	2.50	<b>.013</b>	.03	.25
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.05	.02	431.80	3.25	<b>.001</b>	.02	.08
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.04	.04	445.41	-1.01	.311	-.11	.04
Partner sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	.02	.04	453.05	.43	.668	-.06	.09
Perceived partner general responsiveness	-.04	.01	438.74	-3.70	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-.06	-.02
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.05	.03	449.60	-1.73	.084	-.10	.01
Partner sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	-.13	.06	521.51	-2.31	.021	-.24	-.02
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.07	.02	417.59	4.17	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.04	.10
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	.08	.04	430.04	2.03	.043	.003	.16

### Procedure

Participants were recruited through online advertisements (e.g., Kijiji, Facebook/Instagram) and research platforms (Honeybee Hub). Couples interested in participating completed an eligibility survey. If eligible, then they were asked to leave the research team a voicemail in which each partner gave consent to participate and confirmed that they lived together. Once consent was given, partners were emailed an individualized link to complete a 45-minute baseline survey. Then, each week for the next three weeks, participants were sent a 25-minute weekly survey with truncated measures. Participants were compensated \$15 CAD (\$12 USD) for completing the baseline survey and \$5 CAD (\$4 USD) for each weekly survey. Participants also completed a 25-minute follow-up survey four months later and were compensated \$10 CAD (\$8 USD).

### Measures

In addition to the key variables outlined below, both partners reported their age and relationship duration (this is a couple-level variable calculated by taking the mean of each partner's reports). See supplement Table S3 for correlations between all measures.

**Sexual Growth and Destiny Beliefs.** We measured implicit sexual beliefs at background using a 4-item version of the Implicit Theories of Sex Scale (Maxwell et al., 2017, Study 5; sexual destiny beliefs;  $\alpha = .59$ ,  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ; sexual growth beliefs;  $\alpha = .57$ ,  $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ).

**Sexual Responsiveness.** We measured sexual responsiveness at background using the 6-item SCSS (Muis et al., 2013; e.g.,

“How high is a priority for you meeting the sexual needs of your partner?”;  $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .59$ ), rated on a 5-point scale (1 = “not at all” to 5 = “extremely”).

**Perceived Partner General Responsiveness (PPGR).** We measured perceived partner general responsiveness (modified from Maisel & Gable, 2009) at background with one item (e.g., “My partner really understands me.”;  $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), weekly with one item (e.g., “Over the last week, my partner really understood me.”;  $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), and at follow-up with one item (i.e., “My partner really understands me.”;  $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all true” to 7 = “very true”).

**Perceived Partner Sexual Responsiveness (PPSR).** We measured perceived partner sexual responsiveness (modified and adapted from Maisel & Gable, 2009) at baseline with three items (e.g., “I feel sexually understood by my partner.”, “I feel that my partner accepts me sexually.”, and “I feel my partner cares about my feelings regarding our sex life.”;  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), and weekly with three items (e.g., “In the last week: I felt sexually understood by my partner.”, “I felt that my partner accepts me sexually.”, and “I felt my partner cares about my feelings regarding our sex life.”;  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). Baseline and weekly were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”). We also measured perceived partner sexual responsiveness at follow-up with one item (e.g., “My partner understands my sexual needs.”;  $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), which was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all true” to 7 = “very true”).

**Sexual Ideals.** We measured sexual ideals (Balzarini et al., 2021) at baseline with one item (e.g., “In general . . . My partner meets my sexual ideals (e.g., the traits and attributes I desire in a sexual partner or experience)”;  $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) and weekly with one item (e.g., “In the last week . . . My partner met my sexual ideals (e.g., the traits and attributes I desire in a sexual partner or experience)”;  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “not at all” to 7 = “completely”). We reverse scored this item such that higher scores indicated more unmet sexual ideals.

**Changes in Sex since COVID-19.** We measured changes in people’s sex lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic using one item (i.e., “Has there been a change in how satisfied you are with your sex life with your partner since the pandemic began?”;  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = “less satisfied” to 4 = “no change” to 7 = “more satisfied”). We centered the variable around the midpoint, with negative scores representing less satisfaction and positive scores representing more satisfaction and 0 representing no change.

### Analysis

The data were analyzed with multilevel modeling using mixed models in SPSS guided by the APIM. We first tested associations between our predictors (sexual growth and destiny beliefs) and our outcomes (sexual responsiveness, perceived partner general and sexual responsiveness) at baseline. We also tested whether these associations were moderated by sexual ideals (and exploratorily by changes in sex since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) at baseline. We tested two-level models in which persons were nested within dyads (Kenny et al., 2006). Separate models were tested for each outcome. We grand-mean centered all predictors and moderators in the models, which represented between-person differences. Unstandardized  $b$ s can be interpreted as the average change in the dependent variable for every one-unit change in the predictor value.

To test our predictions over time, we ran two-level cross-models with random intercepts and random slopes in which persons were nested within couples, and persons and weeks were crossed to account for the fact that both partners completed the weekly surveys on the same timeline (Kenny et al., 2006). Couples in this study were also indistinguishable by gender ( $X^2(6) = 6.94$ ,  $p > .10$ ) and we followed the same analytic approach as Study 2 (except we had weekly, as opposed to daily, reports). Our predictor variables (sexual growth and destiny) were between-person variables assessed only in the baseline survey. Both own and partner versions of these variables were grand-mean centered and entered simultaneously as predictors. The moderator variable (sexual ideals) was entered as both a within- (i.e., change within people over the three weeks) and between-person effect (i.e., difference between people over the three weeks) by entering both the person-mean centered and aggregated predictors in the model. We tested moderations by actor sexual ideals (and changes in sex since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), but not partner sexual ideals (or partner-reported changes in sex

since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). We tested both the within-person moderations (i.e., on weeks when their sexual ideals are more met versus unmet), and between-person moderations (people who generally feel their sexual ideals are met versus unmet). We tested moderations for unmet sexual ideals predicting outcomes at the follow up survey, controlling for the outcomes at baseline. For changes in sex since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we tested moderations at baseline predicting outcomes at baseline and follow up. For our moderation predictions, any significant moderations between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and unmet sexual ideals (and changes in sex since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) predicting sexual responsiveness, were followed up with simple effects tests at high (+1SD) and low (−1SD) levels of sexual ideals.

## Results

### Sexual Destiny Beliefs and Responsiveness during the COVID-19 Pandemic

We assessed people’s sexual growth and destiny beliefs shortly after the onset of the pandemic, and then assessed their general responsiveness and sexual responsiveness (and perceptions of their partners; see Table 4). Unlike our previous two studies, people higher in sexual destiny beliefs perceived their partners as more sexually responsive (see Table 4). However, consistently unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks), (aggregated over the study) moderated the association between sexual destiny beliefs and perceptions of a partner’s sexual responsiveness (see Table 6). When people had more consistently met sexual ideals, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with perceiving a partner as more sexually responsive,  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(490.21) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $CI\ 95\% [.04, .18]$ , whereas when people had unmet sexual ideals, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with perceiving a partner as less sexually responsive,  $b = -.14$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t(499.13) = -3.02$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $CI\ 95\% [-.23, -.05]$ . None of the associations between sexual destiny beliefs and our key outcomes were moderated by within-person weekly variation in unmet sexual ideals and none of the associations with the outcomes at follow-up were moderated by unmet sexual ideals.

Given the unique context of this study, we also tested whether any of the associations were moderated by the extent to which people felt more vs. less satisfied with their sex lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 7). None of the associations between sexual destiny beliefs were moderated by changes in people’s sex lives, suggesting that those higher in sexual destiny beliefs perceived their partners as more sexually responsive, even when perceiving lower sexual satisfaction than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Sexual Growth Beliefs and Responsiveness during the COVID-19 Pandemic

People higher in sexual growth beliefs reported being more responsive to their partner’s sexual needs and their partners reported higher sexual responsiveness, as well, at baseline (see Table 4). People higher in sexual growth beliefs also perceived their partner as more sexually responsive at baseline, and over

**Table 4.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and key outcomes in Study 3.

	Actor Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Partner Sexual Destiny Beliefs		Actor Sexual Growth Beliefs		Partner Sexual Growth Beliefs	
	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t
Baseline								
Sexual Responsiveness	-.0001(.02)	-.01	-.01(.02)	-.43	.07(.03)	<b>2.37*</b>	.07(.03)	<b>2.26*</b>
PP Responsiveness	-.01(.04)	-.22	-.06(.04)	-1.44	.08(.06)	1.27	.09(.06)	1.43
PP Sexual Responsiveness	.12(.05)	<b>2.60*</b>	.07(.05)	1.52	.27(.07)	<b>4.01***</b>	.22(.07)	<b>3.26**</b>
Weekly Changes								
PP Responsiveness	.002(.04)	.04	-.04(.04)	-1.04	.14(.06)	<b>2.42*</b>	.11(.06)	1.81
PP Sexual Responsiveness	.07(.04)	1.62	-.01(.04)	-.11	.28(.06)	<b>4.41***</b>	.18(.06)	<b>2.78**</b>
Follow-up (4 Months Later)								
PP Responsiveness	-.05(.04)	-1.10	.04(.04)	.91	.13(.06)	<b>2.17*</b>	.02(.06)	.36
PP Sexual Responsiveness	.01(.05)	.24	.01(.05)	.28	.03(.08)	.46	-.05(.08)	-.68

Note: † $p = .050$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . PP = Perceived Partner. Baseline outcomes are controlled in follow-up analyses.

**Table 5.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and main outcomes at baseline moderated by unmet sexual ideals at background in Study 3.

	b	SE	df	t	p	95% CI	
						Low	High
Sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	-.02	.01	343.12	-1.40	.162	-.05	.01
Perceived partner responsiveness	-.03	.03	334.34	-1.10	.271	-.08	.02
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.03	.03	353.93	-1.35	.177	-.08	.02
Sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	.05	.02	351.98	2.61	<b>.009</b>	.01	.09
Perceived partner responsiveness	-.08	.04	322.68	-2.07	<b>.039</b>	-.15	-.004
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	.02	.04	345.08	.46	.649	-.06	.09
Partner sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	-.004	.01	338.11	-.33	.741	-.03	.02
Perceived partner responsiveness	-.03	.03	339.23	-1.17	.245	-.08	.02
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.02	.02	357.21	-.68	.497	-.06	.03
Partner sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Sexual responsiveness	-.02	.02	348.97	-.78	.434	-.05	.02
Perceived partner responsiveness	.02	.04	326.91	.47	.637	-.06	.09
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	.01	.04	348.52	.23	.817	-.06	.08

time, and were perceived as more sexually responsive by their partners at baseline, and weekly (see Table 4). People higher in sexual growth beliefs also perceived their partners as more responsive to their general needs over time (weekly surveys) and at follow up (see Table 4).

Unmet sexual ideals at baseline moderated the association between people's sexual growth beliefs and sexual responsiveness (see Table 5). Consistent with Study 2, when people had more unmet ideals at baseline, sexual growth beliefs were associated with being more sexually responsive to a partner's needs,  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(360.28) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .002$ , CI 95% [.05, .22], whereas when people had more met ideals at baseline, sexual growth beliefs were not associated with sexual responsiveness,  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(359.85) = -.52$ ,  $p = .603$ , CI 95% [-.11, .06]. Unmet sexual ideals did not moderate the association between sexual growth beliefs and perceived partner sexual responsiveness, suggesting that those higher in sexual growth beliefs perceive their partners as and are perceived by their partners as more sexually responsive even when there are unmet sexual ideals.

We then tested whether any of the associations were moderated by weekly variation (within-person effects) in the extent to which people felt their sexual ideals were met versus unmet, and by their consistently met or unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks), (between-person effects; see

Table 6) over the three-week study. None of the associations for sexual growth beliefs were moderated by within-person weekly variation in unmet sexual ideals, suggesting that sexual growth believers are more sexually responsive, perceive their partners and are perceived by their partners as more sexually responsive, and perceive their partners as more generally responsive even during weeks when they have more unmet sexual ideals. However, between-person variation in unmet sexual ideals did moderate the association between sexual growth beliefs and perceptions of a partner's general responsiveness ( $b = -.09$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(435.73) = -2.93$ ,  $p = .004$ , CI 95% [-.15, -.03]). When people higher in sexual growth beliefs had more met sexual ideals, they perceived their partners as more generally responsive to their needs ( $b = .16$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t(468.08) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .009$ , CI 95% [.04, .28]), but when people had more unmet sexual ideals sexual growth beliefs were not associated with perceptions of a partner's general responsiveness ( $b = -.11$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t(464.95) = -1.61$ ,  $p = .108$ , CI 95% [-.24, .02]).

Perceived changes in sexual satisfaction since the beginning of the pandemic moderated the association between sexual growth beliefs and sexual responsiveness at baseline (see Table 7). When people reported that they felt less sexually satisfied since the beginning of the pandemic,



**Table 6.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and main outcomes over time moderated by aggregated unmet sexual ideals over time in Study 3.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						Low	High
Sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Perceived partner general responsiveness	-.04	.02	460.87	-1.71	.087	-.08	.01
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.08	.02	488.83	-4.31	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-.12	-.05
Sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Perceived partner general responsiveness	-.09	.03	435.73	-2.93	<b>.004</b>	-.15	-.03
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.01	.03	475.15	-.38	.704	-.06	.04
Partner sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Perceived partner general responsiveness	-.02	.02	458.54	-.77	.442	-.06	.02
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.03	.02	484.01	-1.45	.147	-.06	.01
Partner sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals							
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.04	.03	447.44	1.25	.211	-.02	.10
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.001	.03	473.75	-.04	.970	-.06	.05

**Table 7.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and main outcomes at background moderated by changes in sex since COVID at background in Study 3.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						Low	High
Sexual destiny beliefs moderated by changes in sex							
Sexual responsiveness	-.02	.02	362.61	-.90	.370	-.06	.02
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.01	.04	316.81	.30	.768	-.06	.08
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	.01	.04	319.46	.33	.744	-.07	.10
Sexual growth beliefs moderated by changes in sex							
Sexual responsiveness	-.06	.03	363.95	-2.06	.040	-.11	-.002
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.06	.05	297.94	1.15	.250	-.04	.15
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.02	.06	300.97	-.36	.716	-.13	.09
Partner sexual destiny beliefs moderated by changes in sex							
Sexual responsiveness	.03	.02	363.71	-1.38	.169	-.01	.06
Perceived partner general responsiveness	.02	.04	309.18	.53	.598	-.05	.09
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	.02	.04	311.95	.52	.607	-.06	.10
Partner sexual growth beliefs moderated by changes in sex							
Sexual responsiveness	-.02	.03	363.99	-.66	.511	-.08	.04
Perceived partner general responsiveness	-.003	.06	298.13	-.06	.956	-.11	.11
Perceived partner sexual responsiveness	-.01	.06	301.13	-.23	.816	-.14	.11

those higher in sexual growth beliefs were more sexually responsive to their partners' needs,  $b = .13$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(353.69) = 3.20$ ,  $p = .001$ , CI 95% [.05, .22]. When people reported that they felt more sexually satisfied since the beginning of the pandemic, sexual growth beliefs were not associated with sexual responsiveness,  $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(354.55) = .29$ ,  $p = .776$ , CI 95% [-.07, .10]. None of the associations between sexual destiny or sexual growth beliefs at baseline and sexual and general responsiveness four months later were moderated by changes in people's sex lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Discussion

General and sexual responsiveness – understanding and being motivated to meet a partner's relationship and sexual needs – are associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction (Muise & Impett, 2015; Reis et al., 2017). Sexual responsiveness in particular is a promising factor in successfully navigating clinical sexual issues<sup>7</sup> such as vulvodynia, and low sexual desire (FSIAD), as well as non-

clinical issues such as desire discrepancies and unmet sexual ideals (e.g., Balzarini et al., 2021; Bois et al., 2013; Day et al., 2015; Hogue et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2018, 2017a, 2017b; Raposo et al., 2021). However, limited work has investigated who might be more sexually responsive to a partner, particularly when coping with a sexual issue. Previous research has shown that implicit beliefs about sexual satisfaction are associated with key outcomes such as sexual and relationship satisfaction, commitment, and personal well-being, even among couples coping with sexual challenges (e.g., transitioning to parenthood; Maxwell et al., 2017; Rossi et al., 2022; experiencing clinically low sexual desire; Raposo et al., 2021). Across three studies, which included a clinical sample of couples coping with low sexual desire and two samples of couples followed over time, we demonstrated that sexual growth beliefs –

<sup>7</sup>Past research and our current research on sexual responsiveness and clinical sexual issues has mainly focused on women's sexual issues (i.e., vulvodynia, FSIAD) and as such cannot be generalizable to men's sexual issues (i.e., erectile dysfunction)

**Table 8.** Summary of associations between implicit sexual beliefs and main outcomes across all studies.

	Study 1		Study 2	Study 3	Study 3	Study 3
	Women with FSIAD	Partners of women with FSIAD	Daily	Baseline	Weekly	Follow-up
Own sexual growth beliefs associated with ...						
Own Sexual Responsiveness	1.51	.08	1.90	<b>2.37*</b>	–	–
Own PPSR	.70	–.02	–1.56	<b>4.01***</b>	<b>4.41***</b>	.46
Own PPGR	1.46	–.54	.01	1.27	<b>2.42*</b>	<b>2.17*</b>
Partner sexual growth beliefs associated with ...						
Own Sexual Responsiveness	.08	1.56	1.27	<b>2.26*</b>	–	–
Own PPSR	–.02	<b>2.06*</b>	–.28	<b>3.26**</b>	<b>2.78**</b>	–.68
Own PPGR	–.54	–1.36	.98	1.43	1.81	.36
Own sexual destiny beliefs associated with ...						
Own Sexual Responsiveness	.55	<b>–2.90**</b>	<b>–2.03*</b>	–.01	–	–
Own PPSR	–1.28	–1.64	–.68	<b>2.60*</b>	1.62	–.11
Own PPGR	<b>–2.26*</b>	<b>–1.99†</b>	<b>–2.35*</b>	–.22	.04	–1.04
Partner sexual destiny beliefs associated with ...						
Own Sexual Responsiveness	–1.13	–.78	.33	–.43	–	–
Own PPSR	–1.17	–.05	–.36	1.52	.24	.28
Own PPGR	–1.71	–.82	–1.52	–1.44	–1.10	.91

† $p = .050$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . In Study 1 columns, couples were distinguishable by the woman partner diagnosed with FSIAD and the partner of the woman with FSIAD. In the rows, own beliefs represent the beliefs of the person in the columns, whereas partner beliefs represent the beliefs of the partner of the person in the columns. Therefore, partner sexual growth beliefs for partners of women with FSIAD represent the women with FSIAD's sexual growth beliefs associated with the partner of women with FSIAD's outcome. In Studies 2 and 3 partners were not distinguishable. PPSR = perceived partner sexual responsiveness, PPGR = perceived partner general responsiveness.

believing that sexual satisfaction takes work and effort to maintain – are associated with higher sexual and general responsiveness in the face of sexual challenges. In fact, in Study 1, women coping with FSIAD who were higher in sexual growth beliefs were perceived by their partners as more sexually responsive to their needs. And, in Studies 2 and 3, people higher in sexual growth beliefs were

particularly responsive to a partner's sexual needs (and perceived as such by their partners) when their sex life was more challenging – that is, when they felt they had more unmet sexual ideals (Studies 2 and 3) or perceived more negative changes to their sex life since the onset of the COVID pandemic (Study 3). In contrast, sexual destiny beliefs were not associated with greater

**Table 9.** Associations between sexual destiny and growth beliefs and main outcomes moderated by between person differences in unmet sexual ideals across all studies.

	Study 2 (daily)	Study 3 (baseline)	Study 3 (weekly)	Study 3 (follow up)
Own sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals				
Own Sexual Responsiveness	<b>.14*</b>	<b>.05**</b>	–	–
<i>Met sexual ideals</i>	–.04	–0.02		
<i>Unmet sexual ideals</i>	<b>.35*</b>	<b>0.14**</b>		–.01
Own PPSR	–.04	.02	–.01	.002
Own PPGR	<b>.05**</b>	<b>–.08*</b>	<b>–.09**</b>	
<i>Met sexual ideals</i>	–0.03	0.11	<b>0.16**</b>	
<i>Unmet sexual ideals</i>	<b>0.11**</b>	0.19	–0.11	
Partner sexual growth beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals				
Own Sexual Responsiveness	–.13	–.02	–	–
Own PPSR	.08	.01	–.001	–.0006
Own PPGR	<b>.07***</b>	.02	.04	–.04
<i>Met sexual ideals</i>	–0.04			
<i>Unmet sexual ideals</i>	<b>0.14***</b>			
Own sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals				
Own Sexual Responsiveness	–.03	–.02	–	–
Own PPSR	–.01	–.03	<b>–.08***</b>	.001
<i>Met sexual ideals</i>			<b>0.11**</b>	
<i>Unmet sexual ideals</i>			<b>–0.14**</b>	
Own PPGR	.01	–.03	–.04	–.03
Partner sexual destiny beliefs moderated by unmet sexual ideals				
Own Sexual Responsiveness	.02	–.004	–	–
Own PPSR	–.05	–.02	–.03	.05
Own PPGR	<b>–.04***</b>	–.03	–.02	.05
<i>Met sexual ideals</i>	0.03			
<i>Unmet sexual ideals</i>	<b>–0.08***</b>			

Values are unstandardized betas and significance is indicated by \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Simple effects at +1 SD (met sexual ideals) and – 1 SD (unmet sexual ideals) are reported in italics only when the moderation by sexual ideals was significant. PPSR = perceived partner sexual responsiveness, PPGR = perceived partner general responsiveness.

responsiveness and at times were associated with lower sexual and general responsiveness, even when people reported that their sexual ideals were met (with one exception in Study 3, in which, when people with higher sexual destiny beliefs felt their sexual ideals were met, they perceived their partner as more sexually responsive). Overall, the current research demonstrates that implicit sexual beliefs are associated with sexual responsiveness when coping with sexual challenges or differences in a relationship.

### **Sexual Growth Beliefs**

In line with our predictions, we found support that sexual growth beliefs are associated with being more sexually responsive and being perceived as more sexually and generally responsive by a partner. In Study 3, higher sexual growth beliefs were associated with being more responsive to a partner's sexual needs and in Studies 1 and 3, higher sexual growth beliefs were associated with being perceived by a partner as more sexually responsive. Given that people higher in sexual growth beliefs endorse the view that satisfying sex requires work and effort (Maxwell et al., 2017), those higher in these beliefs may strongly value and view meeting a partner's sexual needs as important for maintaining sexual satisfaction. Previous research has demonstrated that those who are more sexually responsive are perceived as such by their partners (Muisse & Impett, 2015), which may explain why people higher in sexual growth beliefs are also perceived by their partner as more sexually responsive. We did not find support for sexual growth believers being perceived as more generally responsive to a partner's needs, which may be because sexual growth beliefs are more closely related to outcomes in the sexual domain (Maxwell et al., 2017; Raposo et al., 2021), whereas general relationship growth beliefs may be associated with general responsiveness. Research has also shown that for couples who are coping with clinically low sexual desire (FSIAD), when partners are more sexually responsive (Hogue et al., 2019) and when partners are higher in sexual growth beliefs (Raposo et al., 2021), they experience higher sexual satisfaction and desire. Paired with work demonstrating that those who have highly sexually responsive partners also perceive their partners as highly sexually responsive and reap benefits such as high relationship and sexual satisfaction (Muisse & Impett, 2015), the current findings suggest that one possible way sexual growth beliefs may be associated with higher sexual quality is through higher sexual responsiveness and partner's perceptions of sexual responsiveness. Future work assessing a possible mediational path is necessary.

In line with our predictions, we also found support that when there are sexual challenges (i.e., unmet sexual ideals, declines in sexual satisfaction since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), higher sexual growth beliefs are associated with being more sexually responsive and being perceived as more generally responsive by a partner. When people had more consistently unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study (3 weeks), in Study 2, sexual growth beliefs were

associated with being perceived as more generally responsive to a partner's needs. Moreover, when people had more unmet sexual ideals (Studies 2 and 3) or perceived less sexual satisfaction since the onset of the pandemic (Study 3), sexual growth beliefs were associated with being *more* sexually responsive to a partner's needs. Given that people who endorse sexual growth beliefs view sexual challenges as unstable and changeable (Böthe et al., 2017), they may be more motivated to be attuned to their partner's sexual needs as they may view sexual challenges as conquerable and as opportunities to work through and foster greater closeness and growth in their relationship. In line with previous research that shows that those who are more sexually responsive are indeed perceived by their partners as highly sexually responsive (Muisse & Impett, 2015), sexual growth beliefs were also associated with being perceived as more sexually responsive by a partner. In addition, consistent with previous research showing that implicit beliefs are most consequential when there are relationship and sexual challenges (Bohns et al., 2015; Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2017; Sutherland & Rehman, 2018), sexual growth beliefs were associated with being perceived as highly sexually responsive even when, and in some cases especially when, couple were faced with unmet sexual needs or challenges.

In Study 3, we also found that people higher in sexual growth beliefs tended to perceive their partner as more sexually and generally responsive. Previous research has shown that growth beliefs are associated with viewing a partner in a positive light despite signs of incompatibility, and unresolved conflict (Knee et al., 2001), suggesting that those higher in sexual growth beliefs may also tend to view their partners as more responsive even when there are sexual challenges. In fact, in Study 3, the partners of people higher in sexual growth beliefs were more motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs, which suggests that their perceptions of their partner's responsiveness may, at least in part, be driven by their partner actually being responsive. It is possible that having a partner who is highly sexually growth-oriented, and thus highly motivated to meet a person's needs may, in turn, motivate and encourage people to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs. Future work using longitudinal methods could test how partners might promote reciprocal responsiveness over time.

### **Sexual Destiny Beliefs**

In line with our predictions, in Studies 1 and 2, we found support for sexual destiny beliefs being associated with being less sexually responsive to a partner. Given that people higher in sexual destiny beliefs view satisfying sex lives as the result of finding a highly compatible partner with whom they share natural sexual chemistry (Maxwell et al., 2017), those higher in sexual destiny beliefs may not see value in or make many conscious efforts to meet their partner's sexual needs. Though sexual destiny beliefs are associated with being less sexually responsive (Studies 1 and 2), we did not find support for sexual destiny beliefs being associated with being perceived as less sexually or generally responsive. It is possible that those higher in sexual destiny beliefs are more likely to choose partners with whom they perceive high sexual compatibility, and as such,

their partners may feel that their needs are met. However, this possibility may be more attributed to partners sharing similar sexual interests rather than having a partner who is highly sexually responsive.

Also, in Studies 1 and 2, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with perceiving a partner as less responsive to their general needs. In contrast, we also found that in Study 3, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with perceiving a partner as more sexually responsive to their needs, but this was only for those who felt their partner met (versus did not meet) their sexual ideals. These mixed findings suggest that the association between sexual destiny beliefs and perceptions of a partner's responsiveness may be affected by other factors that were not assessed in the current research. Previous work shows that destiny believers' satisfaction with their sex lives and relationships are often contingent upon feeling like they are with their soulmate or a highly compatible partner (Franiuk et al., 2004; Maxwell et al., 2017). Sexual destiny believers' perceptions of a partner's responsiveness may similarly depend upon whether they feel their partner is their soulmate or a highly compatible partner. Previous research on perceptions of a partner's sexual responsiveness does show a positive correlation between a person's sexual responsiveness and partner's perceptions of a person's general responsiveness (Balzarini et al., 2021); however, people may also over- or underperceive a partner's responsiveness due to individual traits such as communal strength (i.e., communal people tend to project their own responsiveness onto their partners; Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay et al., 2007) or attachment anxiety (i.e., people high in attachment anxiety tend to underperceive a partner's positive regard; Collins, 1996). In Study 1, when couples had been experiencing FSIAD for a shorter period, sexual destiny beliefs were associated with perceiving a partner as less sexually and generally responsive. Perhaps the initial presence of sexual challenges may be particularly detrimental for sexual destiny believers because it is seen as a sign that the relationship is not meant to be, whereas when sexual challenges have persisted over time, sexual destiny believers may not be as negatively affected because they have determined that their partner is their soulmate or highly compatible with them.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Though our research provides some initial evidence that sexual beliefs are associated with sexual responsiveness in the context of sexual challenges or differences in a relationship, it is not without limitations. Our predictions were tested in three large studies on relationships and sexuality that were not designed to specifically answer our research questions and as such our key constructs were not measured in exactly the same way across studies. These measurement differences may have introduced additional "noise" and could contribute to some of the differences in the findings across studies.

Given that our research questions were tested across samples of couples facing different types of sexual challenges – clinically low sexual desire, changes in sexual

ideal partner match in daily life, and changes in sexual satisfaction since the COVID-19 pandemic – it is not clear if any differences across studies are due to differences in the type of sexual challenge couples are facing. Although we do see some consistent patterns across the studies, more work is needed to determine the breadth and boundaries of these associations, including the severity of a sexual problem that might facilitate or impede responsiveness for people higher in sexual growth beliefs and people higher in sexual destiny beliefs.

Although our ecologically valid studies provide us with a window into couples' relationships over time, the studies are correlational, and we are not able to make conclusions about causality. Though we proposed that sexual growth and destiny beliefs are associated with sexual responsiveness, particularly when there are sexual challenges, we cannot conclude that people's beliefs cause responsiveness. People's past sexual experiences in their current or previous romantic relationships may be relevant to the formation of sexual growth and destiny beliefs as well as their responsiveness. It is possible that those who have been experiencing chronic sexual challenges may develop beliefs that sexual challenges in a relationship are stable and unchangeable and, therefore, may endorse sexual destiny beliefs (i.e., the idea that satisfying sex lives are contingent on finding a partner with whom they share natural sexual chemistry) as well as become less responsive. In contrast, it is possible that those who have been experiencing sexual challenges for a shorter period, or those who were able to work through their sexual differences may be more likely to believe that sexual challenges are unstable and conquerable and, therefore, may be more drawn to sexual growth beliefs (i.e., the idea that satisfying sex lives require work and effort) and maintain responsiveness. To better understand the development of sexual beliefs and the influence of sexual challenges, future studies should include longitudinal designs with frequent measures of sexual beliefs and challenges that follow individuals as they get into romantic relationships to capture the initial experiences of sexual challenges and sexual differences.

Though we found support for our predictions in clinical and non-clinical samples, all three studies included couples in well-established long term and primarily monogamous relationships. As such, our findings may not be generalizable to couples in newer relationships, casual sexual relationships, and consensually non-monogamous relationships. We also did not find that within-person differences in people's sexual responsiveness on days (Study 2) and weeks (Study 3) when they had more met vs. unmet sexual ideals moderated any of the associations. Research has shown that those higher in sexual destiny beliefs evaluate and predict the longevity of a relationship based on a single relationship event (i.e., having an argument with a partner) and put a lot of stock into initial levels of satisfaction in a relationship as they are seen as a sign that the relationship is meant to be (Knee, 1998). As such, there may be less extreme daily or weekly fluctuations in sexual ideals as people progress in their relationships or, when there are fluctuations, these may be overridden by other factors, such as seeing a partner as a "soulmate," which tends to make



destiny believers more committed to their relationships (Franiuk et al., 2002), or understanding that ebbs and flows in sexuality are common in relationships, which is a view linked to higher sexual growth beliefs (Maxwell et al., 2017). Future experience sampling studies with newer couples are needed to explore the association between daily fluctuations in sexual ideals and their association with sexual responsiveness.

Our research contributes to and extends the existing literature on implicit sexual beliefs (Maxwell et al., 2017; Raposo et al., 2021; Wu & Zheng, 2022) While past research has explored associations between sexual growth and destiny beliefs and sexual and relationship satisfaction (Maxwell et al., 2017), sexual desire, relationship conflict, personal well-being (Raposo et al., 2021), and sexual responsiveness (Wu & Zheng, 2022), our preliminary findings suggest that implicit sexual beliefs are associated with both beneficial and detrimental relationship processes and partner perceptions when there are sexual challenges or differences in a relationship. Sexual growth beliefs were found to be associated with more prosocial relationship behaviors, such as being more sexually responsive and being perceived as and perceiving a partner as more sexually responsive, particularly when facing a sexual challenge. As such, future research should experimentally explore the extent to which implicit sexual beliefs are malleable and whether promoting growth beliefs is associated with greater sexual responsiveness. Past research has shown that manipulating sexual beliefs and asking participants to respond to a hypothetical sexual challenge was associated with more adaptive coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support and planning to resolve the issue) for those who held sexual growth beliefs (Sutherland & Rehman, 2018), suggesting that manipulating sexual growth beliefs may also increase sexual responsivity. The findings also have implications for clinicians working with couples who are navigating a sexual problem. Examining the implicit sexual beliefs of partners could provide insight into their responsiveness in the face of sexual issues, allowing clinicians to use approaches to challenge or work within clients' implicit sexual beliefs.

## Conclusion

The current research extends past work on implicit sexual beliefs (i.e., sexual growth and destiny beliefs) to sexual responsiveness for couples who are coping with clinical and non-clinical sexual challenges (i.e., low sexual desire, unmet sexual ideals, and negative changes in people's sex live since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). These findings suggest that sexual growth beliefs may be beneficial in romantic relationships as they may protect couples from the negative relationship outcomes (i.e., declines in relationship and sexual satisfaction, and personal wellbeing) related to sexual challenges, whereas sexual destiny beliefs may be detrimental for couples as their lack of sexual responsiveness may exacerbate the negative outcomes related to sexual challenges. This research provides initial correlational evidence about how implicit sexual beliefs are associated with sexual responsiveness when there are sexual challenges or sexual differences in romantic relationships.

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