

# When and for Whom Is Sex Most Beneficial? Sexual Motivation in Romantic Relationships

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## Abstract

Satisfying sexual encounters are important for the quality of couples' relationships, but maintaining sexual desire and connection over time in a relationship is challenging. Theory and research on sexual motivation can inform when sex is associated with benefits in relationships and when it detracts from satisfaction, as well as who is more likely to maintain sexual desire and satisfaction over the course of time in a romantic relationship. People differ in their reasons or goals for engaging in sex with a romantic partner and their motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs, and this has important implications for their experience of desire and satisfaction. This review of research on sexual motivation seeks to summarize the key findings in this area and highlight themes that provide insight into how couples can reap the most benefits from sex and keep their sexual spark alive over time. Implications for future research and clinical applications are discussed.

*Keywords:* sexual motivation, romantic relationships, desire, satisfaction, couples

Physics is like sex: Sure, it may give some practical results, but that's not why we do it.

—Richard Feynman

People engage in sex for a variety of reasons—for physical pleasure, to express love, to feel desired, or to please a partner (Cooper, Talley, Sheldon, Levitt, & Barber, 2008; Meston & Buss, 2007)—and as Richard Feynman's quote suggests the reasons why we do something matters. In the context of a romantic relationship, greater sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction are important for overall relationship quality (Byers, 2005; Muise, Schimmack, & Impett, 2016e; Sprecher, 2002), but theory and research on sexual motivation—or a person's reasons or goals for having sex—suggest that not all sexual experiences are similarly satisfying and why a person engages in sex is important for their experience of

desire and satisfaction (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013a). In the current review, I outline the importance of sex for the quality of romantic relationships and the simultaneous challenge of maintaining desire and satisfaction over time in relationships. I then draw on theory and research on sexual motivation in (primarily heterosexual) relationships (Cooper et al., 2008; Gable & Impett, 2012; Muise, Impett, Desmarais, & Kogan, 2013b) to inform when sex is most beneficial and when it might detract from satisfaction and to provide insight into who is more likely to maintain desire and satisfaction over time.

## Sexuality in Romantic Relationships

Sexuality is a key factor that shapes the quality of romantic relationships (see reviews by Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014; Muise, Kim, McNulty, & Impett, 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that people who are the most satisfied with their sex lives are also the most satisfied with their romantic relationships (e.g., Breznsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Byers, 2005; Impett et al., 2014; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2015; Sprecher, 2002). Despite the importance of sex for relationships, couples face numerous challenges to having and maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship. Sexual desire tends to peak in the beginning stages of a romantic relationship as partners are getting to know each other and intimacy is rapidly developing and then often declines over time as partners become more secure and comfortable in the relationship (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999). As a result, many long-term couples lose their passion for each other and inevitably face situations in which partners' sexual interests differ. For example, one partner may be interested in having sex while the other partner is not in the mood (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Mark, 2012; Mark & Murray, 2012). The importance of sex for the quality of relationships, coupled with the challenges that many couples face maintaining desire and satisfaction over the longer term, highlights the need to understand when sex is associated with benefits in relationships and when it might detract from satisfaction, as well as who is more likely to maintain desire and satisfaction over time. Indeed, although sexual desire tends to decline over the course of a relationship on average (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Sims & Meana, 2010), desire does not decline for everyone (Acevedo & Aron, 2009) and not everyone experiences accompanying declines in relationship satisfaction (Sims & Meana, 2010). Even for the many romantic partners who experience discrepancies in sexual desire, some are able to navigate these

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differences with greater success and maintain satisfaction even in the face of sexual disagreements.

The close connection between sexual and relationship satisfaction means that good sex is one powerful mechanism for enhancing relationships. When couples can successfully navigate sexual issues and maintain a strong sexual connection over the course of their relationships, feelings of satisfaction in the relationship can be strengthened (Rehman et al., 2011). What follows is an overview of research informing when couples reap the most benefits from engaging in sex and who is most likely to maintain sexual desire and sexual connection over time, as well as the implications for overall relationship satisfaction.

### When Is Sex Most Beneficial in a Relationship?

Although engaging in more frequent sex tends to be associated with feeling happier in a romantic relationship (Muise, Boudreau, & Rosen, 2016), the reasons why people engage in sex with their partner have profound implications for the quality of their sexual experiences and their overall feelings of relationship satisfaction (Cooper, Barber, Zhaoyang, & Talley, 2011; Cooper et al., 2008). For example, research guided by self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000) has found that people experience greater psychological well-being and relationship quality when they engage in sex for reasons that are more self-determined in nature such as “because I enjoy being sexual” and “for the pleasure of sharing a special and intimate experience,” compared with when they engage in sex for reasons that are more controlling in nature such as “because I would feel bad to withhold from my partner” and “because I feel pressured by my partner to have sex” (Brunell & Webster, 2013). Similarly, research indicates that sexual interactions characterized by higher levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are also associated with more positive sexual experiences (Smith, 2007).

Research guided by approach-avoidance motivational theory (for a review, see Gable & Impett, 2012) has also demonstrated how differences in a person’s reasons for engaging in sex are associated with differences in their own and their partner’s experience of desire and satisfaction. When people reported engaging in sex to pursue positive outcomes in their relationship, such as to enhance intimacy or express love for their partner (i.e., approach goals), both partners reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction (Cooper et al., 2008, 2011; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Muise et al., 2013a). In contrast, when people engaged in sex to avoid negative outcomes in their relationship, such as to avoid conflict or a partner’s disappointment (i.e., avoidance goals), they experienced more relationship conflict and both partners reported lower sexual and relationship satisfaction (Cooper et al., 2008, 2011; Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013a). In one longitudinal study of married and cohabiting couples, people who had sex more frequently for avoidance goals over the course of a 3-week daily experience study reported lower sexual satisfaction at a 4-month follow-up and had partners who felt less sexually satisfied and committed to maintaining their relationship four months later (Muise et al., 2013a). As such, research on sexual motivation suggests that some sexual experiences contribute more strongly to relationship quality and well-being than others.

Research guided by approach-avoidance motivational theory has also shown that individuals who are motivated by approach

goals such as to deepen their relationship with their partner or promote growth and development in their relationship are more likely to sustain high levels of sexual desire for their partner over time (Impett et al., 2008). Two daily experience studies of dating, cohabiting and married couples revealed that on days when people engaged in sex with their partner for approach goals, both partners reported higher sexual desire and, in turn, felt more satisfied with the sexual experience and their relationship. In contrast, on days when people engaged in sex for avoidance goals such as to avoid disappointing their partner, not only did they feel lower desire and satisfaction, but their partners reported lower desire and satisfaction as well (Muise et al., 2013a). This research has also shown that people who pursue sex for approach goals are able to maintain high levels of sexual desire even on days that would ordinarily be the most threatening to couples, such when they have disagreements with their partner. In a 14-day daily experience study of college students in dating relationships, sexual desire was generally higher on days when people reported experiencing more frequent positive events and was lower on days with more frequent negative events, but people who were more approach-motivated were even able to maintain high desire in the face of more negative relationship events (Impett et al., 2008). Therefore, engaging in sex to pursue positive outcomes for the partner or relationship, such as enhancing closeness, is one way that couples can maintain satisfying sexual relationships over time and reap the most benefits from sex.

Recent research has demonstrated that approach and avoidance sexual goals are also relevant for the sexual and relationship experiences of couples coping with a sexual dysfunction. In particular, studies have investigated the sexual motivation of couples coping with vulvodynia, a condition that involves chronic, recurrent pain during sexual intercourse and affects about 8% of reproductive aged women (Harlow et al., 2014). The majority of couples coping with vulvodynia continue to engage in sex (Reed et al., 2012), but their reasons for doing so vary (Elmerstig, Wijma, & Bertero, 2008). In one study of women with vulvodynia and their partners, women’s pursuit of sex for avoidance goals was associated with lower sexual relationship satisfaction and greater depressive symptoms (Rosen, Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Boudreau, 2015). In addition, the partners of women with vulvodynia who reported higher avoidance goals for sex also reported lower relationship satisfaction. It is possible that by focusing on the negative outcomes they want to avoid, the experience of pain becomes more salient, and then in turn, couples experience the negative outcomes that they are trying to avoid (e.g., couple conflict or partner dissatisfaction). In contrast, women with vulvodynia who engaged in sex more frequently for approach goals reported greater sexual and relationship satisfaction (Rosen et al., 2015). Holding stronger approach sexual goals may enable women to attend less to the possibility of pain and derive more enjoyment from the sexual activity and by extension their overall relationship. It is also possible that approach motivation allows couples to focus on how they can make the most of their sexual experiences. That is, approach goals may be associated with expanding their sexual repertoire to include nonpenetrative sexual activities or spending longer amounts of time on activities that provide the most pleasure.

One question prompted by this previous work on the benefits of engaging in sex for approach goals is whether people can enhance their approach motivation for sex. Recent experimental work on

approach and avoidance sexual goals suggests that it is possible to enhance people's approach goals for sex and ultimately their satisfaction. In a study with people in relationships, half of the participants were told about the benefits of approach sexual goals and asked to try to focus on approach reasons for sex over the next week, and the other half were given no instructions about sexual goals. When participants completed a follow-up survey 1 week later, people in the approach condition reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction compared to the control group (Muise et al., 2016). Therefore, clinical interventions for couples with low sexual desire or sexual dissatisfaction may incorporate information on the benefits of approach-motivated sex in relationships.

Finally, research in more diverse populations has demonstrated that women's motivations for engaging in sex tend to be largely similar across sexual orientation (heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual) and the gender of their partner (man, woman; Armstrong & Reissing, 2015). Often, however, sexual motivations differed by relationship type where women tended to be more motivated by physical reasons, such as experiencing physical pleasure, in casual relationships, and more motivated by emotional reasons, such as to connect with a partner, in committed relationships (Armstrong & Reissing, 2015). To my knowledge, there is no existing research on gay or bisexual men's motivations for engaging in sex. In one study, however, young gay and bisexual men's romantic motivation was associated with sexual risk taking behavior. That is, gay and bisexual men who reported being more motivated to form a romantic relationship tended to engage in less sexual risk-taking (i.e., reported fewer partner with whom they engaged in unprotected sex), but when gay and bisexual men reported romantic obsession, or an extreme motivation for a romantic relationship, they engaged in more sexual risk-taking behavior (Bauermeister, Ventuneac, Pingel, & Parsons, 2012). One important direction for future research is to explore how different sexual motivations are associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction in more diverse samples.

### Who Is More Likely to Maintain Desire and Satisfaction in a Relationship?

Another way people in romantic relationships may differ in their sexual motivations is in the extent to which they are communally motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs. *Communal strength* is defined as the motivation to give to a partner to enhance that partner's well-being without the expectation of direct reciprocity, as opposed to giving *quid pro quo* where a giving to others is contingent upon receiving something for yourself in return (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). For example, people high in communal strength are more willing to be responsive to their partner's needs and sacrifice for the welfare of the partner and relationship (Kogan et al., 2010). Communal people tend to give to their partner insofar as the personal costs incurred in meeting their partner's needs are reasonable, and they trust that their partner will be responsive to their own needs when they arise (Mills et al., 2004). A growing body of research demonstrates that communal giving, or providing care to close others when in need, is associated with many benefits, not only for the recipient of this care but also for the giver (Canevello & Crocker, 2010, 2011; Kogan et al., 2010; Le, Impett, Kogan, Webster, & Cheng, 2013).

Recently, theories of communal motivation have been applied to the sexual domain of relationships. Applying theories of communal motivation to the domain of sexuality provides insight into how some couples are able to stave off declines in sexual desire over time or remain satisfied even when partners are facing discrepancies in their sexual interest. *Sexual communal strength* is the extent to which people are motivated to incur costs to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs (Muise et al., 2013a). People's level of sexual communal strength has been assessed using items adapted from a general measure of communal strength, such as "How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?" and "How high a priority for you is meeting the sexual needs of your partner?" (Muise et al., 2013a). In a qualitative study, people reported that being communal in a sexual relationship could involve engaging in sex even when not entirely in the mood, being open-minded about a partner's preferences, communicating with their partner about their sexual likes and dislikes, and ensuring mutuality such that both partners' needs are acknowledged and met in the relationship (Muise & Impett, 2012).

People with partners high in sexual communal strength do, in fact, report that their partners are more responsive to their needs during sex, and in turn, they feel more satisfied and committed to the relationship (Muise & Impett, 2015). Put another way, when a person is with a partner who is highly motivated to meet their sexual needs, they detect this and, in turn, are happier in their relationship and more motivated to maintain their relationship over time (Muise & Impett, 2015). Researchers have also looked at responsiveness to a partner's sexual needs in terms of tangible behavioral changes, such as the frequency with which a person makes *sexual transformations*—or changes to their sexual habits—for a partner. People with partners who report making more sexual changes to accommodate their sexual interests, such as engaging in more frequent sex than they might desire or trying specific sexual activities that turn a partner on, also report greater relationship quality (Burke & Young, 2012). This suggests that the partners of both people who are motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs (i.e., sexual communal strength) and people who actually make behavioral changes for a partner (i.e., sexual transformations) reap benefits in their romantic relationship.

Somewhat paradoxically, being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs is also linked to increased benefits for the self. For example, in a sample of long-term couples, sexual communal strength was positively associated with a person's own sexual desire and satisfaction (Muise et al., 2013a). People higher in sexual communal strength also maintained sexual desire over time in long-term relationships. People lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire over a 4-month period of time, whereas those people who were high in sexual communal strength began the study with slightly higher desire and were able to maintain sexual desire over time (Muise et al., 2013a). This finding is quite remarkable given that the average relationship duration of couples in this study was 11 years, and sexual desire often declines over time in relationships (Muise et al., 2016). One key reason why people higher in sexual communal strength reap these benefits is because they tend to engage in sex with their partner's for approach goals, such as to enhance intimacy in their relationship and making their partner happy, and reap benefits for themselves and their partners as a result (Muise et al., 2013a).

As evidence that communal people genuinely care about their partner's interests, they are even motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs in situations when it is not particularly easy—for example, in situations in which their partner is interested in sex but their own desire for sex is low. In these situations, communally motivated people remain motivated to pursue benefits for their partner, such as making their partner feel loved and desired, instead of focusing on what they personally have to lose from engaging in sex, such as feeling too tired (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015). As a result of their increased motivation to pursue benefits for their partner and decreased motivation to avoid costs to themselves, they are more likely to engage in sex in these situations and both partners report greater sexual and relationship satisfaction as a result. Most strikingly, people high in sexual communal strength remained satisfied even on days when they engaged in sex, but their desire was lower than their partner's desire. Whereas less communal people experienced lower sexual satisfaction on days when they engaged in sex but were not in the mood compared with days when both partners experienced similarly high levels of sexual desire, people high in sexual communal strength felt equally sexually satisfied on days when their desire was similar to their partner's desire and on days when they were less sexually enthused than their partner (Day et al., 2015).

Of course being responsive to a partner's needs does not only involve engaging in sex. At times, it may be beneficial to the relationship to be understanding about a partner's need not to have sex. In a recent study of couples who are transitioning to parenthood, both a person's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs (i.e., high sexual communal strength) and their motivation to be understanding about their partner's need not to engage in sex had unique associations with both partners' sexual and relationship satisfaction (Muise, Rosen, Kim, & Impett, *in press*). In other words, when people were more motivated to be understanding about their partner's disinterest in sex, both partner's reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that being responsive to a partner's needs—whether they are interested in having sex or not—can be beneficial for the quality of couples' sex lives and relationships. The findings also indicate that there may be times in relationships when sex will be less frequent, such as when couples have a new baby, and if partners can be understanding and remain responsive to their partner's needs, they can maintain satisfaction in their sex life and relationship during this time.

### Implications and Future Directions

Taken together, the research on sexual motivation in relationships suggests that focusing on positive outcomes for a partner and the relationship can help couples reap the most benefits from engaging in sex, and being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs is one way that couples can maintain desire and satisfaction over time. Although this work seems to imply that being other-focused and responsive to a partner is the key to having a satisfying sex life and relationship, there is an important caveat to these findings. The positive effects of approach motivation and sexual communal strength should only be seen in the context of sexual encounters that do not involve coercion or explicit partner pressure (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Katz & Tirone, 2008). In fact, recent work indicates that when the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs

involves self-neglect, people no longer reap benefits for their sex life and relationship, and instead both partners report poorer sexual and relationship well-being (Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Rosen, *in press*). That is, it is important to strike a healthy balance between being responsive to a partner's needs and asserting your own needs.

Research on sexual motivation has implications for couples coping with a sexual dysfunction in their relationship. Given the benefits of approach and communal motivation in community samples of couples (Impett et al., 2005, 2008; Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013a; Muise et al., 2013b), as well as a growing body of research demonstrating benefits in clinical samples (Muise et al., *invited resubmission*; Rosen et al., 2015), future research should consider incorporating theories of approach and communal motivation into interventions targeting couples coping with sexual problems. Extending research on sexual motivation to clinical samples—such as couples where one partner has clinically low levels of sexual desire—and to developing clinical interventions are important directions for future research.

It is an exciting time for research on sexual motivation since there are many questions that are yet to be answered. To date, the vast majority of research on sexual motivation has focused on the outcomes of engaging in sex for different reasons. Currently we know little about the origins of sexual motivation. For example, how do people develop communal norms around sexuality in their relationships and to what extent to people's norms change over time? Future longitudinal work may consider the trajectory of sexual motivation over time in a relationship. In addition, research on sexual motivation has focused exclusively on people's reason for engaging in sex, but the reasons why a person declines their partner's sexual advances may also have implications for sexual and relationship satisfaction. In general, sexual rejection tends to have negative consequences for relationships (Byers & Heinlein, 1989), but it is possible that there are ways of declining a partner's advances that maintain satisfaction (Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2015). Future research may consider not only people's reasons for engaging in sex but also their reasons and strategies for declining their partner's sexual advances.

### Conclusions

Although declines in sexual desire over time in a romantic relationship are common, and romantic partners will inevitably encounter times when their sexual interests conflict, theory and research on sexual motivation sheds light on who might stave off declines in desire and how couples can navigate their sexual relationship with greater success. It seems that being orientated toward positive outcomes for a partner and the relationship as well as being motivated to be responsive to a partner's sexual needs can help couples keep their sexual spark alive over time and reap the most benefits from sex.

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### Résumé

Des relations sexuelles satisfaisantes sont déterminantes pour la qualité de la relation d'un couple, mais il est difficile de maintenir le désir sexuel et les liens au fil du temps. La théorie et la recherche sur la motivation sexuelle peuvent révéler quand le sexe est associé à des avantages dans le cadre d'une relation et quand il nuit à la



satisfaction, ainsi que les personnes qui sont les plus susceptibles de conserver, dans une relation romantique, leur désir sexuel et leur satisfaction au fil du temps. Les raisons et les buts qui motivent les gens à avoir des relations sexuelles varient, de même que la motivation à répondre aux besoins sexuels de leur partenaire romantique, et ces éléments ont des répercussions importantes sur leur expérience sur le plan du désir et de la satisfaction. Le présent examen de la recherche portant sur la motivation sexuelle vise à résumer les principaux résultats dans ce domaine et à mettre en relief les thèmes qui permettent de comprendre la façon dont les couples peuvent tirer le maximum d'avantages des relations sexuelles et maintenir la passion sexuelle au fil du temps. Les répercussions pour les recherches futures et les applications cliniques sont ensuite présentées.

*Mots-clés* : motivation sexuelle, relations romantiques, désir, satisfaction, couples.

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