

Study links empathy, self-esteem, and autonomy with increased sexual enjoyment

June 3 2011

Sexual pleasure among young adults (ages 18-26) is linked to healthy psychological and social development, according to a new study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The study is the first to use a representative population sample of heterosexuals to find a relationship between key developmental assets and sexual pleasure. The findings are published in the June 2011 issue of *The Journal of Adolescent Health*.

The research study examined data from 3,237 respondents ages 18 to 26 from the National Longitudinal Study of [Adolescent Health](#), Wave III: 2001-2002. "Sexual health is more than the absence of sexually-transmitted infection, [unintended pregnancy](#), violence or other problems. It is the presence of sexual well-being," said Adena Galinsky, PhD, co-author of the study and a doctoral student with Bloomberg School's Center for Adolescent Health. Galinsky, currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Chicago, conducted the study along with Freya Sonenstein, PhD, professor and director of the Center for Adolescent Health.

The study looked at the association between three developmental assets—self esteem, autonomy and empathy—and three measures of sexual pleasure among young adult women and men in established opposite-sex relationships: Regularity of orgasm, enjoyment of receiving oral sex, and enjoyment of performing oral sex. The findings include:

Among the young women, measures of self-esteem, autonomy, and

empathy are positively associated with the three types of sexual pleasure. "These three developmental assets may enable young women, as well as young men, to experience higher levels of sexual pleasure," said Galinsky.

[Sexual enjoyment](#) in the three areas is consistently associated only with empathy for the young men. "Our hypothesis is that empathetic individuals are more responsive to a partner's needs, and thus initiate a positive feedback cycle," said Galinsky.

Young men are more likely to report the highest level of all three types of sexual enjoyment. For example, nearly 9 out of 10 young men report having an orgasm most or all of the time they have sex with their partner, while less than half of young women experience orgasm that frequently when they have sex with their partner.

Galinsky further theorizes that because young women face more barriers to sexual expression as compared to men, the achievement of sexual enjoyment may do more to boost their self-esteem and sense of autonomy. "Alternatively, these developmental assets may be more important to young women's sexual pleasure since they help them break down impediments to sexual communication and exploration," she said.

Sonenstein added that "in order to develop prevention initiatives that reduce sexual risk-taking leading to sexually transmitted disease and unintended pregnancy, program developers need a better understanding of the dynamics of [sexual pleasure](#). Studies such as this one address the current lack of information about this topic."

More information: [doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.09.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.09.008)

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

Citation: Study links empathy, self-esteem, and autonomy with increased sexual enjoyment (2011, June 3) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-06-links-empathy-self-esteem-autonomy-sexual.html>

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