

Are college student hook-ups linked to anxiety and depression?

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As narratives of "hook-up" culture take center stage in popular media, behavioral researchers are starting to ask what psychological consequences, if any, may be in store for young adults who engage in casual sex.

A new study in *The Journal of Sex Research* found higher levels of general anxiety, [social anxiety](#), and depression among students who recently had [casual sex](#). Entitled "Risky Business: Is There an Association between Casual Sex and Mental Health among Emerging Adults?" the study surveyed over 3,900 heterosexual college students from across the United States about their casual sex behaviors and mental well-being. "Casual sex" was defined as having intercourse with a partner one has known for less than a week. Students from over 30 institutions around the country completed the online survey, making this the largest sample to be collected for a study on this topic. On average, 11% of students reported a casual sex encounter during the month prior to the survey, the majority of whom were men.

The study was led by Dr. Melina M. Bersamin of California State University, Sacramento. According to Dr. Bersamin, "It is premature to conclude that casual sexual encounters pose no harmful psychological risks for [young adults](#)." The results "suggest that among heterosexual college students, casual sex was negatively associated with well-being and positively associated with psychological distress."

The researchers also investigated the role of gender in determining

[mental distress](#) linked to casual sex. Prior studies have found that women respond more negatively to casual sex than men, possibly because of double standards that allow men to have more sexual encounters with a greater number of partners than women. In this study, however, gender did not have an effect on outcomes.

"Risky Business" opens the door to future research questions about causal links between sexual behavior and mental health. Researchers have yet to determine whether casual sex leads to [psychological distress](#), or if existing mental health problems cause young adults to engage in riskier behaviors.

More information: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00224499.2013.772088

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