

The science of pillow talk

December 23 2013, by Amanda Denes

It's the stuff spy movies are made of – the CIA operative and his or her lover, together in bed. In the afterglow, secrets are revealed, classified details leaked. As Hollywood would have us believe, it is during this interlude of "pillow talk" that people become less concerned about disclosing sensitive information.

While this may be a fictitious example, many of us may in fact feel more comfortable opening up to a sexual partner about [sensitive information](#) – such as our stresses, [feelings](#), and hopes about a relationship – after sex. The question is, why?

Amid the countless components that contribute to a healthy romance, frequency of sex, sexual satisfaction, and sexual likes and dislikes have all been linked to [relationship satisfaction](#). We know that relationship satisfaction is often related to various aspects of couples' sexual behavior, but we ask far fewer questions about what happens afterward – when the sex is over.

We've been led to believe that all the important questions about sex involve the lead-up, but what happens post-sex may also influence relationship satisfaction.

Risk and reward in romance

Pillow talk, or post-sex conversation, and its influence on relationships, are vital to my scholarly interests. I became interested in this line of research upon realizing the very different experiences people were

having with pillow talk. Friends would tell me stories about sweet nothings whispered following sex – a time period denoted by researchers Daniel Kruger and Susan Hughes as the post-coital time interval (PCTI). These conversations would sometimes make or break the relationship. For some, saying "I love you" for the first time after sex brought the relationship to the next level. For others, the same disclosure led to regret for having confessed one's sentiments too soon.

Why such different experiences? Why were some people sharing their innermost feelings, even when they knew the relationship had not yet reached that level? What effects would these post-coital disclosures have on relationship satisfaction?

In beginning to explore the relationship between our hormones and communication decisions, I recognized that the physiological changes accompanying sex may be the underlying cause of pillow talk and that investigating communication during the PCTI may help us better understand the link between physiology and communication. I also realized that one important variable was likely influencing this whole process – orgasm.

Yes, I've seen people shift uncomfortably when I use this word in academic presentations. While individuals may have different levels of comfort when it comes to discussing sexuality, to ignore the importance of orgasm would be to ignore a key piece of the pillow-talk puzzle and what my own research has revealed to be an important predictor of post-sex communication.

The chemistry of communication

When individuals experience orgasm, profound physiological changes occur as a hormone called oxytocin floods their bodies. Increases in oxytocin have been linked to many pro-social behaviors – hence the

hormone's nicknames, "love hormone" and "trust hormone." While men as well as women experience the post-climax oxytocin surge, testosterone is thought to dampen the effects of oxytocin, which may mean fewer warm, fuzzy feelings post-sex for individuals with more testosterone, such as men.

Based on these physiological responses and what we already know about oxytocin's feel-good effects, I investigated differences in individuals' pillow talk based on whether or not they climaxed. I found that women who orgasmed disclosed more positive feelings to their partners after [sexual activity](#) than women who did not orgasm. In addition, women who orgasmed disclosed more positive feelings to their partners post-coitus than men did.

Oxytocin may explain this finding. Women who climax have more oxytocin flowing through their systems than women who do not climax, and we know that the hormone relates to increased feelings of trust and connection – key components that influence individuals' decisions to disclose feelings to their partners. Women who orgasmed also disclosed more than men who orgasmed – perhaps because men's higher levels of testosterone suppress the oxytocin response.

Additionally, pillow talk varied by couple type. Individuals in more committed relationships were disclosing more [positive feelings](#) to their partners after sexual activity than individuals in less committed relationships. They also regretted their disclosures less and reported more relationship satisfaction following pillow talk.

A purpose behind pillow talk

This may suggest that, for individuals in more committed relationships, pillow talk is part of the way they maintain closeness and satisfaction with their partners. I am currently investigating the possibility that post-

coital communication functions as a relationship maintenance strategy by looking at why individuals engage in pillow talk.

In another study, I found that how individuals view the benefits and risks of disclosing their feelings to their partners can help explain the relationship between orgasm and pillow talk. For some [individuals](#), it seems that the glow of orgasm may minimize the risks – and enhance the benefits – of disclosing. It's easy to imagine the ways this may function in couples' everyday interaction: During pillow talk, couples may feel more comfortable opening up about their stresses, feelings, and hopes for the relationship, and this openness may trickle over to other, non-sexual contexts.

Relationship researchers such as myself are beginning to ask the questions to which so many couples want to know the answers: Why do I feel as though I can share feelings with my partner after sex that I don't feel comfortable sharing normally? What effect will pillow talk have on my relationship satisfaction? Will my relationship benefit from pillow talk?

In starting to answer these questions, we're gaining a better understanding of the ways that post-coital behavior relates to relationship satisfaction and healthy couple functioning. For me, the research doesn't end with [sex](#). In fact, it's just the beginning.

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