

Psychologist explains the research behind flagging libidos

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Credit: Joanna Sweeny/Flickr

A UBC researcher explains why some lacy new lingerie might just do the trick

Is your [relationship](#) going stale? UBC psychology researcher Heather Morton explains the research behind flagging libidos, and offers tips on reigniting the flames of passion.

Why did you want to study partner novelty?

If you Google "How to enhance sexual desire" or "How to spice up your relationship," you will find a large number of pop psychology and self-

help sites will suggest the idea of novelty. Even couples counsellors will recommend these kinds of strategies: "Take salsa dancing" or "Buy new lingerie." However, there is a lack of research examining the efficacy of this strategy.

Many non-human animal studies suggest that novelty may play an important role in sexual functioning. This has been frequently demonstrated by the Coolidge effect, where a male will copulate with a female repetitively until he's satiated and is no longer interested in continuing. But when a new female is introduced, he's interested again. Although you clearly can't do this with humans, there are some areas of research that have examined this phenomenon indirectly.

What have you found?

In our recent review of the literature, we found evidence that suggests men and women's sexual desire declines over time with familiar partners and returns with novel partners. For instance, research on long-term relationships has shown that sexual frequency, sexual satisfaction, and sexual desire decline over time with the same partner. Remarriage has been shown to result in an increase in sexual frequency, therefore this effect cannot simply be attributed to age.

Laboratory studies examining habituation to erotica also support this idea. If you show someone the same erotic clip over and over again, his or her level of arousal decreases. When you show someone a new clip, his or her arousal is renewed. It appears that the Coolidge effect does occur, to some extent, in both men and women.

Is this depressing news for long-term couples?

It may sound depressing, but it can also be empowering. Men and

women are choosing, for the most part, to enter monogamous relationships. There are a lot of benefits to these unions with regards to physical and mental health as well as monetary benefits.

I think it's also helpful to know the potential downsides associated with these relationships, so you can create strategies to overcome them. What we're now in the process of studying is whether couples can reverse the effect of declining desire by increasing novelty within their relationship, such as engaging in a greater variety of leisure activities together or in a wider sexual repertoire.

It can also be helpful to understand that this is natural—that there's not something wrong with you or your partner. My hope is that we can use this information to benefit long-term relationships. Maybe you can have an affair within your own relationship.

Do you have any tips for couples on Valentine's Day?

Talk with your partner about exciting activities you may want to try together this Valentines, and new sexual experiences you'd like to have together.

Couples may be able to gain the benefits in sexual functioning that accompany a new partner by introducing novelty in other ways. Previous studies have shown that engaging in exciting activities together increases relationship satisfaction, however the impact on [sexual functioning](#) was not examined.

Early results from one of our studies suggest that men and women who engage in a greater variety of sexual activities experience greater [sexual desire](#) and satisfaction. It appears as though the frequently given advice on "spicing up your relationship" may in fact be spot on.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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