

Sex and satisfaction in long-term relationships

July 14 2015, by Elaine Smith



Can committed partners find sexual satisfaction and harmony despite differing levels of sexual desire?

Yes, say psychologists at the University of Toronto Mississauga, but like any other aspect of an ongoing [relationship](#), it requires motivation and compromise.

In a study published in a recent issue of the *Personal and Social Psychology Bulletin*, researchers Lisa Day, a UTM PhD student; Amy Muise, a UTM post-doctoral fellow; Samantha Joel, a U of T PhD candidate; and Emily Impett, a psychology professor at UTM, examined the sexual relationships of established couples and discovered that

disparities in the level of sexual desire doesn't automatically spell the end of a couple's happiness.

Those who are motivated to meet their [partner's](#) needs have better relationships and more [sexual satisfaction](#), as do their partners, the researchers discovered. They tend to view sex as one piece of a long-term relationship that, like many aspects, requires give and take for the overall health of the relationship. However, sex is unique, because in most relationships partners are not able to get their sexual needs met outside the relationship like they may be able to with other needs.

"If one person's desire is low and the other's is high, the more the first person is willing to engage in sex for the benefit of the relationship, the more satisfaction each partner felt, both with the sexual experience and the overall relationship," said Muise.

"Most long-term relationships are monogamous and rely on one person to meet the partner's sexual needs. We were curious about situations where one partner wants sex and the other isn't in the mood. People in long-term relationships encounter these situations often, and we wanted to see how people navigated them."

Day explained that a relationship in which the less interested partner is motivated to meet the other's needs in a positive way is considered a relationship high in "communal sexual strength".

The researchers conducted three different studies to explore situations where levels of sexual interest were in conflict. In the first study, one group of participants was asked to describe the ways in which they strive to meet their partner's sexual needs as a way of temporarily increasing their sexual communal strength; the control group didn't get such a request. Next, each group was asked to respond to a scenario in which one partner was eager for [sexual relations](#) and the other was not. Those

in the first group were more willing to engage in sex in situations when their own personal desire for sex is low, and expected to feel more satisfied with the [sexual experience](#) and the relationship overall when they did engage in sex.

The second study determined that the reason people high in sexual communal strength may benefit more from engaging in sex when they aren't in the mood is because they are more strongly motivated by desires to promote their partner's interests. They are less motivated to avoid costs to themselves from engaging in sex.

In the third study, the participants filled out surveys daily for three weeks, reporting level of desire and whether they engaged in sexual relations. The surveys encompassed days when partners reported similar levels of [sexual desire](#) and days when they reported different levels of desire. The participants were not aware that the researchers were specifically interested in different levels of desire, so this study helped confirm that the results of the earlier studies didn't reflect a need to provide socially acceptable responses.

"These people are motivated because they love their partners, want to make them feel good and benefit the relationship," said Day. "They are still keeping their own needs in mind; they don't participate out of fear or a sense of obligation. They are excited and interested by their partner's sexual needs."

Provided by University of Toronto

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