

Team examines what keeps passion alive in long-term relationships

February 25 2016, by Sheri Ledbetter

A Chapman University psychologist and his interdisciplinary research team have just published a study examining the sexual satisfaction—or dissatisfaction—of heterosexual couples in long-term relationships, and what contributes to keeping sexual passion alive. In one of the largest studies to date that scientifically examines what contributes to a satisfying long-term sex life, the findings indicate foreplay, setting the mood, mixing it up, and expressing love are all factors that satisfied couples said they do regularly.

"Sexual satisfaction and maintenance of passion were higher among people who had sex more frequently, received more oral sex, had more consistent orgasms, incorporated more variety of sexual acts, took the time to set a mood and practiced effective sexual communication," said David Frederick, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at Chapman University and lead author of the study. "Almost half of satisfied and dissatisfied couples read sexual self-help books and magazine articles, but what set sexually satisfied couples apart was that they actually tried some of the ideas."

To gauge [sexual satisfaction](#) over time, couples were asked to rate their sex satisfaction in the first six months together and then rate it for now. Dr. Frederick's team learned that the overwhelming majority (83 percent) of people reported they were sexually satisfied in the first six months of the relationship. Only half of people, however, reported currently being satisfied (43 percent of men and 55 percent of [women](#)), with the rest feeling neutral (16 percent of men and 18 percent of

women) or dissatisfied (41 percent of men and 27 percent of women). Another set of items addressed whether respondents believed their sexual passion was the same, less or better now than early in their relationship.

"We looked at common romantic and sexual behaviors that are rarely assessed in the literature but are likely important contributors to sexual satisfaction," said Dr. Frederick. "For example, while sexual variety is deemed important for sexual satisfaction, evidence on the effectiveness of specific forms of variety—such as showering together or wearing lingerie or use of sex toys—is lacking."

Specifically, the research team found that sexually satisfied men and women engaged in more intimate behaviors, such as cuddling, gentle and deep kissing and laughing together during sexual activity; incorporated more acts of sexual variety such as trying new sexual positions or acting out fantasies; more frequently set a romantic or sexual mood such as lighting candles or playing music, and used communication effectively, such as saying "I love you" during sex or sending a teasing text earlier in the day. They also found that sexually satisfied men and women gave and received more [oral sex](#), orgasmed more frequently, and had sex more frequently.

Some key findings of the research included:

- Satisfied men and women were more likely to report that their last sexual encounter with their partner was "passionate," "loving and tender," or "playful". Nearly half of sexually dissatisfied women (43 percent) said that they were "just going through the motions for my partner's sake" compared to only 13 percent of sexually dissatisfied men during their last sexual encounter. Few people reported feeling pressured into sex by their partner (2 to 3 percent).

- About half of satisfied men (49 percent) and women (45 percent) reported their last [sexual encounter](#) lasted more than 30 minutes, compared to only 26 percent of dissatisfied men and 19 percent of dissatisfied women.
- Satisfied men and women were more likely than dissatisfied men and women to say they: tried a new sexual position, wore sexy lingerie, took a shower or bath together, talked about or acted out fantasies, gave or had a massage, went on a romantic getaway, tried anal stimulation, made a date night to have sex, or used a sex toy together.
- Feeling desired by their partners appears to be more of a problem for men than for women. Only 59 percent of men compared to 42 percent of women reported they felt less desired by their partner now than in the beginning. In contrast, two-thirds of men compared with half of women reported feeling as much desire, or more desire, for their partner now as in the beginning of the relationship.
- Most men and women reported feeling the same or more emotional closeness during sex now than in the first six months of their relationship (69 percent of men and 72 percent of women). Less than half of dissatisfied men and women, however, felt this way.

Dr. Janet Lever, a co-author on the study, stated "It was encouraging to learn that more than one-third of couples kept passion alive, even after a decade or two together. That won't happen on auto pilot; these couples made a conscious effort to ward off routinization of sex."

The study, called, What Keeps Passion Alive? Sexual Satisfaction is Associated with Sexual Communication, Mood Setting, Sexual Variety, Oral Sex, Orgasm, and Sex Frequency in a National U.S. Study, examined more than 38,747 married or cohabiting heterosexual men and women in the U.S. who had been with their partner for at least three

years. The study is published in *The Journal of Sex Research*, and can be found here. The average age of the sample was 40 years old for women and 46 years old for [men](#).

Provided by Chapman University

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