

Study reveals secret to a happy sex life

November 7 2016



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The secret to a happy sex life in long-term relationships is the belief that it takes hard work and effort, instead of expecting sexual satisfaction to simply happen if you are true soulmates, says a study led by a University of Toronto (U of T) social psychology researcher.

These "sexpectations"—the need to work on sexual growth or rely on sexual destiny—are so powerful they can either sustain otherwise [healthy relationships](#) or undermine them, says Jessica Maxwell, a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Arts & Science at U of T.

"People who believe in sexual destiny are using their sex life as a barometer for how well their relationship is doing, and they believe problems in the bedroom equal problems in the relationship as a whole," says Maxwell.

"Whereas people who believe in sexual growth not only believe they can work on their sexual problems, but they are not letting it affect their relationship satisfaction."

The findings are based on research involving approximately 1,900 participants, and the results published online today in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* included people from both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

While the effect of people's so-called "implicit beliefs" have been studied in other aspects of human relationships, this is the first time they have been applied to the sexual domain.

Maxwell says there is a honeymoon phase lasting about two to three years where [sexual satisfaction](#) is high among both sexual growth and sexual destiny believers.

But the benefit of believing in sexual growth becomes apparent after this initial phase, as sexual desire begins to ebb and flow.

"We know that disagreements in the sexual domain are somewhat inevitable over time," says Maxwell. "Your sex life is like a garden, and

it needs to be watered and nurtured to maintain it."

While her research did not focus on the influence of media on sex beliefs, it is clear pop culture has conditioned us to accept and understand that other aspects of relationships, such as the division of household chores, takes work and effort, Maxwell notes.

Hollywood's glamorous portrayal of sex and romance in shows like *The Bachelor* are less grounded in reality, however, which may fuel a "soulmate" philosophy that is not as adaptable to conflicts and problems that arise over time.

Maxwell says her research provided at least one example of the media's impact on the sexual domain. She was able to influence people's beliefs by "priming" them with phoney magazine articles that either emphasized sexual destiny philosophies, or advocated the idea that sex takes work.

Like everything else concerning human relationships, however, the study suggests the distinctions between the two schools of [belief](#) are more shades of grey than black and white.

For example, the research demonstrated there are often aspects of both sexual growth and sexual destiny beliefs in the same individual.

And while many women are avid consumers of soulmate and romantic destiny stories, the study showed they are more likely than men to believe that sex takes work in a long-term relationship.

"I think that this could be because there is some evidence that sexual satisfaction takes more work for women, so they rate higher on the sexual growth scale," Maxwell says. The study showed that, while sexual-growth beliefs can buffer the impact of problems in the bedroom, they don't help as much if the problems become too substantial.

There is also some evidence that sexual-destiny believers may be open to making changes in their sex life for the sake of their partners, but only if they are convinced they are their true soulmate.

The findings underscore the importance for counsellors and clinicians trying to help couples struggling with sexual satisfaction to promote the idea that problems in the bedroom are normal, and don't mean the relationship is automatically in trouble.

"Sexual-destiny beliefs have a lot of similarities with other dysfunctional beliefs about sex, and I think it's important to recognize and address that."

The findings are reported in the study titled "How Implicit Theories of Sexuality Shape Sexual and Relationship Well-Being" published online ahead of print in the November issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

More information: Jessica A. Maxwell et al, How Implicit Theories of Sexuality Shape Sexual and Relationship Well-Being., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000078](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000078)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Study reveals secret to a happy sex life (2016, November 7) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-11-reveals-secret-happy-sex-life.html>

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