

Why sex gets better in older age

December 15 2016, by Miri Forbes, Nicholas Eaton And Robert Krueger



A different kind of senior moment. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Aging is generally associated with improvements in our [quality of life](#): We become more proficient in our work, learn how to manage our finances better and our bonds with loved ones deepen. With time and practice, most of the core domains of our lives improve as we develop skills and strategies to manage our lives with more mastery. An exception to this pattern is the quality of our sex lives, [which has consistently been reported to deteriorate with age](#).

While this fits with the messages we receive from popular culture, which tell us that sex is a young person's domain, it is somewhat at odds with the fact that older adults continue to explore and enjoy sexuality well

into old age. The [majority](#) of men and women over 60 in the U.S. are sexually active, most at least two to three times per month ([more often than many younger adults](#)). [They also rate sex as an important part of life](#)

So, if there is no epidemic of age-related frigidity, why would [sexual quality](#) of life take a nosedive in later life? A common answer to this question cites declining [physical health](#) and [sexual functioning](#) with age. Another answer might be: The quality of our sex lives doesn't decline with age.

Studying sex and aging

There is a key element missing from nearly all studies of sex and aging: studying change over time. If we ask a group of people how satisfied they are with their [sex life](#), and the younger people are more satisfied than the older people, does that mean that aging is responsible for this difference? What if instead the apparent age difference is because people born in the 1930s have different attitudes toward sex than people who grew up after the sexual revolution of the '60's and '70's?

To get to the bottom of how aging affects sexual quality of life, [we analyzed patterns in longitudinal data collected from over 6,000 individuals followed over a period of 18 years, spanning ages 20-93](#). In 1995, 2004 and 2013, the representative sample of English-speaking Americans completed extensive self-administered survey questionnaires in private and returned them by mail.

A key question for our study was: How would you rate the sexual aspects of your life these days, from the worst possible situation (0) to the best possible situation (10)?

The basic trends in the data suggested that – without taking any other

factors into account – sexual quality of life declines with age. But as people in the study aged, they placed more emphasis on the quality – not quantity – of sexual encounters. For example, frequency of sex became less important with age, and the amount of thought and effort invested in sex became more important.

These changing priorities were key predictors of sexual quality of life for older adults, and appeared to buffer its decline. When we matched older and [younger adults](#) on key characteristics of their sex lives – along with sociodemographic characteristics, and mental and [physical health](#) – older adults actually had better sexual quality of life.

For example, if we compared a 40-year-old man and a 50-year-old man with the same levels of perceived control over their sex life, who invest the same amount of thought and effort in their sex life, have sex with the same frequency and had the same number of sexual partners in the past year, we would expect the 50-year-old to report better sexual quality of life.

This is consistent with the improvement we see in other life domains with age, and highlights the benefits of [life experience](#) for sexuality as people learn more about their sexual preferences and their partners' likes and dislikes. The positive relationship between sexual quality of life and aging was strongest in the context of good-quality romantic relationships, [where sexual exploration and a focus on partners' pleasure is more likely to take place](#).

Life experience related to a better sex life

Together these findings suggest that as we age, our sexual priorities change and we develop knowledge, skills and preferences that protect against aging-related declines in sexual quality of life. Since wisdom is "[the quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgment](#)," our

study suggests that [life experience is fostering sexual wisdom](#).

This is great news, as [a satisfying sex life has been found to be important for health and well-being](#), regardless of age. For [older adults](#) in particular, [being sexually active predicts a longer and healthier life](#).

We now know that age-related declines in sexual quality of life are largely related to modifiable factors, so we can target sexual skills, beliefs and attitudes in clinical interventions. Given that our [life expectancy](#) continues to grow, this research highlights the opportunity to facilitate positive sexual experiences across the lifespan.

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