

First sexual experience influences women's future sexual desire: study

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Credit: Scott Broome/via Unsplash

For most people, having sex for the first time is a meaningful and memorable rite of passage.

But Diana Peragine, a UTM doctoral candidate in psychology, recently discovered that the experience also has lasting impacts on a heterosexual woman's [sexual desire](#) later in life.

"Conventional wisdom tells us women have a weaker sex drive than men—that the libido gap is large, and it's stable across the lifespan because women are wired to fundamentally want sex less than men," Pergaine explains.

Peragine, along with fellow U of T researchers Malvina Skorska, Jessica Maxwell and professors Emily Impett and Doug VanderLaan, detailed their findings in the study "A Learning Experience? Enjoyment at Sexual Debut and the Gender Gap in Sexual Desire among Emerging Adults" that was recently published in the *Journal of Sex Research*.

The study included 838 heterosexual adults, many from the UTM campus, and found that women only differed from men in their desire for partnered sex if their first experience of sex wasn't an enjoyable one—that is, if their "first time" was lacking in orgasm.

"Women compared to men were half as likely to report being satisfied at first intercourse, and about eight times less likely to have an orgasm," Peragine says, adding that women who had an orgasm the first time they had sex were more interested in partnered sex, and their current levels of desire for it were equal to men's.

She says this suggests that, if first experiences are powerful lessons, first intercourse is no exception.

"It may serve as a '[learning experience](#)' for many, and an important one for developing expectations that sex can be enjoyable, and beliefs that we deserve, and are entitled, to enjoy it," she says.

The study also found that men's first experience of sex had no apparent effect on their current levels of sexual desire.

"Rather than really speaking to fixed [gender differences](#) in sexual desire, our findings raise the possibility that a sexual debut lacking in orgasm may be a common part of women's sexual socialization where [sexual activity](#) may be disincentivized," Peragine says. "(It's a) [sexual debut](#) that's more frustrating than it is rewarding."

She notes that previous research has shown that men are more likely than women to suffer from problems of high sexual desire, while women are more likely to have problems of low sexual desire, and that the desire gap between healthy men and women persists across adulthood—perpetuating the myth that women have a naturally weaker sex drive than men.

Peragine says she wanted to conduct this research because she wondered whether women's lower sexual desire might be better explained by their lack of enjoyment during their first experience with sexual intercourse, rather than by their gender.

"Previously, there was this idea that sexual desire was like hunger or thirst that originates internally and emerges spontaneously," she says. "But obviously now, we're understanding that it's more dynamic and responsive to experience, and that rewarding sexual experiences shape our sexual expectations."

Ultimately, she hopes that the study, which demonstrates that lower sexual desire among women may be due to an experiential difference rather than a gender difference, inspires other research into the "gender gap" of sexual desire.

She adds that the research also has important implications for sex

education, which often focuses on sexual health and promoting healthy sex.

"I do think this kind of work could bring us closer to sex education interventions that facilitate healthy sexual development in the holistic sense of the word," Peragine says, adding that the research also illustrates that first sexual intercourse experience itself might be a source of sex education. "We don't often acknowledge the real life, hands-on experiences of young men and [women](#) with sex—which may be the most instructional of all."

More information: Diana E. Peragine et al, A Learning Experience? Enjoyment at Sexual Debut and the Gender Gap in Sexual Desire among Emerging Adults, *The Journal of Sex Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2022.2027855](#)

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