

Healthy sex life during pandemic tied to an array of sexual coping strategies

June 15 2023, by Sharita Forrest



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New research suggests that people who maintained healthy sexual and intimate lives early in the pandemic used sex as a coping mechanism to enhance their relationship with their partners, explore new sexual

activities, and discover an array of other ways to adapt to the restrictions, stress and the changes in their daily lives.

One year into the pandemic, Liza Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, conducted an [online survey](#) of 675 people to explore the differences between people whose [sex lives](#) had fizzled and those whose sex lives had flourished. The sample was more than 65% female, and a similar proportion of the participants were in the U.S.

In one of three papers derived from the study, published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, participants were asked if they had ever engaged in any of 59 sexual coping strategies to enhance their sex lives during the first year of the pandemic. Participants were asked to rate the coping strategies' usefulness, regardless of whether they had tried them.

The resilience of individuals' love lives—including the frequency of their sexual activity, desire and satisfaction—was significantly predicted by their engagement in the sexual coping mechanisms studied, Berdychevsky found.

"These results emphasize the crucial role of experience with coping mechanisms and show that amidst COVID-related adversity and challenges, many people found ways to adapt their sex lives and enjoy silver-lining opportunities," said Berdychevsky, whose affiliations include the U. of I.'s Family Resiliency Center; the Center on Health, Aging and Disability; and the Discovery Partners Institute.

The analyses showed nine of the coping mechanisms had significant impact on people's sex lives. These included goal-setting strategies, such as using sex to feel more desirable; expanding one's sexual repertoire through experimentation and risk tactics, such as trying new sexual activities or medicines; fostering intimacy through sex and other

relational strategies; caution and logistical strategies, which included being more selective about one's partners or attentive to safe sex practices; and creativity and innovation strategies, such as becoming more playful and spontaneous.

The remaining mechanisms included online and technology strategies such as watching porn and using phone sex; combining sex with substances like drugs and alcohol; context-related strategies such as having sex in public places; using sex to relax and other diversion strategies; and educational strategies such as seeking professional help or attending classes.

Consistently, across all the strategies and coping mechanisms, people who had tried them rated them significantly more useful than those who had not, Berdychevsky said.

In another paper, published in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, she further investigated these coping mechanisms, clarifying their determinants of use and usefulness, and examining their impacts on the quantity and quality of sex.

"All of the coping mechanisms were rated significantly useful, albeit to different degrees," she said. "Furthermore, gender, age, the availability of a sex partner and the existence of children served as determinants of different coping mechanisms' scope of use and degree of usefulness."

Among those who participated in the survey, 69% reported using sex as a source of pleasure, while 62% indicated it was a means of increasing intimacy or bonding with their partner. Slightly fewer, 55%, said it was a source of relaxation or stress relief, and about 53% indicated they treated sex as a leisure activity, according to the study.

Respondents viewed educational strategies, innovation and

experimentation, and diversion strategies as the most useful. However, participants who used relational coping mechanisms reported greater satisfaction with their sex life, Berdychevsky said.

Although online tools and resources were used fairly frequently, participants rated these among their least useful options, according to the study.

Women were significantly more likely to engage in sexual activity to pursue goals, to benefit their relationships and to utilize caution and logistical strategies compared with men. Women rated coping strategies such as using sex as a source of creativity, pleasure or as a diversion, and educational strategies as more useful than did the men in the study. Sexual desire was driven by gender and was greater for men than for women.

"This study's results can help scholars and practitioners prevent or mitigate the deterioration of people's sex lives, as well as other crises and stressors," Berdychevsky said. "It is essential to train people on sexual coping resources and strategies to protect their sexual well-being and quality of life."

In another paper from this study, Berdychevsky and co-authors Jacinda K. Dariotis, a professor of human development and [family studies](#), and doctoral student Damien Cavanaugh examined how people's sex lives had changed about a year into the pandemic for partnered and non-partnered individuals and identified the determinants of these changes.

The findings, published in the *International Journal of Sexual Health*, revealed significant declines in the frequency, quality and diversity of sexual behaviors, desire and satisfaction. According to the study, these trends were tied to socio-demographic characteristics, [psychological factors](#) and the logistical impacts of the pandemic.

"The [psychological effects](#) of the pandemic will last for a while, even with the 'new normal,' and this will be felt in sexual expression and relationships," Berdychevsky said. "Effective interventions are critically needed to address sexual health and build resilience among people to help them cope with the prolonged stressful conditions of the pandemic and their aftermath."

More information: "(Un)forgotten Sex Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Coping Strategies that Work and the Role of Experience," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2023), [DOI: 10.1007/x10508-023-02630-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/x10508-023-02630-6)

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Liza Berdychevsky et al, Psychological, Socio-Demographic, and Logistical Factors Associated With Changes in Sex Life After Over a Year Into the COVID-19 Pandemic, *International Journal of Sexual Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/19317611.2023.2193568](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2023.2193568)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Healthy sex life during pandemic tied to an array of sexual coping strategies (2023, June 15) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-healthy-sex-life-pandemic-array.html>

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