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What Keeps Couples Happy Long Term

A large, new study on sexual satisfaction finds happy long-term couples share certain habits



PHOTO: ISTOCK



By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

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Some couples keep a strong sex life going for decades.

One of the largest studies to-date on sexual satisfaction in long-term relationships, to be published in the *Journal of Sex Research* later this month, has found that couples with satisfying sex lives do a lot of communicating. Researchers also cited the importance of working to set the mood, practicing sexual variety and oral sex, and frequently having orgasms and sex.

The study also found that the men and women who said they were sexually satisfied were happier in their relationship.

To conduct the study, researchers at Chapman University, in Orange, Calif., California State University, Los Angeles, Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, Calif., and at the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind., which studies human sexuality, posted a survey on MSNBC.com for two weeks in 2006. They then analyzed the answers of almost 39,000 married or cohabitating heterosexual men and women who had been with their partner for at least three years. The average age of the sample was 40 years old for women and 46 years old for men.

75% AND 74%

Percentage of satisfied men and women, respectively, who said 'I love you' during their last sexual encounter.

Individuals were asked to rate their current sexual satisfaction on a scale of one to seven, and also to rate their sexual satisfaction in the first six months of their relationship. An overwhelming majority—83%—of respondents recalled being satisfied in the first six months. But only about half—43% of men and 55% of women—said they were currently

satisfied. The rest said they were feeling “neutral” (16% of men and 18% of women) or dissatisfied (41% men and 27% of women).

Researchers are comfortable using anonymous surveys when the data sample is large and broad. The work is just being published now because it typically takes several years for researchers to analyze such a large quantity of data and for their work to go through a vetting process by peers and editors.

For starters, people who are satisfied with their sex life are having sex with their partner much more often than those who are dissatisfied, the study found. Seventy-nine percent of men and 81% of women who were satisfied said they have sex one or more times per week. Only 17% of dissatisfied men and 23% of dissatisfied women said they have sex that often.

63% AND 55%

Percentage of satisfied men and women, respectively, who made a 'date night' with their partner to be sure they had sex.

Yet the researchers say it is hard to know which comes first: sexual satisfaction or sexual frequency. "It's a chicken and egg thing," says David Frederick, assistant professor in health psychology at Chapman University and the lead author on the study. "Couples who are more satisfied are driven to have sex more often, which gives them more satisfaction and leads to more frequency."

The study shows some interesting gender differences. For men, the strongest predictors of satisfaction, in order, are mood setting, sexual variety and communication. For women, they are how frequently they have orgasms, mood setting and communication.

The researchers found five different types of communication that are important to sexual satisfaction. The more of these communication strategies a couple uses, the more sexually satisfied they are. In order of importance, both satisfied men and women say they praise their partner for something they did in bed; are asked by their partner for something they want; ask for something they want from their partner; talk on the phone or email with their partner during the day to tease about something they want; ask for feedback on how something felt.

The study also highlighted five types of mood setting that are more common among satisfied men and women. The most important, by far, is that they say "I love you." (Seventy-five percent of satisfied men and 74% of satisfied women say that they or their partner said "I love you" during their last sexual encounter, compared with 49% of dissatisfied men and 44% of dissatisfied women.) The other ways that satisfied couples set the mood, in order of importance, are: They engage in "sexy talk." They laugh about something funny that happened during sex. They light candles or dim the lights. They play background music.

'Saying 'I love you' is the communication strategy most commonly used among satisfied men and women—and it is what differentiates them most from dissatisfied couples, researchers found.'

The top-five acts that lead to a satisfying sex life are the same for men and women, the study found. They both say that trying a new sexual position is what makes them happiest. After that, women say they are most satisfied by taking a shower or bath with their partner, getting or giving a massage, incorporating sexy lingerie into their sex life, and talking about or acting out fantasies. For men, the order was slightly different. They were most satisfied, in order, by incorporating lingerie, taking a shower or bath, talking about or acting out fantasies and getting or giving a massage.

Steven and Beck Robertson in London, who have been married almost 15 years, illustrate the findings. At the beginning of the relationship, they had sex every day, but that pace tapered off after a year or two. “You can’t keep it up; it’s way too exhausting,” says Ms. Robertson, a 36-year-old copywriter. She says she was surprised because she and her husband consider themselves “quite sexual people” and she writes erotic fiction. “We’d find ourselves cuddling up on the couch and eating pizza more.”

At first, the couple didn’t think this was a problem. But over the next year, Ms. Robertson began noticing articles that said that couples with more satisfying sex lives were happier in their relationship. She brought this up with her husband. And the two decided to make sex a priority.

They talked about the things they might like to try. Mr. Robinson wanted to be more spontaneous: have sex in the morning, go to a hotel, go separately to a bar and pretend they were just meeting for the first time.

'Satisfied men and women praise their partner for something they did in bed and talk on the phone or email during the day to tease about something they want, researchers found.'

During their marriage, the Robertsons have had three or four “sexual droughts,” where their sex life stalls for several months, usually because of an emotional issue in their relationship. When this happens, they talk again about what they can do to spice it up.

Now, they sometimes give each other massages. They shop for lingerie for Ms. Robertson together. And they read out loud from Anaïs Nin, the “Story of O,” or the erotic novel that Ms. Robertson recently published, which Mr. Robertson says is a great way to spark a discussion and ask, “Do you find that sexy?”

These days, the Robertsons have sex about twice a week. “It brings you closer to your partner,” says Mr. Robertson, a 38-year-old designer.

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