

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS: WHAT'S THE STORY?

The term “friends with benefits” was first coined by singer Alanis Morissette in her 1995 song “Head over feet.” Since then, the phrase has become increasingly popular. Soon, there will be a TV sit-com called “Friends with Benefits” and a movie of the same name starring Justin Timberlake.

What are friends with benefits? The term “friends with benefits” refers to friends who add sexual activity to their relationship. It usually implies that while the two people maintain their friendship, they will also have sex without any romantic commitment. They are “just friends”.

Is “friends with benefits” a new phenomenon? Friends with benefits relationships have probably been around for a long time but it is likely that they are more common today than in past generations. Some believe that as the age of first marriage has increased, more young people are exploring different types of relationships. Currently, the average age of first marriage in Canada is 30.5 for men and 28.5 for women (Statistics Canada, Online). As a result, more and more people in their twenties are single. Some may be in traditional dating relationships, some may be in-between relationships, and some may not be seeking a committed romantic relationship while they concentrate on things like school or building a career. However, they still want to have sexual interactions with someone they know and trust. So “friends with benefits” is a type of relationship in contrast to “hooking-up” which usually involves casual sex with a new acquaintance and only happens once or a few times.

So how common are friends with benefits relationships and how do they work out? Let’s check the research.

RESEARCH ON FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Because the concept of “friends with benefits” is a relatively new one, there have been only a few academic studies that specifically examined this type of relationship. While several Canadian studies on the topic will be published soon, for the time being we have to rely on studies of young adults in the United States, mostly college students. Still, these studies provide a basic picture of friends with benefits relationships: how common they are; what people’s experience of them is; and how they work out.

HOW COMMON ARE FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS RELATIONSHIPS?

In research studies, the percentage of people who report that they have been in friends with benefits relationships varies considerably depending on exactly how the term was defined. Some studies have reported that about a third of people have had friends with benefits relationships while other studies put the figure at over half. In a study of 889 students aged 17 to 25 at a U.S. university, Owen and Fincham (2010) asked their study participants the following question;

Some people say that friends with benefits is a friendship in which there are also physical encounters, but no on-going committed relationship (e.g., not boyfriend/girlfriend). Based on this definition, how many “friends with benefits” relationships did you have over the past 12 months? (p. 3).

Based on this definition, 54% of the male respondents and 42.9% of the female respondents reported that they had had a “friends with benefits” relationship in the previous 12 months.



ASSESSING FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS RELATIONSHIPS: EMOTIONAL REACTIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

In the study described above, Owen and Fincham (2010) looked at positive emotions (e.g., happy, pleased, excited) and negative emotions (e.g., disappointed, confused, used) that people experienced as a result of their friends with benefits relationships. Overall, the participants reported more positive than negative emotions although this was more the case for males than females. This is not to say that people did not experience negative reactions. Rather, it is that the positive reactions outnumbered the negative ones.

In another study, Eisenberg, Acard, Resnick, and Neumark-Sztainer (2009) looked at psychological well-being and relationship type among 1,311 sexually active young adults (average age = 20.5) living in Minnesota. They asked their study participants if their last sexual partner was a stranger, casual acquaintance, close but not exclusive partner, exclusive dating partner, or fiancé(e)/spouse. The respondents also filled out measures of psychological well-being such as body satisfaction, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. The authors assumed that “close but not exclusive partner” is a type of friends with benefits relationship. The study found that, in general, males and females with these different sexual partner types scored equally well on measures of psychological well-being. This suggests that compared to other relationship types, friends with benefits relationships are no different in their implications for psychological well-being than other types of relationships.

HOW DO FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS RELATIONSHIPS TURN-OUT?

Perhaps not surprisingly, research has found that once they are in a friends with benefits relationship, the participants soon begin to wonder if the relationship will evolve into something more permanent and committed. Owen and Fincham (2010) found that 24.8% of males and 39.5% of females with friends with benefits hoped that the relationship would become committed and 44.3% of males and 56% of females had discussed the possibility of making a commitment with their friend with benefits.

In a small study of friends with benefits relationships among 125 university students in Michigan, Bisson and Levine (2009) asked their respondents how the relationship turned out. Just over a quarter (28.3%) stayed friends with benefits, 35.8% stopped having sex but remained friends, 9.8% became romantic partners, and in 25.9% of cases, the relationship ended. In other words, it was more than twice as likely that the relationship would end altogether as it was that it would go on to become a committed romantic relationship.

WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

“Friends with benefits” is clearly part of the relationship landscape for young adults today. For those who are not currently in a committed relationship or who do not want to be in one, friends with benefits can be an option. But like every type of relationship that involves sexual activity, there are risks and down-sides to consider.

One risk is that one partner will become more emotionally attached than the other (in fact, this is inevitable to some degree). This can lead to hurt feelings for one partner at the very least and relationship-ending conflict at worst. As we have seen, almost a quarter of males and over a third of females in friends with benefits relationships hope the relationship will go on to become more committed but less than 10% actually do so. So there is a significant potential for disappointment.



According to the research examined here, in just over a quarter of friends with benefits relationships, the friendship ends completely. This suggests that before friends agree to add the “benefits” to the relationship they should consider the possibility that bringing sexual activity into the relationship may eventually end it.

Many friends with benefits relationships are non-exclusive. In these cases, there are no rules against having sex with other people outside of the friends with benefits relationship. One or both partners may soon find that they have difficulty with this kind of arrangement. Feelings of jealousy are likely and this can jeopardize the friendship.

It is also important to stress the importance of consistent condom use in friends with benefits relationships. Just as people often mistakenly believe that they are immune from STI/HIV because they are in a relationship that is committed, being in a relationship with a trusted friend doesn't in-itself offer any protection against STI/HIV. The fact that some friends with benefits relationships are not exclusive further reinforces that message because multiple sexual partners are involved. It follows that STI prevention and avoidance of unplanned pregnancy are good reasons to maintain consistent condom use in friends with benefits relationships.

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