

## PREDICTORS OF SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Most research studies examining the sexual health of adolescents and young adults have focused primarily on the potentially negative consequences of sexual activity. For example, many studies have been conducted which look at young people's sexual behaviour in terms of risk of sexually transmitted infection (STI) and unplanned pregnancy. But there is more to the sexual health of young people than avoiding these and other negative outcomes.

The Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008) indicate that achieving sexual health involves both the reduction of negative outcomes (e.g., STIs, unplanned pregnancy) and sexual health enhancement (e.g., integration of sexuality into mutually satisfying relationships, acceptance of one's own sexuality). The guidelines include a definition of sexual health drawn from the World Health Organization that recognizes that sexual health goes beyond avoiding negative outcomes to also integrate the positive and pleasurable aspects of sexuality (See box below).

*Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. World Health Organization cited in Public Health Agency of Canada. (2008). Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education. P. 5.*

In this installment of Check the Research, we look at two recent studies that examined factors associated with or predictive of sexual satisfaction among adolescents and young adults.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SEXUAL SATISFACTION

Higgins, Mullinax, Trussell, Davidson and Moore (2011) conducted a survey with 2,168 male and female heterosexual university students at four universities in the United States in which they looked a variety of factors that might be associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction. All students included in the survey had experienced sexual intercourse at least once. The average age of the respondents was 20.2 years.

In the first part of the survey, Higgins et al. (2011) asked the students two questions designed to assess how sexually satisfied they were. Answers were provided on a 5-point response scale that ranged from "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied". The two questions were: "...how would you rate your overall personal level of physiological (physical) sexual satisfaction?" and "...how would you rate your overall personal level of psychological (emotional) sexual satisfaction?" (p. 1645). A majority of the students reported that they were either very satisfied (32% physiologically, 32% psychological) or satisfied (52% physiologically, 47% psychologically) with their sexual lives. There were no statistically significant differences between males and females on these measures.

Next, Higgins et al. (2011) examined the relationship between 23 different variables related to sexuality that were included in the survey and levels of sexual satisfaction among the students. The variables that were significantly correlated with both physiological and psychological sexual satisfaction were: (1) levels of sexual guilt; (2) sexual self-comfort; (3) self-esteem; (4) relationship status; and (5) sexual frequency.



## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PHYSIOLOGICAL (PHYSICAL) SEXUAL SATISFACTION FOR WOMEN

Women who had an orgasm during sex were 6.6 times more likely to report being sexually satisfied than those who rarely or never had an orgasm (Higgins et al., 2011). Women who had intercourse more frequently were more likely to report being sexually satisfied than women who had intercourse less frequently. Women who reported that they were always comfortable with their sexuality were 3.9 times more likely to report being sexually satisfied than women who reported they were sometimes, rarely, or never comfortable with their sexuality. Women who were in exclusive dating relationships were twice as likely as women who were casual daters or not dating to report being physically sexually satisfied.

## FACTOR ASSOCIATED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL (EMOTIONAL) SEXUAL SATISFACTION FOR WOMEN

Women who always felt comfortable about their own sexuality were 4.7 times more likely than those who said they were sometimes, rarely, or never comfortable to report being sexually satisfied (Higgins et al., 2011). Women in exclusive dating relationships were 3.2 times more likely to report being sexually satisfied than those who were not dating. Young women with low levels of feeling guilty about having sex were 2.8 times more likely than those with high levels of guilt to report higher levels of psychological sexual satisfaction.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PHYSIOLOGICAL/PHYSICAL SEXUAL SATISFACTION FOR MEN

Similar to the women in the survey, higher levels of physiological sexual satisfaction for men were also associated with sexual self-comfort and with being in an exclusive dating relationship (Higgins et al., 2011). The study identified several variables that appeared to be more important for the physical sexual satisfaction of men than for women. For example, young men with higher levels of self-esteem were 4.8 times more likely to be physiologically satisfied than those with lower levels of self-esteem and those who felt that their sexuality-related decision-making was guided by their own values and feelings were 2.7 times more likely to report being physically satisfied.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL (EMOTIONAL) SEXUAL SATISFACTION FOR MEN

With respect to their psychological (emotional) sexual satisfaction, the factors significantly associated with greater satisfaction in men were sexual self-comfort, lower sex guilt, being in an exclusive dating relationship, and frequency of sex (Higgins et al., 2011). Self-esteem was an especially important factor in the psychological sexual satisfaction of young men. Those who reported that they had excellent or very good self-esteem were 11.1 times more likely than men who said they had fair, poor or very poor self-esteem to report being very psychologically satisfied with their sexual lives.

The authors point out that in most respects, the factors contributing to the sexual satisfaction of the young men and women in the study were quite similar. For example, higher levels of sexual self-comfort and being in an exclusive dating relationship were associated with physical and psychological sexual satisfaction for both men and women (Higgins et al., 2011). In addition, the authors examined whether using contraception had an impact on levels of physiological or psychological sexual satisfaction and found that it did not for either sex.



*Our findings dispel widely held popular notions of men's sexual satisfaction as primarily physical in nature and women's as primarily emotional or relationship based; rather, both types of factors were important among both women and men. Higgins et al. (2011). Sexual satisfaction and sexual health among university students in the United States, American Journal of Public Health, 101, (9), p. 1651.*

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP

Auslander, Rosenthal, Fortenberry, Biro, Bernstein, and Zimet (2007) conducted a study with 319 males and females ranging in age from 14 to 24 years (average = 19.7) to investigate potential predictors of young people's level of satisfaction with their current sexual relationship. The survey respondents who were recruited from an adolescent medicine clinic and a college located in Ohio were all currently in a romantic/sexual relationship. The survey questionnaire included sections on mental health, relationship quality, sexual behaviours, and satisfaction with the current sexual relationship. Satisfaction with the current sexual relationship was measured using a seven question scale focusing on sexual pleasure and excitement with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The responses to each of the seven questions were added and an average score calculated.

Overall, the survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their current sexual relationship with an average score of 4.11 out of 5 (Auslander et al., 2007). About 15% of the sample scored 3.5 or less indicating neutral or negative perceptions of sexual satisfaction. In looking at variables associated with respondent's satisfaction with their current sexual relationship, the authors found the young people in the study who thought that their overall romantic relationship was positive, had fewer lifetime sex partners, had more frequent sex, used condoms and were more satisfied with their current sexual relationship.

*Despite the desire to see adolescent sexuality as problematic and different from that of adults, adolescents look remarkably similar to adults in the percentage that are sexually satisfied as well as in the factors that predict their sexual satisfaction. Auslander et al. (2007). Predictors of sexual satisfaction in an adolescent and college population. Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology, 20, 25-28.*

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Some of the key findings of these two studies can be summarized as follows.

1. Sexually active adolescents and young adults enjoy high levels of sexual satisfaction within their relationships.
2. In many respects, adolescents and young adults are not different from older adults in the factors that are associated with sexual satisfaction.
3. Relationships are important: young people who are in exclusive relationships and who view those relationships positively are more likely to enjoy high levels of sexual satisfaction.
4. The importance of relationships in contributing to high levels of sexual satisfaction applies to both men and women and to both physical and psychological sexual satisfaction.
5. In one of the studies reviewed above, using contraception did not have a negative impact on sexual satisfaction and in the other study, condom use was associated with higher satisfaction with the current sexual relationship. This suggests that taking precautions (e.g., birth control, STI risk reduction) to avoid the potential negative outcome of sexual activity does not interfere with the achievement of high levels of sexual satisfaction within young people's relationships.



## REFERENCES

Auslander, B.A., Rosenthal, S.L., Fortenberry, D., Biro, F.M., Bernstein, D.I., & Zimet, G.D. (2007). Predictors of sexual satisfaction in an adolescent and college population. *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, 20, 25-28.

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