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# The Impact of Sexual Initiation and Motivation on Couples' Sexual Frequency

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*For couples, motivations for sexual intimacy, initiation attempts at sexual intercourse, and the desired frequency of sexual intercourse can impact the relational outcomes of a relationship. Emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction are closely intertwined for couples and can play a significant role in the dynamics of their relationship. This literature review first discusses sexual initiation and its impact on sexual frequency and then the connection of motivation on the emotional climate of sexual intimacy and couples' sexual frequency.*

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Maintaining a healthy sex life is an important part of having a healthy relationship. Couples who maintain satisfying sex lives report being happier (McNulty et al., 2016; Kashdan et al., 2018), experiencing long-term relationship satisfaction, and having greater marital stability (Blumenstock & Papp, 2017; Karimi et al., 2019; McNulty et al., 2016). One of the possible reasons for these outcomes of sex for couples could be the hormones that are released during and after sex (Khajehei & Behroozpour, 2018; Ulmer-Yaniv et al., 2016). After sexual intercourse, endorphins are released, which makes couples feel happier; the release of oxytocin helps couples to feel more connected. Sexual intimacy and relationship satisfaction are two elements of relationships that are closely intertwined (McNulty et al., 2016; Yoo et al., 2014). Partner sexual satisfaction can lead both to one's own sexual satisfaction and to greater relationship satisfaction (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019; McNulty et al., 2016; Muise et al., 2017). Generally, lower sexual desire discrepancy leads to greater sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Shrier & Blood, 2016; Willoughby et al., 2014). Since couples tend to feel happier, more connected, and more satisfied with their relationships after participating in this bonding experience (Khajehei & Behroozpour, 2018; Ulmer-Yaniv et al., 2016), sexual intimacy can play a significant role in a couple's overarching relationship dynamic.

An understudied element of sexual intimacy within couples is the role of partner sexual initiation on a couple's relationship (Coffelt & Hess, 2015; Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014). An attempt to be physically intimate is described as a signal from one partner seeking to be physically intimate

with the other at a time when sexual behaviors are not currently in progress and in a situation where the partner recognizes that his or her attempt may or may not be accepted by the other partner (Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018; Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014). Individuals can initiate sexual activity through various means, such as nonverbal communication, indirect verbal communication, and direct verbal communication (Coffelt & Hess, 2015; Stephens & Eaton, 2014). When partners view an initiation attempt to be sexually intimate as coercive and feel undue pressure to accept, relationship satisfaction may decrease. However, an initiation attempt that is viewed as a representation of sexual desire shows increases in relationship satisfaction (Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014).

Sexual coercion, the negative type of initiation, has been studied extensively and refers to any behavior used by one person to make another unwillingly participate in vaginal, oral, or anal sex by pressuring non-verbally, verbally, or physically (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015; He et al., 2013). In some cases, coercion can be a manner of perception; what one person may see as coercive may not be viewed as coercive by another (Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014). Research has shown that women are more often the victims of sexual coercion than men and that people see coercion as having a more harmful effect when it is used by men toward women (Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014; Stephens & Eaton, 2014). Women are more likely to comply in situations of unwanted sex because they feel a sense of obligation toward their partner (Kluck et al., 2018; Willoughby et al., 2014).

Another variable that can be linked to positive or negative outcomes in a relationship is a couple's sexual expectations, which may also impact the number of initiation attempts in a relationship. Generally, men tend to expect more frequent sexual intercourse in a relationship than women (Willoughby et al., 2014) whereas women tend to focus less on frequency and to expect more meaningful connection, emotional vulnerability, and open communication from a sexual experience (Leavitt et al., 2019a). Discrepancy between what partners expect in a sexual relationship and what actually occurs can cause couples to be unhappy with their relationship or can be a catalyst to improve the relationship (Willoughby et al., 2014). Couples can use the discrepancy as a motivator to improve their relationship by

learning more about each other and ways to compromise. Finding a compromise in terms of frequency by being more sensitive to the needs and desires of their spouses and perceiving initiative actions more positively will create greater intimacy within the relationship.

Although relationship satisfaction is influenced by many factors, the manner in which partners initiate sexual intimacy and their motivation for doing so may play a significant role in the emotional dynamic of the relationship because sexual and relationship expectations are based on initiation and motivation, which can set the emotional climate of sexual intimacy and influence relationship satisfaction. This literature review first discusses sexual initiation and its impact on sexual frequency and then the connection of motivation to the emotional climate of sexual intimacy and couples' sexual frequency.

### The Impact of Initiation on Sexual Frequency

Before initiating sexual intimacy, couples usually follow a sexual script. A sexual script demonstrates "what behavior is expected and acceptable in various sexual and relation situations" (Emmers-Sommer, 2015, p. 265). The sexual script generally starts with priming messages. The partner desiring to have sex uses priming messages, such as a lingering kiss or a compliment on their looks, to test the waters to see if the other is open to sexual activity. The other partner may reply with one of three possible types of synchronizing messages. The first is in-synch messages, which show acceptance through verbal or nonverbal movements or verbal messages that propel the sexual episode (Coffelt & Hess, 2015). The second is token acceptance messages—those messages of compliance usually given by wives who do not want to participate in sexual activity but will agree to do so to please their husband (Coffelt & Hess, 2015; Hogue et al., 2019; Kluck et al., 2018). The third is out-of-synch messages that are used to decline the attempts at sexual intimacy (Coffelt & Hess, 2015). By following a similar script, one partner can communicate their desires to partake in sexual intimacy and the other can recognize and accept or decline the bid for sexual relations. These scripts can help couples to clearly communicate their sexual desires with each other, though sometimes the script comes across fuzzily, which often causes other relational problems.

A person's gender is a variable that can influence the scripts or initiation patterns that they choose to use. Generally, men are the initiators of sexual intimacy and do so in a direct fashion (Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018; Grøntvedt et al., 2015; Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014; Stephens & Eaton, 2014). By contrast, women usually take on a more passive role and are viewed as the receivers

or gatekeepers of sex (Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018; Kluck et al., 2018; Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014; Stephens & Eaton, 2014). Even though men are usually the initiators of sex, women are more likely to initiate sexual intimacy if they have higher sexual desire and a positive partner bond (Grøntvedt et al., 2015). When initiating sex, women tend to use less direct means of communication, such as eye contact, to convey their desire for sex; this less direct method can often lead to miscommunication or the disregarding of women's wishes (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Kluck et al., 2018). Additionally, women are more likely to comply with their partner's requests for sex than men, even if it is unwanted, because women feel that it is their right or obligation (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Kluck et al., 2018; Willoughby et al., 2014). Therefore, if a person adheres to these trends, their gender can influence both the way that they view sexual intercourse and the ways and frequency they employ in choosing to initiate it.

According to research done among couples in North America, one of the possible reasons for the gender difference in sexual intercourse initiation is that this region has a traditional heterosexual script that dictates culturally determined norms for how each gender should initiate sexual intimacy (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018). According to this script, men are supposed to be proactive in dating and sexual contexts and therefore are encouraged to initiate sexual encounters whereas women are portrayed as reactive and are supposed to accept the bids for sexual interaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Kluck et al., 2018). Therefore, this cultural script could play a role in the gender trends for the initiation of sexual intercourse in the North American region.

In addition to gender influences, couples' initiation attempts at sexual intercourse and the emotional climate of a relationship is another factor (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Willoughby et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2014). When couples experience satisfying sexual interactions that help partners to emotionally connect, they tend to have greater emotional intimacy (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Yoo et al., 2014). Especially in the case of women, this added meaning of the emotional connection and quality communication are associated with greater sexual satisfaction and better sexual experiences (Grøntvedt et al., 2015; Leavitt et al., 2019a). Also, couples who report experiencing love, intimacy, and commitment show greater sexual satisfaction overall (Grøntvedt et al., 2015). By contrast, couples who are unhappy with the frequency of sexual interactions generally experience less relationship satisfaction, less emotional stability, and higher amounts of conflict (Hogue et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2017; Willoughby et al., 2014). Therefore, emotional intimacy,

sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction, along with gender, are variables that are closely intertwined for couples and associated with sexual frequency (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Yoo et al., 2014).

### Motivation for Sexual Intimacy

Individuals may be motivated to engage in sexual relations for a multitude of reasons. Gender can also play a part in sexual motivation. Generally, men's reasons for initiating sexual intercourse is their greater level of sexual desire (Busby et al., 2019; Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018), their desire to release sexual tension (Busby et al., 2019; Grøntvedt et al., 2015), and their self-perceived independence in being able to initiate (Grøntvedt et al., 2015). Women often pursue sex to receive love, to express intimacy, and to contribute to their partner's satisfaction (Grøntvedt et al., 2015; Kluck et al., 2018). Therefore, a person's gender is often related to their motivation for sexual intimacy.

Another motivating factor for couples to participate in sexual intimacy is their religious beliefs about the spiritual meanings of sex. Religiosity is an element that can inform sexual meaning or attitudes and has been linked to a positive valuation of sexual intimacy (Hardy & Willoughby, 2017; Leonhardt et al., 2019). For example, one way that religion can positively impact how religious couples view sexual intimacy is the concept of sexual sanctification. Sexual sanctification is the belief in a spiritual component to sexuality and the view that it is consecrated by God (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; Leonhardt et al., 2019). Therefore, couples who view sexual intimacy as a God-given spiritual endeavor may be more motivated to engage in regular sexual intercourse. Researchers have found that those who believe in sexual sanctification early on in marriage experience more frequent sexual intercourse, greater sexual satisfaction, and increased marital satisfaction one year later (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; Leonhardt et al., 2019).

A third motivating factor for couples to participate in sexual intimacy is a partner's desire to meet the other's sexual needs. This phenomenon is often referred to as sexual communal motivation. Theories about sexual communal motivation suggest that responsiveness to a partner's sexual needs can benefit the overall romantic relationship and is associated with higher sexual desire and satisfaction over time when it is done out of a genuine desire to meet the partner's needs while not neglecting the individual's needs (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2017). This communal desire can also help partners who desire less frequent sex to focus on the

benefits of having sex with their partner and less on the costs (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019). Couples who engage in sexual communal motivation are more satisfied with the sexual aspect of their relationship (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2017).

Sexual communal motivation can lead to one of two goals—either to approach or to avoid (Hogue et al., 2019). Approach sexual goals include couples engaging in sexual intercourse to benefit from positive outcomes such as promoting intimacy or expressing love for one's partner. Generally, couples who have greater sexual communal motivation use more approach sexual goals, and those who engage in approach sexual goals tend to have higher sexual desire and greater sexual well-being (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019). By contrast, avoidant sexual goals are used by people in relationships who accept sexual relations to avoid negative relationship outcomes, such as conflict, tension, or the termination of the relationship. Individuals who use avoidant sexual goals often use sexual relations to help them to feel more secure about the stability and longevity of their relationship; however, avoidant sexual goals are related to lower sexual well-being in the relationship (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Hogue et al., 2019).

Engaging in sexual activity when motivated to meet only the other person's needs while neglecting one's own can have negative effects on the relationship (Hogue et al., 2019; Kluck et al., 2018). This type of behavior is called unmitigated sexual communion or compliant sex and is generally engaged in by women. When women engage in higher sexual communal motivation at the exclusion of their own needs, they report higher sexual distress, and both partners report lower sexual well-being and less sexual satisfaction (Hogue et al., 2019; Muise et al., 2017). Therefore, being motivated to have sex for one's partner's needs and neglecting one's own can be harmful to the overall relationship. To have better sexual relationships, couples do better when they recognize and are motivated by an understanding of one another's sexual needs, whether it is interest to engage in more frequent sexual relations or some disinterest in or lower frequency of sexual activity (Muise et al., 2017).

### Conclusion

For couples, motivations for sexual intimacy, initiation attempts at sexual intercourse, and the desired frequency of sexual intercourse can impact the relational outcomes of a relationship (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Leavitt & Willoughby, 2014; Willoughby et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2014). Emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and

relationship satisfaction are closely intertwined for couples and can play a significant role in the dynamics of their relationship (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Yoo et al., 2014). Research shows that couples can improve their sexual relationship with each other through self-awareness and communication of their sexual needs (Yoo et al., 2014) because couples who maintain satisfying sex lives report greater happiness (McNulty et al., 2016; Kashdan et al., 2018), experience long-term relationship satisfaction, have greater marital stability (Blumenstock & Papp, 2017; Karimi et al., 2019; McNulty et al., 2016), and feel greater emotional connection and intimacy (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-

Dottan, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Yoo et al., 2014). Awareness and open communication can potentially assist couples to address those behaviors that are damaging to the relationship and help them work together to have a more satisfying marital and sexual relationship. In sum, individuals' motivation for sexual intimacy combined with their sexual intimacy initiation behaviors can lead to greater attunement and thus a better or more satisfying sexual frequency for couples.

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