



2020

The Effects of Mindfulness on Marital Sexuality

Sage DeLaMare

Brigham Young University, sage.delamare@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeLaMare, Sage (2020) "The Effects of Mindfulness on Marital Sexuality," *Family Perspectives*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol2/iss2/3>

This Academic Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Family Perspectives by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Effects of Mindfulness on Marital Sexuality

Sage DeLaMare
Brigham Young University

This literature review examines the differences between male and female sexuality, explores sexual mindfulness as a treatment, and suggests various ways to practice mindfulness. Research has found that women tend to suffer more sexual dysfunction than men and that mindfulness may be a powerful tool in helping women experience more sexual desire, arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction. Sexual mindfulness is effective because it helps the individual relax, remain aware, and overcome negative thought processes and sexual anxieties. Relaxing may increase female sexual satisfaction because it tends to help women release muscle tension and experience less pain, help arousal by decreasing pent up anxiety, and help calm the mind so that the body can move through the sexual response cycle. Remaining aware allows many women to stay in tune with the moment-by-moment sexual experience and enjoy heightened arousal and orgasm, be responsive rather than avoidant of sexual experiences, and cultivate greater intimacy with their partner. Mindfulness can also help women decrease sexual dysfunction as they identify and work through appearance-based and performance-based sexual anxiety by characterizing and setting aside negative cognitive distractions in a non-judgmental fashion.

The Effects of Mindfulness on Marital Sexuality

In recent decades, research has noted differences in the sexual experiences of men and women and suggests that females tend to have more sexual dysfunction than their male counterparts (Graziottin, 2004; Leavitt et al., 2019b). Sexual dysfunction refers to problems that occur during one or more phases of the sexual response cycle—desire, arousal, orgasm, and resolution—and prevent an individual from experiencing high levels of sexual satisfaction (Chapa et al., 2020; “Sexual Dysfunction and Disorders,” 2015). For women, sexual dysfunctions generally include a lack of sexual desire, a low level of arousal, an inhibited ability to orgasm, inadequate vaginal lubrication, the inability to relax the vaginal muscles enough to allow intercourse, or pain during penetrative sex (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Chapa et al., 2020; Dunkley et al., 2015; Feki et al., 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016; “Sexual Dysfunction and Disorders,” 2015). Nearly half of

women report low levels of sexual desire (Feki et al., 2018), and at least a third experience impaired arousal (Brotto & Basson, 2014). Further, more than half of women were not orgasmic during their last sexual experience, around 40% are not orgasmic during most sexual experiences, and most women do not orgasm until three-to-five years after their first sexual experience (Leavitt, 2020).

There are many possible reasons for women’s higher levels of sexual dysfunction. Current research shows evidence that women’s sexual dysfunction may be linked to low sexual desire (Leavitt et al., 2019b). When compared to their male counterparts, women tend to experience lower levels of sexual desire because for many women, arousal triggers desire rather than desire building up to arousal, their bodies require more sexual stimulation to reach female arousal and orgasmic thresholds, and they tend to place greater value on emotional intimacy (Leavitt et al., 2019b). Additionally, two studies show an association between sexual dysfunction and the way that women have been taught by society to view their own sexuality (Feki et al., 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019b). Negative social conditioning has led to a general lack of understanding in women about their bodies, has taught habitual repression of arousal, and has encouraged the tendency of many women to focus on their partner rather than themselves (Feki et al., 2018; Gillen, 2012; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Montemurro & Satinsky et al., 2013; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012).

Research suggests many potential solutions to attend the numerous possible causes of sexual dysfunction. Medical professionals often treat dysfunction with therapy, medication, hormone injections, mechanical aids, new sex positions, and coaching (“Sexual Dysfunction,” 2015; Thouin-Savard, 2019). While such treatments can be helpful for some women, especially those who experience sexual dysfunction because of physical disease or mental health issues (“Sexual Dysfunction,” 2015), these treatments may not address many of the underlying sources of the problem (Leavitt et al., 2019b). However, current research suggests that practicing mindfulness, being aware and non-judgmental, may play a significant role in increasing women’s sexual satisfaction by directly addressing many

of the factors that may lead to sexual dysfunction (Leavitt et al., 2019b). This paper will discuss sexual mindfulness in terms of relaxation, awareness, and managing negative thoughts and will explore the impact that practicing sexual mindfulness has on female sexuality in relation to each of these aspects—followed by a brief explanation of how mindfulness can be practiced.

Sexual Mindfulness

Practicing sexual mindfulness may address many of the core issues in female sexuality (Halvaiepour et al., 2020). Sexual mindfulness can be defined as the purposeful giving of nonjudgmental attention to the present moment during a sexual experience (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a). The practice of sexual mindfulness enhances an individual's ability to relax and focus, be aware of themselves and their situation, accept themselves, and reduce internal stress (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a). Relaxing, remaining aware, and overcoming negative self-thoughts through practicing mindfulness may have a positive impact for women experiencing sexual dysfunction because these skills have the potential to increase sexual desire, sexual arousal, lubrication, orgasm, perceived sexual desirability, sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, sexual self-esteem, and overall sexual function in the majority of women and decrease sexual distress and anxiety (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Mize, 2015; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016).

Relaxing During Sexual Experiences

In essence, mindfulness is “relaxed wakefulness,” but many women tend to struggle to relax during sexual experiences (Brotto et al., 2008). The inability to relax may lead to some of the common problems in female sexual functioning, specifically in terms of arousal (Brotto et al., 2008; Brotto & Basson, 2014). A common factor that inhibits arousal in women is pain; however, mindfully relaxing may be beneficial because it helps release muscle tension, which is usually one of the causes of pain for women during intercourse (Ekdahl et al., 2018; Wylie & Levin, 2013). In addition to reducing pain, relaxing has the potential to increase sexual function, sexual pleasure, and overall mood (Ekdahl et al., 2018; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Morotti et al., 2013b). Relaxing also helps arousal build without being suppressed by pent up stress and emotion (Leavitt et al., 2019a). Through relaxing, individuals become more aware of their bodies and self-soothe their anxieties, which allows them to better regulate their emotions and act more intentionally in a calm state that contributes to greater sexual satisfaction (Leavitt et al., 2019a).

Remaining Aware During Sexual Experiences

Sex therapists often observe that one of the main reasons for sexual dysfunction in their female clients is their inability to be aware of and focus on arousal stimuli (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013). A lack of awareness may occur in women because they tend to have more cognitive distraction (i.e., thoughts that inhibit one's ability to be focused and present in the moment) than men, especially when it comes to sexuality (Dunkley et al., 2015; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016; Leavitt et al., 2019a). Cognitive distractions may draw a woman's attention away from connecting with her partner during the sexual activity at hand (Newcombe & Weaver, 2016; Leavitt et al., 2019a). In this regard, mindfulness is specifically important because it allows individuals to practice relaxing, refocusing, and being present in the moment, which is particularly important in order to have more satisfying sexual encounters (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016).

Research suggests that many women tend to struggle to differentiate between arousal and desire and consequently are often unable to reach orgasm (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). However, being self-aware of moment-by-moment sensations and pleasure during sexual activities and becoming attuned to the one's sexual response through mindfulness may help women initially recognize, correctly identify, and mindfully respond to their sexual response cycle (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). Mindfulness of heightened feelings of arousal may lead to increased sexual fulfillment that is manifested through higher sexual desire, arousal, orgasm, satisfaction, and overall well-being, in addition to less sexual anxiety and depression (Atkinson, 2013, Brotto & Basson, 2014).

Women who experience desire and arousal difficulties usually have a habit of suppressing awareness of their sexual response (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Ferguson & Brito, 2019). They may ignore sensations like excitement, body heat, or pelvic muscle tone because society has taught them that they should not act on these sensations (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Ferguson & Brito, 2019). Research suggests that women can practice mindful awareness in order to be in tune with the physiological changes that occur during arousal and be responsive, rather than avoidant, to sexual stimuli, thus allowing women to move intentionally through the sexual response cycle (Brotto & Basson, 2014, p. 44; Dunkley et al., 2015; Newcombe, 2016). Furthermore, being mindful and responsive to sexual stimuli tends to help women have greater control over their

nervous systems, sexual functioning, and emotional distress (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016), which may result in greater attunement to physical pleasure and sensation, greater sexual functioning, less anxiety, and higher levels of sexual arousal (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016).

Remaining present and aware of their bodies as they move through the sexual response cycle not only helps women have a heightened awareness of genital arousal but may also enhance sexual experiences with their partners (Leavitt et al., 2019a). Specifically, mindfulness may help women cultivate a greater understanding of their partner's sexuality and provides a better opportunity to intimately connect with their sexual partners (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). This intentional connection increases sexual desire, arousal, and personal well-being and contributes to healthier relationships (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). Female sexual satisfaction and relational satisfaction are intertwined, and research shows that the overall quality of the woman's relationship (i.e., emotional connection, having meaning, communication quality, level of desire, and commitment) may be partially reliant on the level of sexual satisfaction and quality she experiences (Leavitt et al., 2019b). The relational effects of mindfulness include less reactivity in the relationship, greater understanding of unity and separation between partners, and a deeper sense of intimacy and independence within the relationship (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013).

Being Non-Judgmental During Sexual Experiences

Society has taught women that their sexuality is based on how they look and how they perform, and these assumptions tend to cause women to base their sexual satisfaction on how they assume their partner sees them and how well they think they are able to sexually please their partners (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). Rather than focusing on how they are feeling, most women are judging themselves, or self-monitoring (Dunkley et al., 2015; Feki et al., 2018). As previously discussed, in order to progress through the sexual response cycle, most individuals need to pay attention to erotic stimuli; however, many women fail to give adequate attention to heightening arousal because they struggle to manage cognitive distractions, like self-criticism (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). Negative cognitive distractions can lead to anxiety, guilt, and shame and inhibit the sexual response, resulting in low sexual

satisfaction, low sexual desire and arousal, and anorgasmia (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016).

Sexual anxiety and the associated sexual dysfunctions are particularly seen in women who, compared to men, tend to have more negative thoughts about their sexual performance and the appearance of their bodies (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). In fact, research shows that nearly 50% of women experience sexual dysfunction and that over 50% of women are dissatisfied with their body image (Feki et al., 2018). Society tells women that being thin and young is desirable, but most women do not feel that they meet these criteria and, therefore, perceive themselves as sexually undesirable (Morotti et al., 2013a; Montemurro & Gillen, 2012; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Because appearance-based anxiety tends to inhibit sexual desire and increases sexual insecurity and dysfunction (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Feki et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2013), mindfulness is important as it may help women view their bodies in a more positive light and identify their specific anxieties. Non-judgmental attention may lead to an increase in sexual esteem, sexual desire, and perceived sexual desirability, as well as lower levels of sexual anxiety and dysfunction (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013).

Performance-based anxieties and distractions also tend to increase women's sexual dysfunction, leaving them dissatisfied and uncomfortable (Dunkley et al., 2015; Feki et al., 2018; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). However, individuals who practice mindfulness may be better able to identify anxiety and characterize it as a simple mental event or product of the mind that can be set aside to create more mental space for being present and attending to feelings of eroticism (Brotto & Basson, 2014, p. 44; Leavitt et al., 2019a). Mindfulness helps women let go of sexual expectations, decrease self-criticism, and reduce over evaluation of sexual performance; and this decrease of distraction and anxiety helps women feel more sexual desire, sexual esteem, and sexual satisfaction (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a).

How to Practice Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness is an innate trait and also a learned skill that positively impacts women's sexual wellbeing by taking them from stressed to relaxed to aware to accepting (Newcombe & Weaver, 2016). Sexual mindfulness can be practiced through exercises like sensate focus where

couples or individuals focus on breathing during sex, being aware of sexual sensation, and letting go of self-judgement (Leavitt et al., 2019a). In order to be sexually mindful, most individuals need to practice being mindful in other aspects of life that generate less anxiety than sex and then practice applying those skills to sex (Leavitt et al., 2019a). Luckily, mindfulness can be practiced even when doing daily mundane tasks by focusing on the activity at hand, breathing, identifying the emotions and sensations in the body, and intentionally clearing the mind of distractions (Dunkley et al., 2015; Leavitt et al., 2019a). In addition, research suggests that individuals who set aside time to participate in short mindfulness meditation exercises experience lower anxiety and depression (Strohamier et al., 2020), which may allow more room to feel sexual desire and may increase sexual well-being for many women (Vencill et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although women tend to suffer from sexual dysfunction for a number of reasons, and various treatments exist, mindfulness may help women experience more sexual desire, arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction because it helps them relax, remain aware, and overcome negative thought processes and sexual anxieties (Atkinson, 2013; Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe &

Weaver, 2016). Relaxing may increase sexual satisfaction because it may help many women release muscle tension and experience less pain and more pleasure (Ekdhahl et al., 2018; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Morotti et al., 2013b; Wylie & Levin, 2013), it can help their arousal build without being suppressed by pent up anxiety and emotion (Leavitt et al., 2019a), and it may help calm their minds so that their bodies move through the sexual response cycle (Brotto & Basson, 2014). In addition, remaining aware allows many women to stay in tune with the moment-by-moment sexual experience and enjoy heightened arousal and orgasm (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016), cultivate greater intimacy with their partner and experience a correlated increase in relational and sexual satisfaction (Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Newcombe & Weaver, 2016), and be responsive rather than avoidant of sexual experiences (Brotto & Basson, 2014, p. 44; Dunkley et al., 2015; Newcombe, 2016). Furthermore, mindfulness can help women decrease sexual dysfunction by identifying and working through appearance-based and performance-based sexual anxiety and characterizing and setting aside negative cognitive distractions in a non-judgmental fashion (Brotto & Basson, 2014; Dunkley et al., 2015; Feki et al., 2018; Lazaridou & Kalogianni, 2013; ; Leavitt et al., 2019a; Satinsky et al., 2013; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012).

References

- Atkinson, B. J. (2013). Mindfulness training and the cultivation of secure, satisfying couple relationships. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2(2), 73. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000002>
- Brotto, L. A., & Basson, R. (2014). Group mindfulness-based therapy significantly improves sexual desire in women. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 57, 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2014.04.001>
- Brotto, L. A., Basson, R., & Luria, M. (2008). A mindfulness-based group psychoeducational intervention targeting sexual arousal disorder in women. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 5(7), 1646-1659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2008.00850.x>
- Chapa, H. O., Fish, J. T., Hagar, C., & Wilson, T. (2020). Prevalence of female sexual dysfunction among women attending college presenting for gynecological care at a university student health center. *Journal of American College Health*, 68(1), 52-60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1515751>
- Dunkley, C. R., Goldsmith, K. M., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2015). The potential role of mindfulness in protecting against sexual insecurities. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 24(2), 92-103. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.242-A7>
- Ekdhahl, J., Flink, I., Engman, L., & Linton, S. J. (2018). Vulvovaginal pain from a fear-based avoidance perspective: A prospective study among female university students in Sweden. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 30(1), 49-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2017.1404543>
- Feki, I., Smaoui, N., Sellami, R., Mnif, L., & Masmoudi, J. (2018). Effect of body image on Tunisian women's sexual functioning. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 22(4), 1290-1299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9525-3>
- Ferguson, S. & Brito, J. (2019, May 29). *Everything you need to know about female arousal*. [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com/health/female-arousal).
- Graziottin, A. (2004). Similarities and differences between female and male sexual functions and dysfunctions. *The Journal of Men's Health and Gender*, 1(1), 71-76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmhg.2004.03.011>

- Halvaiepour, Z., Yazdkhasti, F., Oreyzi, H. R., & Nosratabadi, M. (2020). Developing cognitive bias modification scenarios for women with sexual interest arousal disorder and comparing effectiveness with mindfulness therapy. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 47*(2), 162-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1842572>
- Lazaridou, A., & Kalogianni, C. (2013). Mindfulness and sexuality. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 28*(1-2), 29-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2013.773398>
- Leavitt, C. (2020) *Pathways to climax* [PowerPoint presentation].
- Leavitt, C. E., Lefkowitz, E. S., & Waterman, E. A. (2019a). The role of sexual mindfulness in sexual wellbeing, relational wellbeing, and self-esteem. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 45*(6), 497-509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2019.1572680>
- Leavitt, C. E., Leonhardt, N. D., & Busby, D. M. (2019b). Different ways to get there: Evidence of a variable female sexual response cycle. *The Journal of Sex Research, 56*(7), 899-912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1616278>
- Mize, S. J. (2015). A review of mindfulness-based sex therapy interventions for sexual desire and arousal difficulties: From research to practice. *Current Sexual Health Reports, 7*(2), 89-97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-015-0048-8>
- Montemurro, B., & Gillen, M. M. (2013). Wrinkles and sagging flesh: Exploring transformations in women's sexual body image. *Journal of Women & Aging, 25*(1), 3-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2012.720179>
- Morotti, E., Battaglia, B., Paradisi, R., Persico, N., Zampieri, M., Venturoli, S., & Battaglia, C. (2013a). Body mass index, Stunkard Figure Rating Scale, and sexuality in young Italian women: A pilot study. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 10*(4), 1034-1043. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsm.12045>
- Morotti, E., Battaglia, B., Persico, N., Zampieri, M., Busacchi, P., Venturoli, S., & Battaglia, C. (2013b). Clitoral changes, sexuality, and body image during the menstrual cycle: A pilot study. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 10*(5), 1320-1327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsm.12103>
- Newcombe, B. C., & Weaver, A. D. (2016). Mindfulness, cognitive distraction, and sexual well-being in women. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, 25*(2), 99-108. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.252-A3>
- Pepping, C. A., Cronin, T. J., Lyons, A., & Caldwell, J. G. (2018). The effects of mindfulness on sexual outcomes: The role of emotion regulation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 47*(6), 1601-1612. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-1127-x>
- Satinsky, S., Dennis, B., Reece, M., Sanders, S., & Bardzell, S. (2013). My "fat girl complex": A preliminary investigation of sexual health and body image in women of size. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 15*(6), 710-725. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2013.783236>
- Sexual dysfunction and disorders: Treatments, symptoms and diagnosis. (2015). *Cleveland Clinic*. [Cleveland Clinic](https://www.clevelandclinic.org/health/conditions-and-treatments/sexual-dysfunction-and-disorders).
- Strohmaier, S., Jones, F. W., & Cane, J. E. (2020). Effects of length of mindfulness practice on mindfulness, depression, anxiety, and stress: a randomized controlled experiment. *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01512-5>
- Thouin-Savard, M. (2019). Erotic mindfulness: A core educational and therapeutic strategy in somatic sexuality practices. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 38*(1), 203-219. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2019.38.1.203>
- Woertman, L., & van den Brink, F. (2012). Body image and female sexual functioning and behavior: A review. *Journal of Sex Research, 49*(2-3), 184-211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.658586>
- Wylie, K., & Levin, R. J. (2013). A self-treated case of female pleasure dissociative orgasmic disorder. *Sexual Relationship Therapy, 28*(30), 294-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2012.762087>
- Vencill, J. A., Tebbe, E. A., & Garos, S. (2015). It's not the size of the boat or the motion of the ocean: The role of self-objectification, appearance anxiety, and depression in female sexual functioning. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 39*(4), 471-483. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315587703>