

# Sexual Motives and Quality of Life

## Synonyms

sSexual scripts

sSelf-focused approach motives

Sself-focused avoidance motives

Ssocial approach motives

Ssocial avoidance motives

## Definition

Until recently, American sexologists generally assumed that young people engage in sexual activities for one of three reasons (the Big Three): [love](#), a desire for [pleasure](#), and/or a desire to procreate. Recently, however, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have begun to ask: “Why do young men and women engage in sexual liaisons?” and “Why do they avoid such encounters?” As a consequence, we now possess a better understanding of the impact of gender and type of commitment on the [motives](#) that spark (or dampen) people’s sexual attitudes and [behavior](#) and their impact on participants’ [quality of life](#).

### Definitions

Sexual motives can be defined as: “The conscious and subjective reasons that men and women give for participating in sexual activities.” In a comprehensive survey of the scholarly literature, psychometricians have crafted more than 50 test batteries and scales designed to assess people’s motives for engaging in sex and for avoiding sexual encounters. Among the most common sexual motives are: love, pleasure, relief from [stress](#), dominance, submission, providing nurturance, partner approval, self-affirmation, recognition, conformity, experimentation/exploration, [spirituality](#), financial gain, jealousy-induction, revenge, and procreation.

Scholars have also assessed people’s motives for avoiding sex. These include such things as fear of (a) exposure, (b) abandonment, (c) angry attacks, (d) loss of control, (e) one’s own destructive impulses, and (f) losing one’s individuality or being engulfed. There are other deterrents, too. Many religions consider sex outside of marriage to be immoral. Men and women may worry that if they flout community prohibitions, they may acquire a poor reputation or risk community and family reprisals. Young people may worry about unwanted pregnancies. Sexual encounters can arouse negative emotions such as guilt, shame, [anger](#), regret, and disappointment—especially if sex occurs in the context of coercion and abuse. People contemplating sex may fear disease (contracting STIs and AIDS) if they engage in high-risk behavior, and they are right to be

fearful. [Casual sex](#) with multiple partners, whether heterosexual or homosexual, without adequate protection, *is* associated with disease.

## Description

Let us now discuss the relationship of gender and commitment on sexual motives, sexual attitudes and behavior, and quality of life.

### The Impact of Gender on Sexual Motives

Theorists agree that for cultural, social, and biological reasons, men and women sometimes possess somewhat different sexual motives. Cultures promote very different “sexual scripts” for men and women. Men are taught to think of themselves as sexual beings, primarily concerned with physical gratification. Women are taught that premarital sex violates social taboos; they are expected to be the sexual “gatekeepers,” refusing sex until marriage. They are taught that love and commitment should be a major concern. They should be more concerned with their partner’s [happiness](#) than their own. There appears to be a grain of truth in these stereotypes.

There is some support for the notion that —be they gay, lesbian, or “straight”—women are often motivated by love and a desire to get psychologically close to another, while men are often more motivated by lust (such as the “She was too hot to resist,” “It felt good,” “I was feeling horny”) in making sexual decisions.

In a recent study, men and women at the University of Hawai’i kept sexual diaries. Immediately after having partnered sex or masturbating, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire indicating why they had chosen to engage in sex on that occasion. The author found that, consistent with predictions, the majority of men indicated that pure pleasure was their primary motive for engaging in sexual activity. [1] A desire to relieve sexual tension, [relieve and](#) stress, and a desire for conquest, came next. For the majority of women, a desire for pure pleasure was also their main reason for engaging in sex. Nonetheless, as predicted, they were also slightly more likely to focus on their partners’ needs during sexual encounters. The desire to express emotional closeness, please partner, and partner wanted to were high in the list of motives. We should stress, however, that to the extent that gender differences exist, they are generally far smaller than “common sense” would suggest. There are more similarities than differences between men and women, —and gender differences are becoming smaller all the time (see Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Peterson & Hyde, 2010)

*Gender and #Motives to #Avoid #Sex.* Cultural scripts mandate that men should initiate sexual activity, while women should limit it by saying “No.” Not surprising, then, is the fact that young men and women differ somewhat in their reasons for clinging to virginity and refusing to participate in sexual encounters. Men often fail to “make a pass” at women because they fear rejection. Women more often cite a concern with morality and reputation— or (infrequently) a lack of interest or a failure to enjoy sex— as reasons for avoiding sex.

Sexual motives [p2] [change](#) as relationships deepen.

Men's and women's sexual motives are known to change as casual sexual encounter and affairs turn into more committed relationships, and then move into marriage. A young man's goals on a Saturday night in a bar, for example, will differ greatly from his goals after a 50-year marriage and the rearing of a family.

*The Young: Casual Sexual Encounters.* In one study, Pamela Regan and Carla Dreyer asked college men and women to write an essay describing their motives for participating in casual sexual encounters, such as one-night stands and, hook-ups, ~~and the like~~. Generally, men's and women's reasons for engaging in casual sex were identical. Both emphasized intra-individual factors (e.g., sexual desire, sexual experimentation, physical pleasure, as well as alcohol and drug use) and factors associated with the casual sex partner (e.g., attractiveness and possessing a "sexy" or "hot" persona) as reasons for their short-term sexual encounters. There were a few differences, however. Men were more likely to emphasize social environmental reasons (e.g., increased status and popularity, conformity to peer group norms), whereas women cited interpersonal reasons for casual sex (e.g., hoping their casual fling would evolve into a serious romance).

*As Casual Encounters Move to Intimate Ones.* As people grow older, and/or commit themselves to more loving and committed relationships, their motivations change. Pleasure and a desire for intimacy began to shape their sexual encounters. They also worry less about fear of rejection and fear of STIs and AIDS than do their peers.

*As Couples Age.* Researchers interviewed couples ranging in age from 22 to 57 years of age. They found that love (as measured by the selection of "I want to show love for my partner" as a reason for engaging in sexual intercourse), began with young women endorsing it more than did men. By 35–40, however, things had begun to change, and by 46–57, men were endorsing that sentiment more than were women. An opposite change occurred for the item "I want a physical release." From youth onward, men endorsed that motive more than did women. In the oldest age group, however, that difference disappeared. The gender differences in desire for love *versus* pleasure and sexual release seemed to fit the stereotypes. They did, that is, until people got older; by middle age, the gender differences disappeared.

## Practical Consequences

Adolescent sex can be a wonderful or a terrible experience. Although a minority of college women (28%) found their *first* sexual experience to be psychologically or physically satisfying, almost two thirds (61%) of them rated their more recent sexual experiences as either perfect, very good, or good. What contributes to men and women's sexual satisfaction or lack thereof? Researchers argue that two constructs — sexual self-concept and the reasons or motives that guide decisions to engage in sex with a partner — are of primary importance. Young women make a distinction between acts taken in pursuit of pleasure ("I was in love, It was romantic, I was ready,") and those taken to avoid negative and painful experiences (avoiding conflict, giving in to a partner's nagging, etc.). Not surprisingly, young women who possess positive self-concepts and who participate in sex for positive reasons are far more likely to feel sexual satisfaction than are their peers.

## Willingness to Engage in Risky Sexual Behavior

A few researchers have investigated the relationship between various sexual motives and risky sexual behavior. They ask: “Are sexual motives related to a willingness to risk casual sex with strangers? To a failure to use contraception? To a failure to practice safer sex?” There is compelling evidence that people’s sexual motives do matter—and that motives do shape people’s sexual choices and experiences in theoretically meaningful ways.

Lynne Cooper and her colleagues proposed that “people use sex to achieve different goals, and that these differences shape the experience and expression of their sexuality” (p. 2). They argued for a four-motive typology:

- (1.) *Self-focused approach motives* (such as having sex to enhance emotional or physical pleasure)
- (2.) *Self-focused avoidance motives* (such as having sex to cope with threats to self-esteem or to deal with anxiety, depression, or fear)
- (3.) *Social approach motives* (such as having sex to express love or to get closer to a loved one)
- (4.) *Social avoidance motives* (such as having sex to avoid peer censure or partner anger)

Those who have sex for approach reasons are, by definition, seeking a positive or rewarding outcome—be it a physically enjoyable experience or a closer connection with their partner. Consistent with this logic, love, intimacy, and relationship enhancement motives have been found to be associated with positive feelings about sex, frequent intercourse, and higher levels of sexual satisfaction. In contrast, people who have sex for avoidance reasons are, by definition, seeking to minimize, avoid, or escape such unpleasant feelings as a bad mood, feelings of inadequacy, or feared rejection by those they care about. Such a negative orientation toward sex has been found to take a toll on the quality of social interactions and to inhibit the development of intimate bonds. Not surprisingly, then, avoidance motives are strongly associated with negative responses to sex and are (often) correlated with low frequency of sex and low levels of sexual satisfaction.

Avoidance motives are also likely to lead to maladaptive promiscuous and risky sexual behavior. Cooper and her colleagues, in a study of community-residing adolescents and young adults, found that young people who were high in coping motives (using sex to manage unpleasant emotions) had more sex partners, had more casual liaisons, and engaged in more risky sex than did their peers. Those who were high in partner approval motives (having sex to placate partners) reported more casual and risky sex partners, a greater failure to use reliable birth control methods, and higher rates of unplanned pregnancies. All of which, the authors assumed, were a consequence of their fear of asserting themselves and risking their partner’s wrath.

These same people were interviewed 1½ years later (along with their partners). The typical couple had been together for an average of 2½ years. The authors found that men who were high in a composite measure of avoidance motives were more likely to “cheat” on their partners, had more casual and risky extra-pair sex partners, and employed more coercive sexual tactics with their partners. Women who were high in self-affirmation (avoidance) motives also reported significantly more casual and risky extra-pair sex partners.

The Cooper team has also found that self- versus social-motivations provoke different kinds of choices. People who are primarily motivated by intimacy needs tend to view sexual contact as appropriate only in the context of an emotional relationship, and thus generally restrict themselves to a single, committed sex partner. The authors also find that in general high-intimacy motive people are less promiscuous and less risky than their peers. They drink alcohol less often in conjunction with sex, use more effective birth control, and experience (marginally) lower rates of unplanned pregnancies.

What about those who choose to have sex out self-focused enhancement motives? These are people who report stronger thrill and adventure-seeking needs, more unrestricted attitudes toward sex (as evidenced by their greater willingness to have sex with casual, uncommitted partners), and have more sex partners, especially casual sex partners, than their peers. In fact, such people engage in a pervasive pattern of sexual risk-taking. They drink more often in conjunction with sex, and are less likely to use condoms, birth control pills, and IUDs, relying more on rhythm methods, withdrawal, and no protection at all, in spite of the fact they have more casual sex partners. Finally, and not surprisingly, they also have higher rates of both STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

Individuals high in internal avoidance measures (those who, say, have sex to reassure themselves that they are desirable or assuage their anxiety) tend to be ambivalent about sex—they both desire and like it, but also experience a host of negative emotions in conjunction with it. In contrast, those who are high in social avoidance motives do not appear to find sex rewarding, but use it primarily as a way to avoid social costs.

## Conclusions

When scanning the research literature, it is evident that scholars are often unaware of other theorists' work. This is not surprising. The researchers we have cited hailed from a variety of disciplines, possessed a diversity of theoretical models, posed a variety of questions, attempted to answer them in very different ways, and published their results in different journals. It is hoped that this review may help facilitate a conversation between present-day researchers and ease attempts to bring some unity to their competing theorizing, constructs, measures, and reporting styles. There is actually a great deal of research on sexual motives in the literature.

There is yet another reason why, on first glance, the scholarly research described here may feel a bit overwhelming in its complexity. These days, the United States, like the rest of the world, finds itself swept up in breathtaking historical and social changes. No surprise then that attitudes and beliefs about sexuality are in flux and thus difficult to summarize. Thumb through an *Introductory History* book, and you will be struck by the social revolutions that have transpired—they started slowly and then gathered speed. In the 1500s and 1600s, Catholicism challenged the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, and the “invention” of marriage for love rather than family or practical reasons.

And in more recent times: Margaret Sanger offering families information about family planning. Alfred Kinsey providing Americans with a glimpse into the realities of sexual behavior. A Jewish émigré, Carl Djerassi, inventing the birth control pill. (For the first time men

and women could engage in sexual activity without worrying about pregnancy.) Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan's promoting the Women's Liberation Movement. The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, young people chanting: "Make love, not war." The global village created by worldwide communication, computers and satellites, information exchange, travel, and trade. The appearance of AIDS and the STIs, casting a pall over the idea of casual sex.

What do all these changes mean for men and women's sexual activities, feelings, and behavior? How do they affect the complexity of the results we have reported?

1. American's values seem to be in such flux. Many traditionalists still cling to the old values; modern-day pioneers are embarking on new adventures. Young people seek pleasure and get hurt; they resolve to do things differently the next time; they do or they do not. No surprise then that today a confusing array of values exists out there. People may embark on sex for one reason in their 20s, discover that their life does not suit them, and seek out other gratifications (and attempt to avoid other pains).

2. Men and women's sexual values and motives seem to be becoming increasingly similar.

3. People seem to possess a surprising array of reasons for participating in sexual activity—far more reasons for choosing to engage in sexual activity than in former times. They do in fact participate in more sexual activity than heretofore.

4. Sexual activity may be in process of becoming demystified. Instead of the mystery, fear, anxiety, and [r6]sacrilization that have surrounded sexual activity for so many centuries, that activity seems to have become "no beeg teeng," as we say in Hawai'i. What that means for society and for individuals is anyone's guess. And the exponential growth of cybersex and pornography further clouds the crystal ball.

At this stage, we conclude by saying that the expansion of possible motives for having sex probably *is* a big thing and that we are well advised to take that expansion seriously and try to come to grips with it, to understand it as one of our planet's most important new developments and one of the most important influences on quality of life.

In this review, we discovered that men and women may indeed choose to engage in sexual activities for a plethora of reasons. Hopefully, a knowledge of people's sexual motivations can assist scholars in gaining an understanding of sexual fantasy, masturbation, and sexual activity in general and the contribution of these motives to one's quality of life. An awareness of one's partner's sexual motives may also facilitate communication. Given differences in the meanings that people assign to sex, misunderstandings are inevitable. An understanding of the diversity of sexual motives may help reduce conflict in romantic relationships. Finally, information as to how gender, personality, and sexual motives effect sexual behavior—especially risky sexual behavior—may assist public health officials in crafting messages and programs designed to reduce young people's risky sexual behavior.

## References

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