

Friendship and confiding in spouse eases stress over sexual issues in older men

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A new study suggests that it may not help older men and women with sexual problems to talk to a doctor, but men who talk to their partner report greater happiness - and those who talked with friends felt less depressed.

The research, to be published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, shows that the way men and women deal with sexual health and stress in their later years varies greatly and that there is not one solution that can help ease unhappiness caused by sexual problems.

The research was conducted by Ryo Hirayama, a Ph.D. student in Oregon State University's Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, and professor Alexis Walker, who is the Jo Anne L. Petersen Chair in Gerontology and Family Studies at OSU. The study was conducted with data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project.

The Oregon State researchers looked at 861 people ages 57 to 85 who were married or had an [intimate partner](#), and who reported having at least one sexual problem. The sexual problems reported by [older adults](#) included lack of interest in sex, inability to climax, physical pain during sex, maintaining an erection, or lubrication issues. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 3 how bothered they were by each problem they listed. They also were asked about their well-being, which the researchers measured by using typical scales for happiness and for [depressive symptoms](#).

The study yielded several surprising findings. First, fewer than half of older adults with sexual problems discussed these problems with their doctors, although men were more likely to do so than women. In addition, whether older adults discussed these issues with their physicians did not make a difference in their well-being.

"This was our most unexpected outcome," Hirayama said. "Older adults are advised to talk to their doctors about sexual health issues, but not all people do so and talking with a physician is not as helpful as you might expect."

However, confiding in a partner or with friends was found to be effective for many men in reducing stress and unhappiness related to sexual problems. Unfortunately for women, this same benefit was not reported.

"In fact, women with higher levels of sexual stress who confided in their close friends reported lower happiness," Hirayama said. "We aren't quite sure what to make of this finding."

Women did not see any reduction in stress or well-being (unhappiness and depression) when they talked to their spouses either.

"What this tells is that women's sexual issues are complex, and that complexity needs to be recognized," Walker said. "A woman with a great deal of sexual concerns could feel threatened by talking to her spouse about it, or perhaps simply confiding in a friend is not enough."

Since the largest effect size was seen with men who confided in both spouses and friends, the researchers said the result brings into critical focus the importance for men in middle and later life of confiding in family members and friends.

"The finding is striking because most people presume men do not have confidants," Hirayama said. Hirayama is doing his doctoral studies on male identity issues and men's social ties in current society.

"Men are not believed to be functioning socially in our society, yet research increasingly shows that social networks can be a critical part of a man's life, especially as he ages," he said.

Walker, who has done research in the gerontology field for decades, said the medicalization of aging makes some people feel as if there is a "fix" for everything. She said that in some cases, certain sexual issues might just be part of the aging process and that the important part is that couples keep the lines of communication open.

"In the general context of sex and aging, the rule is 'use it or lose it,'" Walker said. "The best prediction of sexual activity is to continue to be sexually active throughout your adult life, to make it a part of your life. But it is also true that older people can have [sexual problems](#), and sometimes there are ways to work around these issues by emphasizing other activities you enjoy as a couple."

Provided by Oregon State University

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