

Not in the mood? Study reveals how couples communicate when desire is low

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A new study from U of T Mississauga pulls back the covers to reveal how couples communicate when it comes to sex and desire.

The study by psychology researcher Rebecca Horne, co-authored with colleagues at UTM, York University and Carleton University, looks at how [romantic partners](#) regulate expression of sexual desire, and what effect these tactics have on relationship well-being.

A Vanier Scholar and Ph.D. researcher, Horne studies how couples resolve [conflicts of interest](#) through sacrifice, when one person gives up their own self-interest or [desires](#) for a partner, and what effect this has on the relationship.

Her ongoing work is a longitudinal study of the sacrifices couples make when relocating for the sake of a partner's job. But, as Horne notes, partners make sacrifices for each other every day, including during our most intimate moments.

"The domain of sex is a primary area where couples can have these conflicts, and where sacrificing might be really important, especially because it's a sensitive and vulnerable context for a lot of people," Horne says.

According to Horne, regulating expression of desire is one form of sacrifice that we may make for our romantic partners.

"Romantic partners often regulate their emotions and affection to achieve certain goals, but we wanted to know more about how partners regulate their expression of sexual desire during sex and its implications for couples' well-being," she says.

Horne notes that we might regulate our emotions to achieve goals in everyday social interactions, like smiling at an annoying boss for the sake of workplace harmony or job retention.

In a romantic relationship, this could take the form of expressing

fondness and warmth to a partner that's not really in line with what we're feeling in the moment, or hiding feelings of sexual disinterest from a partner or pretending to be more into a sexual experience than we really are.

These tactics might be employed to smooth over the kind of momentary blips in desire caused by a bad day at work, fatigue or distraction in the moment.

"These are ways that we modify our self-interest, presumably for the benefits of our partner," Horne says, noting that research shows this happens as much as three times a week in a typical romantic relationship.

"We may think we are interacting authentically with our partners, but we do these regulatory strategies in subtle ways."

But, as Horne notes, the result is a disconnect between what we are feeling inside, and what we are showing on the outside.

Dialing up desire, dampening disinterest

For the study, the researchers surveyed 225 couples, most in heterosexual long-term romantic relationships, to track the link between regulation of desire and relationship [satisfaction](#). Respondents kept individual 21-day diaries that tracked intimate relations, levels of desire and individual feelings of well-being and satisfaction.

The results showed people engaged in two kinds of primary regulatory tactics when desire was low: amplification of desire and suppression of disinterest.

Amplifying desire is about exaggeration to cover for low interest in sex.

That could take the form of erotic talk, caresses or even faking an orgasm.

Suppression of disinterest is another common tactic, employed when a partner hides the fact that they're not really interested in the experience, either in the moment or overall.

Horne says that a partner may conceal that they have lost interest during sex if they are fatigued or distracted, or if their partner isn't attending to their sexual needs in the moment.

"When we use these strategies, we're trying to change the way that we express emotion or desire to somebody after that emotion or desire has already been elicited," Horne says. "These strategies can be really challenging because there's a tension between what we're feeling inside and what we're showing when we're not interested."

Regulation and authenticity

"Not all sexual regulation strategies are created equal," Horne says. "Even though they both involve altering expression of desire to our partner, they differ in outcome."

Sexual authenticity appears to be the driver here. Those who employed these tactics reported feeling sexually inauthentic, which predicted lower satisfaction, both sexually and in the relationship.

"We found that there are drawbacks to these behaviors," Horne says. "Our work suggests that both partners feel less satisfied with their sex lives on days when one partner amplified or exaggerated expressions of desire."

The story is a little bit different for suppression tactics.

Those who hid their lack of desire reported feeling sexually inauthentic and detached from their own satisfaction, but it wasn't always detrimental for their partners, who may have been convinced they were interested and engaged in the moment.

While suppressing disinterest can lead to in a partner's higher satisfaction, it can undermine one's own feelings of satisfaction.

"These things happen during sex, and they have implications for our satisfaction," she says. "When we regulate these displays, it feels sexually inauthentic."

Honest and clear communication

While all respondents reported engaging in regulation tactics occasionally, Horne says it's important to notice if it becomes part of a pattern.

Being attuned to our partners while balancing our own sexual needs can circumvent the conflicts that might lead to regulation strategies, and can amp up [relationship](#) satisfaction for both partners.

"If things aren't feeling right during sex, you could try to reroute, or have an open conversation about the things you like and don't like," Horne advises.

"Honest and clear sexual communication is really important, and seems to have more benefits for [partner](#) satisfaction."

"Dialing Up Desire and Dampening Disinterest: Regulating Sexual Desire in the Bedroom and Sexual and Relationship Well-Being" is published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

More information: Rebecca M. Horne et al, Dialing Up Desire and Dampening Disinterest: Regulating Sexual Desire in the Bedroom and Sexual and Relationship Well-Being, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/02654075211054781](https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211054781)

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