

Frequency of Sexual Difficulties in Couples Seeking Couple Therapy and Sexual Therapeutic Goals Pursued by their Therapist

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Introduction

Sexual issues : Any issues related to sexuality, including the psychological, emotional, or relational aspects of sexuality or problems with sexual function or frequency.

In couples seeking **relationship therapy**:

60%

reported being **dissatisfied** with their sex life (Brassard et al., 2012)

30%

had a clinically significant **sexual problems** (Péroquin et al., 2019)

Unfortunately, many **relationship therapists** fail to question couples about sexuality:

- Clinical psychologists questioned on average **22%** of their client about sexual issues and reported a **lack of self-efficacy** in the area of sexuality (Miller et Byers, 2012)
- However, although sexual issues are frequent in couples seeking relationship therapy, little is known about the sexual issues that couples are most likely to experience and report and there is very limited research examining the extent to which relationship therapists address sexual issues in therapy.

Objectives

Using a mixed design, the present study examined the **nature of the sexual issues** reported by couples at the start of relationship therapy as well as the **sexual therapeutic goals** pursued by their therapist. The **likelihood** of therapists pursuing a sexuality-related goals when one of both partner report a sexual issue was also assessed.

Method

169

mixed-sex couples seeking relationship therapy

22 to 76 years old
Relationship length from less than a year to 49 years
Relationship difficulties for an average of 4.62 years
90.8% White

10

relationship therapists

8 women and 2 men
Average 14.40 years of experience in psychotherapy

Measures for couples:

Relationship difficulties : open-ended question, asked to describe one to three difficulties that motivated their consultation in couple therapy.

Measures for therapist:

Therapeutic goals: open-ended question, asked to list all the therapeutic goals they were pursuing with the couples.

A two-phase content analysis was conducted to classify the sexual issues and the sexual therapeutic goals.

Results

- In **48.5%** of couples, at least one of the partners reported a sexual issue
- When at least one partners mentioned a sexual issues, their therapist pursued a sexual therapeutic goal **59%** of the time.
- When couples reported a sexual issue, **their therapists were 5 times more likely to pursue a sexuality-related goal**, $B = 5.09$, 95%CI [2.55, 10,19], $\chi^2(1) = 22.71$, $R^2_{CS} = .13$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

- Our findings suggest that a **sole focus on sexual satisfaction and function does not fully capture all the sexual issues** experienced by couples seeking relationship therapy.
- Although relationship therapists often pursue sexuality-related therapeutic goals in their work with distressed couples, the results suggest **that sexual issues are not always prioritized in the context of relationship therapy.**

Clinical implications

The high prevalence of sexual issues observed in this study underlines the importance for relationship therapists to question all couples about sexual issues. Our results point towards a diversity of sexual issues that bring couples in relationship therapy, so therapists should inquire about sexuality very broadly, beyond a unique focus on sexual satisfaction and sexual function.

Limitations. While reading the qualitatively reported sexual issues, it was not always possible to know whether the sexual issues were related to the client or to their partner. Some sexual issues/goals were very general, which did not allow us to make a specific categorization of these issues and goals.

References

Brassard, A., Péroquin, K., Dupuy, E., Wright, J., & Shaver, P. R. (2012). Romantic attachment insecurity predicts sexual dissatisfaction in couples seeking marital therapy. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 38(3), 245-262.
Miller, S. A., & Byers, E. S. (2012). Practicing psychologists' sexual intervention self-efficacy and willingness to treat sexual issues. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41(4), 1041-1050.
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Nature of sexual issues reported by couples	% of couples	Nature of sexual therapeutic goals pursued by relationship therapists	% of couples
Frequency of sexual activity.	26.1	Improving sexuality.	30.5
Sexual desire.	23.8	Increasing the frequency of the couple's sexual activities.	23.1
Initiation of sexual activity.	10	Promoting a satisfying emotional and sexual space for the couple.	17.1
Sexual incompatibility.	7.7	Improving the couple's sexual compatibility.	11
Pornography use.	3.8	Recovering the sexual desire of one or the two partners.	10.9
Physical barriers to sexuality.	3.1	Reconnecting with sexuality following a change in family structure.	8.5
Routine sexual activity.	3.1	Reconnecting with sexuality following a traumatic/unpleasant experience.	2.4
Change in family structure that affects sexuality.	2.3	Managing the negative consequences of sexuality on the couple.	2.4
Traumatic/unpleasant experience that affects sexuality.	2.3	Considering the challenge and obstacles of a physical issue on sexuality.	1.2
Others sexual issues.	17.7		