

Evolved to be connected: the dynamics of attachment and sex over the course of romantic relationships

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Sexual urges and emotional attachments are not always connected. Still, joint operation of the sexual and the attachment systems is typical of romantic relationships. Hence, within this context, the two systems mutually influence each other and operate together to affect relationship well-being. In this article, we review evidence indicating that sex promotes enduring bonds between partners and provide an overview of the contribution of attachment processes to understanding the sex-relationship linkage. We then present a model delineating the functional significance of sex in relationship development. We conclude by suggesting future directions for studying the dual potential of sex for either deepening attachment to a current valued partner or promoting a new relationship when the existing relationship has become less rewarding.

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Sexual urges and emotional attachments are not always connected [1]. Sexual acts may be devoid of affectional bonding, as in the case of one night-stands, and vice versa, affectional bonding between adults does not necessarily involve sexual desire, as in the case of deeply attached partners whose sexual desire for each other has dissipated over the years. Nevertheless, in ongoing romantic relationships, intimates typically serve as both attachment figures and sexual partners [2,3^{••}]. Hence, within this context, sex has the potential to motivate intensely meaningful experiences and thereby affect the future of a relationship, beginning before it is even established, through the consolidation of the attachment bonding process, and on through potential deterioration and detachment.

In this article, we review published evidence indicating that sex promotes enduring bonds between sexual partners and provide an overview of the contribution of attachment processes to our understanding of the sex-relationship linkage. We then introduce a model that delineates the functional significance of sex in relationship development. We conclude by suggesting directions for future research on the dual potential of sex for either deepening attachment to a current valued partner or promoting a new relationship when an existing relationship has become less rewarding.

The attachment-promoting function of sex

The sexual behavioral system evolved to pass genes to the next generation; it may do so by generating sexual desire that manifests itself in approaching desirable partners and enticing them to engage in sexual intercourse [4]. Although the basic functioning of the sexual system is not dependent on attachment processes (i.e., people can mate without bonding) [1], the prolonged helplessness of human offspring promoted the development of mechanisms that keep sexual partners bonded to each other so that they could jointly care for their offspring and thereby improve their survival chances [5^{••}].

Several characteristics of human sexuality suggest that behavioral manifestations of the sexual system act as such a mechanism, fostering extended intimate contact and enhancing enduring emotional bonds between sexual partners [6^{••},7]. Humans, for example, prefer the ‘missionary’ sexual position; typically have sex privately; and sleep together after sex [8]. Humans also tend to engage in sex throughout the menstrual cycle rather than just near ovulation. These tendencies increase exposure to the neuropeptide oxytocin, which is secreted during sexual activity [9], and may therefore amplify its documented attachment-promoting effects [10].

Phenomenological accounts of sexual experiences provide more direct evidence for the theorized sex-attachment linkage, revealing that people often indicate that sex nurtures the emotional connection between partners [11]. In fact, people not only associate sex with relationship promotion, but also act accordingly, such that they are more inclined to employ strategies that allow them to get closer to prospective partners (e.g., disclosing intimate personal information) or to improve a relationship with current partners (e.g., resolving conflicts constructively) when their sexual system is activated [12,13].

In the long run, as demonstrated in longitudinal studies, sex carries the potential to operate as a stabilizing attachment-facilitating device that motivates partners to invest resources in the current relationship. For example, experiencing heightened feelings of passion for one's partner and gratifying sex predicts lower relationship insecurity [14] and a higher probability of enacting relationship-promoting behaviors (e.g., displays of intimacy and affection) [15–17]. Moreover, sexual satisfaction tends to linger following sexual activity ('sexual after-glow'), thus helping to sustain emotional bonds between acts of sex and to enhance relationship satisfaction over the long term [18*].

The role of attachment processes in the construal of sex in romantic relationships

Although the sexual system normatively functions as a promoter of attachment bonds [6**], it does not operate in a vacuum. Specifically, attachment strategies, which are developed earlier in life and which guide the desired levels of intimacy and interdependence with romantic partners, may shape the regulatory functioning of the sexual system, molding the construal of sexual interactions in romantic relationships [19*]. Indeed, a large body of research has shown that attachment orientations help explain variations in what people want out of sexual encounters, how they get their needs met, and what functions sex serves in their close relationships [2,3**].

Research has generally indicated that smooth functioning of the attachment system encourages self-assured approach to sexuality, ease with sexual intimacy, and enjoyment of mutual sexual interactions within the context of committed relationships [2,3**]. In particular, people who are secure with respect to attachment tend to engage in sex mainly to intensify the relationship with their current partner (e.g., to express love for their partners) [20]. Their secure state of mind, which is characterized by a relative lack of attachment concerns and sexual performance anxieties [4,15], allows them to successfully respond to partners' sexual preferences without compromising their own needs [15]. Overall, the confident approach to sexuality that comes with attachment security promotes pleasurable engagement in affectionate and exploratory sexual activities, thereby fostering relationship quality and longevity [2,3**].

By contrast, insecure patterns of attachment are likely to impair the functioning of the sexual system in romantic relationships. To be sure, if a person feels chronically insecure about being loved, whether this insecurity is reflected in relationship worries or in intimacy fears, this person's sexual system is unlikely to function in a healthy way. The nature of this interference, however, is manifested differently in anxious and avoidant people's love life (see Table 1 for a summary of the main findings) and is thus likely to have distinctive manifestations in their

partners' sexuality (e.g., partners of avoidant people, but not those of anxious people, are generally less sexually satisfied) [2,3**].

Highly anxious people's erotophilic tendencies [25] inspire them to channel their relational hopes into the sexual route and to use sex to attempt to satiate their intense needs for merger [21,22]. Unfortunately, however, their relationship anxieties also keep haunting them into their bedroom [4,15], eliciting harmful behavior that, perhaps ironically, may contribute to realizing their worst fears. For example, highly anxious people's fear of losing their partners motivates them to succumb to their partners' wishes [39] and engage in unwanted, and often risky, sexual activities (e.g., unprotected sexual intercourse) [32,34]. At the same time, their own preferences may go unexpressed [39]. These inhibited needs, along with preoccupation with relationship concerns, impede their ability to abandon themselves to erotic sensations [39,40], resulting in lower sexual desire and other sexual difficulties [28–30]. Sexual difficulties, in turn, are likely to frustrate highly anxious people's unrealistic expectations for the ultimate union and generate a debilitating cycle of sexual and relational worries [15,28].

Highly avoidant people, by comparison, experience discomfort with the closeness imposed by sexual contact and thus tend to strip sex of psychological intimacy. In particular, they are likely to have sex for self-serving, relationship-irrelevant reasons (e.g., self-enhancement, stress reduction) [22,23]. Such opportunistic sexual goals, combined with low relationship commitment [41], may explain why highly avoidant people react favorably to 'no-strings attached' sex [24,33], engage in short-term extradyadic copulations [25,32], rarely fantasize about intimate interactions with their partners [27], and masturbate rather than have frequent sex with them [25,42]. When highly avoidant people do have sex with their primary partners, they are less likely to display affection and respond to their partners' needs. Ironically, the resulting aversive feelings of estrangement [15] interfere with gratifying their own sexual needs [28,29]. On the whole, avoidant people's difficulties in relieving intimacy fears, which stretches even to the protected world of sexual imagination, deprive their relationship of warmth and deny them the opportunity of corrective experiences [2,3**].

The relationship development model of sexual desire

Prior research has demonstrated how past attachment experiences account for individual differences in the functioning of the sexual system and its overall impact on relationship well-being [2,3**]. Nevertheless, little is known about how current attachment experiences interact with earlier experiences to affect the construal of sex across relationship development. A recently introduced

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