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RESEARCH

Sexual needs of women in response to the needs of their partners[☆]



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Summary Expectations of sexuality and of a relationship with a partner are one of the keys to a well-balanced relationship. In 2011, we carried out an exploratory survey involving 5000 men and women, which had the following main findings: men need higher sexual frequency and a partner who is more active, erotic, faithful and understanding; women need a partner who is gentle, caring and attentive to the conditions in which love-making takes place.

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Surveys

Needs, in particular sexual needs or intimate needs, are not clinical criteria. They have been developed mainly in women's magazines, and they reflect women's concerns (men also have needs, but these are less often formulated), and in this sense they do correspond to a version of reality. Some media outlets aimed at women provide insightful and interesting commentary, using high-quality tools in the form of qualitative surveys. For example, in this article, we will refer to a Harris Interactive survey for Top Santé (Harris Interactive survey, 2009) (November 2009) and two surveys by the Observatoire International du Couple

[International Couples' Observatory] (OIC, 2011–2012) on men and women living in heterosexual couples (December 2010 to June 2011).

The Harris interactive survey for Top Santé looked at perceptions, needs and practices of women in loving relationships, and identified five main points:

- 33% of women want strong commitment and a shared life;
- for eight in ten women (76%), sex life is important;
- only six in ten women (64%) are satisfied with their sex lives;
- more than half of women (52%) would like a better sex life;
- this panel of women stated they wanted greater diversity in sexual practices, and above all, a revival of seduction, restoration of trust and complicity, and a sense of shared values.

Of note is the importance for this set of women of the moral values that underpin the loving relationship: commitment, trust and complicity. Commitment is a factor that is commonly emphasised by women as one of the difficulties

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they encounter in their relationships, in that their trust is heavily dependent on the level of their partner's commitment. Commitment is a sign of the solidity of the partnership, and for this reason, weaknesses and hesitations are very harmful to the longevity of a relationship.

The couples' survey

In 2010 and 2011, we used an online questionnaire to carry out a large exploratory survey involving over 5000 men and women living in heterosexual relationships. To ensure that the sample was as diverse and representative as possible, the survey was publicised in various media (television, radio, newspapers, websites), and via a mailshot to healthcare professionals. A total of 3404 women aged between 18 and 80 (mean 35.3 years, standard deviation 11.6) responded to 188 questions (37 of which were open-ended). A total of 2153 men aged between 18 and 80 (mean 43.1 years, standard deviation 13.3) responded to 130 questions (19 of which were open-ended).

The questions were on several topics: first sexual encounter, foreplay, sexual relations, pleasure and orgasm, masturbation, body image, desire, emotions, relationships and communication, pregnancy and children, disorders, and demographic information.

Several characteristics of the sample were similar to characteristics of other surveys: age at first sexual encounter (17.6 years for women; 18.5 years for men), frequency of sex (9.2 and 8.4 per month) and number of partners (7.7 and 12.9) were close to those observed by Bajos and Bozon and in other European and North American studies (NATSAL, ACSF and CSF, Langis and Germain 2015). It should be noted that the sample of women was younger and better educated than the men, which has an influence on the results, but in a similar way to that observed for the studies cited above: young women, born after the sexual revolution, have more partners than older women; educated women have more knowledge, are more independent, their work provides financial independence and professional contacts, which are all factors that promote a broader sexual experience.

This article presents the results pertaining to sexual needs.

Men's needs and experiences

- Frequency of sex in the relationship is insufficient for 63% of men. We shall see when examining women's needs that some women also sometimes think that the frequency is insufficient. But frequency, which is thought by men to be insufficient, is one of the main differences between representations of men and women, with men too often exerting "pressure" on female desire, which, in some cases, is diminished by it. This should teach us a general rule: "Too much desire on one side kills desire on the other".
- 84% of men say that they "sometimes do not get enough sex". Along the same lines as the first point, the great desire for action on the part of the male should not be compared with female desire, otherwise we will have to use a different word. Male sexual availability, which is almost constant, cannot easily be compared with female

sexuality, which is highly conditional on an erotic and loving environment.

- If they experience refusal from their partner, 50% of men now understand their attitude. This is a recent and important change (in relation to what study or experience?) towards better understanding of the lived interpersonal experience between men and women and a gradual reduction in male "pressure".
- Just 33% of men state that they are "very satisfied" with their sex lives. We believe that this criterion of high satisfaction better reflects needs (male or female) of a "full sex life", rather than the other responses, which are "moderately", "a little", "not at all". There is not enough discussion of the representations that underlie the terms that are habitually used to describe this aspect, which is so important currently, of the quality of one's intimate life with a chosen partner: "Are you moderately, a little, not at all satisfied with your sex life?" These terms do not follow a linear path from "very" to "not at all". Specific work needs to be done on the exact representation of these items in subjective evaluations of sex life quality. As everyone's expectation is to be "very satisfied", the second item ("moderately") means dissatisfaction for many people.
- Successful sex is a shared moment of intimacy for 60% of men. This wish to share a full intimate life has become a reality only recently, as communication between partners has improved, with exchanges of intimate experience and subjective feelings.
- Almost 80% of men are interested in Porn, and most of them would like their partners to be interested in it too. This is a male need that is very far from female needs (just 44% of women state that they are interested in porn, but often with the desire to support their partner in this area). This is because arousal works differently in men and women. Men's preferences are towards heterosexual and multi-partner scenes, favouring three sexual practices, in this order: oral sex, doggy style, anal sex, with a preference for films that are realistic and amateur. The rejection of professionally-made porn films seems to reflect an interest in scenes that are close to real experiences, possibly a wish to stage one's own sexuality. Women's preferences are quite different; lesbian scenes, threesomes and, in some cases, group sex, but with a clear preference for eroticism over pornography.
- In terms of intimate behaviour, 68% of men would like their partner to be more active and more erotic.
- In terms of personality, there is a need for a partner who is understanding, as 57% of men fear disappointing their partner sexually. This becomes a difficult problem to solve when considering that this male population expects an active, erotic partner who is also more understanding!
- Finally, in terms of moral values, faithfulness is the most important value for 80% of men. However, if infidelity occurs, 62% of them say they would be prepared to forgive. We will see that women are more severe, as only half would agree to forgive.

The women's survey

- One of the key points in the responses from women related to the first sexual experience. Lived experience of this

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