

Daily Affect and Female Sexual Function

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The specific affective experiences related to changes in various aspects of female sexual function have received little attention as most prior studies have focused instead on the role of clinical mood and anxiety disorders and their influence on sexual dysfunction.

Aim. We sought to understand the transaction between daily affect and female sexual function in effort to provide a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between affective and sexual experiences.

Methods. The present study used a 2-week daily diary approach to examine same-day and temporal relations between positive and negative affect states and sexual function in young women.

Main Outcome Measures. We examined the unique relations between positive (i.e., joviality, serenity, self-assurance) and negative (i.e., fear, sadness, hostility) affects and female sexual response (i.e., desire, subjective arousal, vaginal lubrication, orgasmic function, and sexual pain) while controlling for higher order sexual distress, depression, and anxiety, as well as age effects and daily menstruation.

Results. Analyses revealed different aspects of both positive and negative affects to be independently related to sexual response indices. Specifically, results indicated that joviality was related to same-day sexual desire and predicted increased desire the following day. This latter relation was partially mediated by sexual activity. Further, greater sexual desire predicted next-day calmness, which was partially mediated by sexual activity. Notably, fear was related to same-day subjective arousal, lubrication, orgasmic function, and vaginal pain, whereas poorer orgasmic function predicted greater next-day sadness.

Conclusions. These findings describe the manner in which changes in affect correspond to variations in female sexual function, thus highlighting the inextricability of mental and sexual health. Further, these findings may offer insight into the progression of normative levels of affect and sexual function as they develop into comorbid depression, anxiety, and sexual dysfunction. **Kalmbach DA and Pillai V. Daily affect and female sexual function. J Sex Med 2014;11:2938–2954.**

Key Words. Positive Affect; Negative Affect; Female Sexual Function; Hierarchical Linear Modeling

Introduction

Previous investigations have demonstrated that poor emotional health commonly co-occurs with female sexual difficulties [1–3] and increases the risk of developing a sexual dysfunction [4]. This large body of research highlights the importance of affective experiences in female sexual functioning. As much of the current literature has focused on sexual difficulties in the context of psy-

chiatric illnesses, an abundance of the extant evidence has focused on clinical conditions, such as depression and anxiety, as precipitating and perpetuating factors of sexual dysfunction [1,5], much to the exclusion of more normative affect states. Yet, to better understand the psychogenic influences of female sexual response and dysfunction, it is important to examine how normative affective experiences correspond to sexual function in women's daily lives. As mood and anxiety disorders

are, at least in part, the product of chronically and severely dysregulated emotion, examining the interplay between normative affect and sexual response may not only offer insight into the specific affect states relevant to sexual response but also improve our understanding of how normative affect and sexual functioning coevolve into more clinically significant states or disorders. To address this gap, the present study employed a repeated measures design to examine the relations of normal variations in daily affect (i.e., joviality, self-assurance, serenity, sadness, fear, and hostility) and indices of sexual function (i.e., desire, subjective arousal, lubrication, orgasmic function, and sexual pain) in a sample of young women.

Normative affect, as opposed to clinical mood or anxiety disorders, refers to normal, “everyday” emotions, such as happiness and fear [6], which change in response to our daily experiences. Normative affect states are less stable and severe than pathological mood states. To illustrate, a person may occasionally feel sad or fearful, but not suffer from a mood or anxiety disorder. Affect consists of both positive and negative states. Positive affect refers to the degree to which a person feels happy, enthusiastic, or confident, whereas negative affect refers to an individual’s feelings of distress and unpleasantness, including sadness, fear, and anger [7,8]. Although affect includes both positive and negative states, these experiences do not constitute opposite ends of a continuum. Rather, positive and negative affects are related, yet unique, constructs [6–9] shown to be differently related to mood and anxiety disorders such that low positive affect (i.e., anhedonia) is unique to depression, whereas high negative affect is characteristic of both depression and anxiety [10]. Moreover, positive and negative affects have been shown to be independently related to a number of health outcomes, including sleep disturbance [11] and cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, and immunological health [12,13].

Although much of the research on emotional health and sexual function has focused on sexual problems in the context of psychopathology (e.g., Laurent and Simons, and Atlantis and Sullivan [1,5]), recent investigations have shifted some of the attention to the influence of positive and negative trait affects. Oliveira and Nobre [2] found that both positive and negative trait affects constituted vulnerabilities to overall sexual dysfunction, which was partially mediated by depressed and anxious mood states. In focusing on female sexual desire, Peixoto and Nobre [3] similarly found that both positive and negative trait affects constituted vul-

nerabilities to difficulties with female sexual desire and that depressed mood partially mediated these relations.

Despite this recently growing body of research, a number of gaps exist in our understanding of the transactional processes between affect and sexual function. Notably, past investigations have placed greater emphasis on interindividual differences (trait) rather than intraindividual change (state). Oliveira and Nobre’s [2] and Peixoto and Nobre’s [3] showed that women with lower trait positive affect and higher trait negative affect also reported greater sexual dysfunction and lower desire compared with women with high-trait positive mood and low-trait negative mood. While these findings are important in identifying interindividual vulnerabilities to sexual dysfunction, these investigations fail to account for the intraindividual variance in the relation between affective experiences and sexual function across time.

A number of studies have shown changes in female sexual response following induced positive and negative affects. Evidence suggests induced positive affect allows for higher levels of desire [14] and subjective arousal [15,16] in response to erotic stimuli, although other evidence has not supported relations between positive affect and arousal or genital response [15,17]. In comparison, the relation between negative affect and female sexual response is even more mixed. A number of experimental studies have shown that induced negative affect is related to *greater* levels of genital response to erotic stimuli, but is unrelated to subjective arousal [14,18]. These findings are intriguing as they are not consistent with evidence supporting relations between trait negative affect, depression, anxiety, and poorer overall female sexual response [1,2]. However, it is worth noting that, though a useful manipulation in research, inducing affect in the laboratory can be problematic [19,20] and may suffer from poor ecological validity.

Experience sampling techniques are needed to capture the dynamic interplay between affect and sexual response while maximizing ecological validity. Additionally, repeated assessments of affect and sexual function allow for the analysis of intraindividual changes (i.e., state-level relations). Much of the prior research on affect and sexual function has used global measures of positive and negative affects. Thus, it remains unclear which specific affect states facilitate these associations. Finally, a number of prior studies examined positive and negative affects separately, rendering it impossible to examine the shared and independent

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