

# The Object of Sexual Desire: Examining the “What” in “What Do You Desire?”

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** Over the past two decades, sexual desire and desire discrepancy have become more frequently studied as have potential pharmaceutical interventions to treat low sexual desire. However, the complexities of sexual desire—including what exactly is desired—remain poorly understood.

**Aims.** To understand the object of men’s and women’s sexual desire, evaluate gender differences and similarities in the object of desire, and examine the impact of object of desire discrepancies on overall desire for partner in men and women in the context of long-term relationships.

**Methods.** A total of 406 individuals, 203 men and 203 women in a relationship with one another, completed an online survey on sexual desire.

**Main Outcome Measures.** Reports of the object of sexual desire in addition to measures of sexual desire for current partner were collected from both members of the couple.

**Results.** There were significant gender differences in the object of sexual desire. Men were significantly more likely to endorse desire for sexual release, orgasm, and pleasing their partner than were women. Women were significantly more likely to endorse desire for intimacy, emotional closeness, love, and feeling sexually desirable than men. Discrepancies within the couple with regard to object of desire were related to their level of sexual desire for partner, accounting for 17% of variance in men’s desire and 37% of variance in women’s desire.

**Conclusions.** This research provides insights into the conceptualization of sexual desire in long-term relationships and the multifaceted nature of sexual desire that may aid in more focused ways to maintain desire over long-term relationships. Future research on the utility of this perspective of sexual desire and implications for clinicians working with couples struggling with low sexual desire in their relationships is discussed. **Mark K, Herbenick D, Fortenberry D, Sanders S, and Reece M. The object of sexual desire: Examining the “what” in “what do you desire?” J Sex Med 2014;11:2709–2719.**

**Key Words.** Sexual Desire; Women’s Sexual Desire; Men’s Sexual Desire; Couple Relationships; Object of Desire; Sexual Functioning; Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD); Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder

## Introduction

Sexual desire has been described as the most universal sexual response experienced by both men and women [1]. Desire is often defined as a motivational state [2,3] with a subjective awareness

to attain something that is currently unattained [3] where a combination of forces brings us toward and away from sexual behavior [4]. Sexual desire is so integral to understanding sexual functioning that a discussion about sexual functioning would be incomplete without reference to it [5,6]. Sexual

desire is associated with romantic love [7,8], relationship satisfaction [9–11], sexual satisfaction [10–13], and other important interpersonal phenomena [14,15]. When problematic, diagnoses of sexual interest/desire disorder in women and hypoactive sexual desire disorder in men (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-V]) [16] are made with treatment options targeting arousal for men, but there is no FDA-approved pharmacological treatment currently available for women. Together, this has recently led researchers and the medical community to become more interested in further understanding the complexities of sexual desire, especially in women.

The experience of sexual desire is presumed to be distinct from, but related to, the physiological state of sexual arousal [17,18] and the behavioral act of sexual activity. The absence of sexual desire in a relationship often signals problems in the relationship, and sexual desire problems are frequently cited in sex and marital therapy [19,20]. Prevalence rates of low sexual desire are found to be around 16% or 17% in U.S. and British men [21,22] and from 26.7% to 52.4% in women [23]. The methods to assess sexual desire in terms of frequency of behavior are reliable, but they are not necessarily comprehensive [24]. There is value in understanding the complexities behind sexual desire in a healthy sample of couples for insight provided to individuals and couples suffering from low sexual desire.

Research has found that sexual desire may mean different things to different individuals. Graham et al. [18] found that women often referred to sexual desire and arousal interchangeably. Beigel [25] and Vandereycken [26] found that desire for sex might easily be mistaken for, or mislabeled as, a desire for love or intimacy. However, perhaps it is not that sexual desire is misunderstood but rather that different people experience desire in different ways and at different times. Sexual desire may not always be a desire for sex. Sexual desire may also represent a desire to impress a partner [27], feel closer to a partner, feel love, intimacy [27,28], or affection [28], all through the behavior of sex. There is evidence that sexual desire is more than a desire to engage in sexual activity where neither sex, intercourse, or orgasm are necessarily the goal of sexual desire [17,20]. Sexual motivation research suggests that a variety of sexual motives may underlie sexual behavior [29,30], and there are a variety of dispositional motives likely to influence sexual motivation [30]. Thus, the nature of sexual

desire, or in the case of the current article, the object of sexual desire, may differ from one person to another [31], and perhaps discrepancies in the object of sexual desire within a couple may impact overall sexual desire. Levine [19] suggested that sexual desire informs us of something we want—the longing for something that we do not currently have. This may be the key feature of sexual desire. Yet, the answer to “what” we desire when sexual desire is experienced is currently unclear in the literature.

Research points to potential gender differences in beliefs about sexual desire [32] and patterns of sexual desire [29,33], which may have numerous implications for how sexual desire is conceptualized [34]. Regan and Berscheid [20] found that a higher proportion of women than men viewed sexual desire as a physiological state caused by external factors. Further, men’s sexual desire was driven by intraindividual and erotic environmental factors, where women’s sexual desire was driven by interpersonal and romantic environmental factors [33]. Some scholars have suggested women’s sexual desire as less strongly biologically supported than men’s sexual desire [19]; perhaps this allows for women’s sexual desire to be more heavily impacted by the interpersonal context than men’s sexual desire. Levine [19] has suggested that women use intimacy and closeness as a gateway to sex, where men use sex as a gateway to intimacy and closeness, and these motivations for sex are associated with differences in the nature of desire. These gender differences have been reflected in the recent differential changes to the DSM-V for men’s low sexual desire and women’s low sexual desire diagnoses [16,35–37]. However, this body of research has not addressed the large within-gender differences in the experience of desire or in the object of desire.

In her important piece on women’s sexual desire, Meana [31] notes, “what exactly is being desired is a central question” (p. 108). Meana [31] goes on to state that conceptualizing desire as goal driven may be missing an important aspect of sexual desire. Although her work was specific to women, this may also be the case for men. It may not be that sexual desire is fulfilled by sexual activity, but by the fulfillment of other needs [19,31]. There has, to our knowledge, been no empirical examination of the object of sexual desire in terms of *what* is desired on an individual or dyadic level and particularly the way couple dynamics of the object of sexual desire impacts overall desire within the relationship.

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