

## A Comparison of Approach and Avoidance Sexual Goals in Couples With Vulvodynia and Community Controls

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Provoked vestibulodynia (PVD) is a prevalent form of vulvodynia that interferes with the sexual and relational functioning of affected couples. Approach and avoidance sexual goals are associated with the sexual and relationship well-being of women with PVD and their partners. However, whether sexual goals differ in couples coping with PVD compared with community couples is unknown.

**Aims:** To compare the approach and avoidance sexual goals of women with PVD and their partners with a control sample of community women and their partners to build on an established motivational model and to compare the sexual goals of women with PVD with those of their partners.

**Methods:** Women diagnosed with PVD and their partners (n = 161) and control couples (n = 172) completed measures of approach and avoidance sexual goals.

**Outcome:** Approach and Avoidance Sexual Goals Questionnaire.

**Results:** Women with PVD reported lower approach and higher avoidance sexual goals than control women, whereas partners of women with PVD did not differ from control partners in their sexual goals. Women with PVD also reported lower approach and higher avoidance sexual goals compared with their partners, whereas there were no differences between partners in the control sample.

**Clinical Implications:** Given that avoidance sexual goals have been linked to negative sexual and relational outcomes, clinicians could strive to help couples with PVD become aware of their sexual motives, with the aim of weakening avoidance sexual goals and bolstering approach sexual goals.

**Strengths and Limitations:** This is the first study to empirically document differences in sexual goals between couples affected by PVD and community couples. Limitations include the study's correlational design, differences in demographic characteristics between samples, and the homogeneity of participants' sexual orientation.

**Conclusions:** Findings suggest that the sexual goals of women affected by PVD differ from those of community women and from their partners and support sexual goals as targets for psychological interventions to help couples coping with PVD. **Dubé JP, Bergeron S, Muise A, et al. A Comparison of Approach and Avoidance Sexual Goals in Couples With Vulvodynia and Community Controls. *J Sex Med* 2017;XX:XXX–XXX.**

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**Key Words:** Provoked Vestibulodynia; Vulvodynia; Couples; Sexual Motivation; Sexual Goals

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### INTRODUCTION

Provoked vestibulodynia (PVD), a subtype of vulvodynia characterized by acute pain in the vulvar vestibule, is the most frequent cause of pain during intercourse in premenopausal women.<sup>1</sup> Although the precise etiology is unknown, multiple biological, psychological, and interpersonal factors contribute to the development and maintenance of PVD.<sup>2</sup> PVD is associated with psychological and sexual impairments for affected women and their romantic partners, such as increased psychological distress and decreased sexual function and satisfaction (see Bergeron et al<sup>2</sup> for a review). Sexual motivation is emerging as a key factor that is relevant to women with vulvovaginal pain,

prompting recommendations that it be targeted in psychological interventions to help women adapt to the condition.<sup>3–5</sup> Although sexual goals, defined as the outcomes that people pursue when engaging in sex, are associated with the sexual and relational functioning of women with PVD and their partners,<sup>5,6</sup> whether sexual goals differ for couples affected by PVD compared with community couples is unknown. Because PVD renders sexual intercourse painful and affected women report many relationship fears and guilt as a result,<sup>7</sup> they might tend to engage in intercourse primarily to avoid negative consequences (avoidance goals) compared with women without pain who might engage in intercourse most often to pursue positive outcomes (approach goals). Determining the presence and nature of such differences could help account for the sexual impairments that are commonly observed in couples affected by PVD and could support sexual goals as targets of interventions to help these women and their partners. The present study compared the sexual goals of couples affected by PVD with those of community control couples and compared the sexual goals of women with PVD with those of their male partners.

People's desires to approach pleasure and avoid pain are well established in theories of motivation.<sup>8,9</sup> Such theories distinguish between independent systems of approach (or attainment) and avoidance (or inhibition), which are activated when individuals adopt self-regulatory actions focused on attaining success and averting failure, respectively.<sup>10–12</sup> The approach-avoidance distinction, when applied to sexuality, posits that people might engage in sex to attain positive outcomes, such as to show love for a partner (ie, an approach sexual goal), and to avoid negative outcomes, such as their partner's disappointment (ie, an avoidance sexual goal)<sup>5,13</sup> (see review by Impett et al<sup>14</sup>). Sexual goals have been further delineated in their focus on the self (eg, to feel good about one's self) vs the partner (eg, to experience pleasure with a partner).<sup>15</sup> Although conceptualized as independent systems, it is possible to simultaneously hold approach and avoidance goals for sex.<sup>14,16</sup> For instance, one might pursue sex to achieve intimacy and to avert discord with a partner. Indeed, although some studies have found a positive correlation between approach and avoidance sexual goals,<sup>5,17</sup> others have found no significant association.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, sexual goals have distinct associations with sexual and relationship outcomes; approach sexual goals are associated with enhanced sexual desire and relationship and sexual satisfaction (while controlling for avoidance goals), and avoidance goals are associated with lower desire and satisfaction (while controlling for approach goals).<sup>5,13,17</sup>

Although other types of goals, such as task persistence and pain avoidance, have been shown to affect a person's ability to manage pain,<sup>18,19</sup> the role of goals in vulvovaginal pain has only recently received empirical attention. An epidemiologic study found that, despite their pain, more than 90% of affected women engaged in intercourse in the preceding 6 months.<sup>20</sup> In a qualitative study, Elmerstig et al<sup>4</sup> found that women with pain during sexual intercourse reported engaging in intercourse to achieve

intimacy with, and to avoid abandonment by, their partners, suggesting that approach and avoidance sexual goals—and particularly those that were partner-focused—affected women's decisions to persist with painful intercourse. Further, Rosen et al<sup>5</sup> found that in a sample of women with PVD and their partners, women's higher approach sexual goals were associated with their higher relationship and sexual satisfaction, whereas women's higher avoidance sexual goals were associated with women's lower sexual and relationship satisfaction, more depressive symptoms, and lower relationship satisfaction for their partners.

Although no studies have directly compared the level of sexual goals in women affected by PVD with those of unaffected women, Brauer et al<sup>3</sup> found that, compared with controls, women who experienced pain during intercourse (ie, they did not have a specific diagnosis) reported persisting with sex for fewer reasons that involved pleasure (conceptually aligned with approach sexual goals) and for more reasons that included a sense of obligation or to avoid losing a romantic partner (conceptually aligned with avoidance sexual goals). Further, couples affected by PVD have reported lower sexual rewards and higher sexual costs compared with control couples.<sup>21</sup> Fears of partner loss or disappointment and feeling obliged to meet partners' sexual needs also have figured prominently into the sexual goals of women with vulvovaginal pain in qualitative studies.<sup>4,7</sup> Together, these findings suggest that partner-focused sexual goals might be especially relevant for women with PVD, and that they might endorse lower approach sexual goals and higher avoidance sexual goals compared with control women. Because partners of women with PVD also are negatively affected by the pain<sup>22</sup> and romantic partners tend to adopt similar goals (see Laurin<sup>23</sup> for a review of goal contagion research), partners of women with PVD might report lower approach and higher avoidance sexual goals compared with partners of control women. Moreover, although research with community couples typically finds no sex differences in sexual goals,<sup>13</sup> in the context of PVD, in which women bear the burden of pain, it is plausible that women might endorse higher avoidance sexual goals and lower approach goals than their partners. Uncovering differences in sexual goals will provide insight into an important motivational factor that could help account for the negative sexual and relational consequences observed in couples struggling with this condition. An enhanced understanding of how the sexual goals of couples affected by PVD differ from control couples also could support sexual goals as targets for interventions to improve sexual and relational functioning in couples coping with PVD.

## AIMS

The aim of this study was to compare the sexual goals of women with PVD and their partners with those of a control group of community women and their partners. This study also sought to determine whether there were differences in sexual goals between women with PVD and their partners. We predicted that women with PVD would have lower approach sexual

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