



Effects of social anxiety and depressive symptoms on the frequency and quality of sexual activity: A daily process approach

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ABSTRACT

Diminished positive experiences and events might be part of the phenomenology of social anxiety; however, much of this research is cross-sectional by design, limiting our understanding of the everyday lives of socially anxious people. Sexuality is a primary source of positive experiences. We theorized that people with elevated social anxiety would have relatively less satisfying sexual experiences compared to those who were not anxious. For 21 days, 150 college students described their daily sexual episodes. Social anxiety was negatively related to the pleasure and feelings of connectedness experienced when sexually intimate. The relationship between social anxiety and the amount of sexual contact differed between men and women—it was negative for women and negligible for men. Being in a close, intimate relationship enhanced the feelings of connectedness during sexual episodes for only individuals low in social anxiety. Depressive symptoms were negatively related to the amount of sexual contact, and the pleasure and feelings of connectedness experienced when sexually intimate. Controlling for depressive symptoms did not meaningfully change the social anxiety effects on daily sexuality. Our findings suggest that fulfilling sexual activity is often compromised by social anxiety.

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Traditionally, diminished positive experiences have been considered to be part of the structure of depression, but not anxiety (Brown, Chorpita, & Barlow, 1998; Clark & Watson, 1991). Nevertheless, a meta-analysis of 30 studies found negative relationships between social anxiety and positive experiences that could not be explained by depression (Kashdan, 2007). Why should social anxiety be inversely related to positive events and experiences? At any given moment, people have limited available self-regulatory resources, including attention, stamina, willpower and other executive functions. With over-exertion, these resources can be depleted, leaving little to no regulatory capacity for subsequent challenges (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). People with high social anxiety exert substantial time and effort to conceal anxious feelings and avoid social situations. To minimize the probability of being scrutinized during social interactions, people with high social anxiety engage in “safety behaviors” such as talking very little, nodding excessively, and deflecting attention by asking questions. Regular, intense efforts to control anxiety and public impressions

put socially anxious people in “prevention mode”, where the avoidance of threat and failure take precedence over responding to potential rewards (Clark & Wells, 1995; Kashdan, 2007; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Devoting limited self-regulatory resources to manage anxiety “steals” time and effort from being receptive to environmental reward cues and pursuing other everyday strivings (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Kashdan, Breen, & Julian, 2010). Thus, the self-regulatory orientation linked to social anxiety appears to interfere with the psychological benefits of positive social experiences like enjoyment, laughter, inspiration, and intimacy.

Social anxiety and romantic relationships

By nature, social anxiety is an emotionally vulnerable experience contextually linked to interpersonal interactions and relationships. Yet, only scant attention has been given to the romantic lives of people with high social anxiety. People with high social anxiety have been shown to be less likely to be in romantic relationships (e.g., Lampe, Slade, Issakidis, & Andrews, 2003; Schneier et al., 1994). Of the subgroup of people with high social anxiety in romantic relationships, there is evidence to suggest dysfunction. People with high social anxiety reported less perceived intimacy

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and social support (e.g., Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Sparrevoth & Rapee, 2009; Wenzel, 2002), and greater avoidance of conflict, disclosure, and intense emotions (Davila & Beck, 2002; Kashdan, Volkmann, Breen, & Han, 2007).

Each of these studies relied on single occasion, global questionnaires, asking participants to report on their general behaviors and relationship attitudes across time and context. Only two published studies used a process-oriented methodology. In an observational study of how 13 people with high social anxiety communicated with their romantic partners, researchers found that these people reported infrequent positive behaviors during various conversation topics and frequent extreme negative behaviors when discussing a contentious topic compared with 14 “nonanxious” people and their romantic partners (Wenzel, Graff-Dolezal, Macho, & Brendle, 2005). In another observational study, 22 women with high social anxiety and their romantic partners (compared with 23 “nonanxious” people and their romantic partners) discussed how they each coped with the most difficult event in their lives, respectively (Beck, Davila, Farrow, & Grant, 2006). The researchers found no differences in the quality of social support provided and received by women with high social anxiety compared to “nonanxious” women.

Social anxiety and sexual behavior

To understand social anxiety and romantic relationships, there is value in studying the most intimate form of positive social experience: sex.¹ The importance of this life domain is underscored by its presence in everyday thought, conversation, and even commerce. From what we know, people with high social anxiety report a range of sexual problems, including greater performance anxiety, greater difficulty getting aroused (lubrication for women, erections for men), more frequent premature ejaculation, fewer sexual partners, and less discussion of sexual issues with romantic partners (Bodinger et al., 2002; Figueira, Possidente, Marques, & Hayes, 2001; Fontenelle et al., 2007; Leary & Dobbins, 1983).

To our knowledge, all published studies on social anxiety and sexuality have used global sexual history questionnaires. In addition, individual difference variables, such as the type and quality of romantic partners, might influence within-person associations between social anxiety and sexual activity. A few existing studies provide indirect evidence for considering these contextual, moderating variables.

Relational factors and sexuality

Engaging in sexual activity with a romantic relationship partner (compared with new or occasional partners) has been shown to alter the quality of sexual experiences. In 2009, researchers collected data from a nationally representative sample of 3990 adults (ages 18–59) in the United States via mailed household surveys (Herbenick et al., 2010). When contacted, participants were asked about their most recent sexual experience with another person. For men, having sexual relations within a romantic relationship context, compared with a non-relationship partner, was associated with greater arousal and pleasure, and a higher probability of orgasm; these findings remained even after accounting for age and health status. In contrast, during their last sexual episode, women experienced greater arousal difficulties and a lower probability of having an orgasm within a romantic relationship context compared with non-relationship partners, and a similar level of

pleasure across different types of partners; these findings remained even after accounting for age and health status. Findings concerning women should be interpreted cautiously as most of their sexual partners outside of romantic relationships were classified as friends as opposed to new people.

These data suggest that the nature of sexual partners influence the frequency and quality of sexual experience. Thus, the type and quality of sexual partners might moderate any existing relationships between social anxiety and the frequency and quality of sexual activity in daily life.

Gender, social anxiety, and sexuality

Gender has been found to influence the effects of social anxiety on the quality of romantic relationships in cross-sectional survey studies. Compared to women with low social anxiety, women with high social anxiety reported less support, less disclosures about emotions and personal information, and greater conflict in their romantic relationships (Cuming & Rapee, 2010); for men, social anxiety did not influence any of these relationship quality outcomes. As for observable behavior when communicating with romantic partners in a laboratory setting, healthy supportive responses by partners only served to increase the distress of women with high (but not low) social anxiety (Beck et al., 2006); there were no men in the study to allow for gender comparisons. The seemingly unusual response by women with high social anxiety fits with recent research on fear responses to overtly positive events (e.g., Weeks, 2010; Weeks, Heimberg, Rodebaugh, & Norton, 2008). Specifically, individuals with high social anxiety often fear being evaluated favorably and publicly by other people because of concerns that they cannot meet the new, higher standards set for them. Instead of responding with positive experiences, individuals with high social anxiety feel conspicuous and seek to withdraw or disqualify the positive event to reduce unwanted, unmanageable negative reactions. Within this conceptual framework, women with higher social anxiety might fail to respond positively to overtly healthy sexual experiences and in turn, might reduce the frequency of sexual experiences to avoid any evaluation from sexual partners (positive or negative).

When comparing men and women on psychological variables, few differences tend to be of a large enough magnitude to be meaningful (Hyde, 2005). Sexuality is an exception. Stark gender differences have been reported in rates of masturbation and attitudes about casual sex (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). When asked to describe the advantages of romantic relationships, women viewed intimacy, companionship, and exclusivity as more important benefits than men; men were more likely to consider sexual gratification as a primary benefit (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Taken together, these results suggest that men place higher value on sexual gratification in romantic relationships, while women regard the fulfillment of their needs for commitment, intimacy, and affiliation as more important.

In heterosexual relationships, there is asymmetry in sexual access with women often serving as gatekeepers (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Supportive research suggests that men show a greater willingness to engage in casual sex whereas women show a preference toward reserving sexual intercourse for committed partners (e.g., Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Mathes & Kozak, 2008; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Although all human beings desire sex, the asymmetrical status of men and women in sexual interactions alters mating strategies and perceived costs and benefits. Men show greater motivation to obtain sexual gratification and are more apt to extract immediate pleasures compared with women (e.g., Meston & Buss, 2007; Regan & Dreyer, 1999). Women are more

¹ At the same time, in situations involving coercion and assault, sex can become a profoundly traumatic event.

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