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Dyadic Sexual Communication Skills



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Synonyms

Communication skills for couples; Dyadic sexual communication; Intimate communication skills; Marital communication skills; Sexual communication ability; Sexual communication skills

Definition

Dyadic sexual communication skills include the nonverbal and verbal skills to exchange meaningful and relevant sexual information with intimate partners before (e.g., “sweet talk”), during (e.g., “dirty talk”), and after (e.g., “pillow talk”) sexual encounters. This involves the ability to self-disclose about sexual matters (e.g., about previous good, bad, or even traumatic sexual experiences), the ability to listen to and understand a partner’s self-disclosures (e.g., about their sexual likes and dislikes), and the ability to negotiate compromise and reach consensus on joint sexual interactions (e.g., in sexual consent and safer sex communication). Dyadic

sexual communication skills are distinct from sexual communication skills in other contexts, such as sexuality-related communication between parents and children, teachers and students, or patients and health-care providers, because they specifically focus on the ability to address mutual sexual feelings and behaviors within a couple (Byers, 2011).

The content and form of dyadic sexual communication and related skills differ and change depending on the *type and duration of the couple relationship*. With a new or casual sexual partner, for example, verbal communication about consent, boundaries, and safer sex is more critical than with an established partner, where these issues are typically already negotiated and nonverbal sexual cues (e.g., to initiate sex) are established. But verbal sexual communication in long-term relationships is still important and can be difficult. Disclosing issues such as sexual dissatisfaction or newfound sexual interests within or beyond the couple relationship, for example, can make an individual feel vulnerable and/or create severe and high-stake conflicts in long-term couples. Dyadic sexual communication and the requisite skills may also vary depending on cultural context and individual past experiences, particularly for those who engage in minoritized sexual behaviors and lifestyles. For example, individuals navigating consensual non-monogamy, sexual power exchange, or social stigmatization of homo- and bisexuality may require different communication strategies to effectively negotiate these dynamics (e.g., if one partner has already come out and the other not). Therefore, it is important to look at

dyadic sexual communication skills from both the perspective of relationship type (e.g., casual/committed, sexual/romantic, monogamous/non-monogamous, kinky/non-kinky, same-sex/mixed-sex relationships) and relationship lifecycle (early, mid, late relationship phase).

Another important factor in dyadic sexual communication skills is the *sexual communication goals*. Researchers have distinguished between expressive/affective goals (e.g., enhancing emotional intimacy) and instrumental goals (e.g., initiating or ending a sexual activity or encounter), each requiring different communication skills. Open and honest sexual self-disclosure among long-term sexual partners has been shown to contribute to sexual satisfaction through both expressive and instrumental pathways (MacNeil & Byers, 2009).

However, not all sexual communication is honest and authentic. Partners may sometimes use *strategic sexual communication* to achieve specific goals. For instance, both women and men report using inauthentic expressions of sexual pleasure, such as simulating orgasms, to make their partners feel good or nonverbally signal a desire to end the sexual interaction (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2009). While strategic sexual communication skills can be used benevolently, they can also be harmful, especially when they lead to emotional estrangement or exploitation (e.g., feigning sexual and romantic commitment to manipulate a partner).

Introduction

Analyses of dyadic sexual communication and related skills can be organized along different dimensions such as:

- Verbal versus nonverbal sexual communication
- Authentic versus strategic sexual communication
- Topics addressed (e.g., consent, safer sex, sexual preferences)
- Timing (i.e., before versus during versus after sexual encounters)
- Nature of the dyadic relationship (casual versus committed couple relationships; new versus familiar partners)

- Sexual orientation and gender identity of partners (mixed-sex versus same-sex relationships; cisgender, trans, nonbinary, agender)

In line with the literature, the focus of this entry is predominantly on communication in established couple relationships and thus does not address all different relationship types and phases mentioned above. We first introduce established theories and measures of dyadic communication skills, then briefly summarize the state of research on correlates and effects of dyadic sexual communication skills, and finally present different approaches to improving dyadic communication skills.

Theories of Dyadic Sexual Communication Skills

Both evolutionary and sociocultural theories can be applied to explain the determinants and effects of dyadic sexual communication skills. From an evolutionary and sociocultural theory perspective, dyadic sexual communication skills are linked to sexual well-being, functioning, and reproductive success.

According to the evolutionary *sexual strategies theory* (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), women and men can be motivated to engage in short-term mating and long-term pair-bonding, depending on the circumstances. Dyadic sexual communication skills can contribute to finding and securing both short-term and long-term sexual partners. Evolutionary theories of mate choice point to the relevance of sex/gender-specific intra-sexual competition and the need for *self-promotion* in the sense of demonstrating one's own mate value and/or derogating competitors and their mate value (Schmitt & Buss, 1996). According to evolutionary *signaling theory*, for example, women use authentic and/or fake sexual vocalizations during penetration (i.e., moans, screams, instructional commands) to enhance their male partner's arousal and improve their own mate value relative to less expressive rivals (Prokop, 2021).

Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 2003) is the main sexual socialization theory that explains various psychosocial influences on

sexuality. This theory posits that human sexuality follows three types of learned scripts (i.e., ideas about how sexual interactions should proceed) that interact with each other: intrapsychic scripts (mainly shaped by personal development), interpersonal scripts (mainly shaped by interpersonal relationships), and cultural scripts (mainly shaped by cultural norms, religious values, and media role models). Based on sexual script theory, dyadic sexual communication skills would include the ability to self-disclose intrapsychic scripts and negotiate interpersonal scripts (e.g., Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). *Social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 2001) is one of the leading media effects theories. It can explain the conditions under which people learn how to communicate sexually with an intimate partner from media content and role models.

A comprehensive conceptual model that integrates evolutionary and sociocultural theories and would organize the various topics relevant to dyadic sexual communication is missing, though (Rosier & Tyler, 2017; Widman et al., 2022).

Measures of Dyadic Sexual Communication Skills

To measure dyadic sexual communication skills, researchers usually collect self-report data from individuals and couples using single-item measures and psychometric scales. *Single-item measures* can address communication frequency (e.g., “How often in the past 12 months have you talked with your intimate partner(s) about sexual matters?”; Evans-Paulson et al., 2021) or communication skills (e.g., “How confident are you in effectively communicating your sexual needs, desires, and boundaries with your partner?”). Three examples of *psychometric scales* that have been developed to measure dyadic sexual communication skills are detailed below.

- The *Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale* (SSDS; Snell et al., 1989) has 72 items and 24 subscales measuring the respondent’s willingness (5-point response scale ranging from not willing (1) to completely willing (5)) to disclose to an intimate partner information about his or her

sexual behavior (e.g., “My past sexual experiences”), sexual values (e.g., “What sex in an intimate relationship means to me”), sexual attitudes (e.g., “How I feel about abortion”), and sexual feelings (e.g., “How satisfied I am with the sexual aspects of my life”).

- The *Dyadic Sexual Communication Scale* (DSCS; Catania, 2011) measures the perceived quality of mutual sexual communication with 13 items (6-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6)). Items include: “My partner and I can usually talk calmly about our sex life” and “My partner and I never seem to resolve our disagreements about sexual issues.”
- The *Sexual Communication Style Scale* (SCSS; Brogan et al., 2009) uses 18 items to measure the extent to which dyadic sexual communication is verbal or nonverbal (5-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5)). Example items are “My partner talks during sex” and “I can tell from my partner’s nonverbals [= nonverbal expressions] whether he or she is enjoying sex.”

There are also a number of scales that assess sexual communication with new partners about issues of sexual health and sexual consent.

Researchers most commonly conduct cross-sectional surveys, but sometimes carry out *longitudinal studies* employing a research diary (e.g., Bibby & Davila, 2024). Some studies have also used *objective observational data*. In one study, long-term couples were invited to the research laboratory and asked to discuss one of their authentic nonsexual problems and one of their sexual problems. The problem discussions were recorded and coded for warmth and dominance in the communication (Rehman et al., 2017).

Correlates and Effects of Dyadic Sexual Communication Skills

There is a general consensus in sexuality research, communication science, and couple and sex therapy that communication skills and good communication promote positive relationships and sexual

outcomes in terms of sexual frequency, functioning, satisfaction, and desire (e.g., Bennett-Brown & Denes, 2023; Galizia et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2018; Mallory, 2022; Mallory et al., 2019).

A meta-analysis of 48 studies with 12,145 participants in couple relationships (Mallory et al., 2019) showed that sexual communication was positively associated with sexual desire ($r = 0.16$), sexual arousal ($r = 0.21$), orgasm ($r = 0.23$), and overall sexual functioning ($r = 0.35$). Another meta-analysis of 93 studies with 38,499 coupled participants (Mallory, 2022) found positive correlations between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction ($r = 0.43$) as well as relationship satisfaction ($r = 0.37$). Both meta-analyses consistently revealed that the associations between sexual communication and sexual and relationship outcomes were stronger for women than for men in couple relationships.

The different dimensions of dyadic sexual communication may be associated with different *causal pathways* to positive outcomes: A willingness to disclose personal sexual information can foster intimacy and trust and provide inspiration for shared sexual exploration. Good verbal and nonverbal communication helps both partners fine-tune the sexual interaction to ensure that it is as mutually pleasurable as possible. When there are problems with sexual functioning or discrepancies in desire, couples can use communication to normalize the situation, seek compromise, and negotiate alternative sexual practices. Regular sexual communication helps couples adapt their expectations and sexual practices to fluctuations in sexual desire, health issues, aging, or newfound sexual interests.

Although the various causal pathways from general and sexual communication skills to positive sexual and relationship outcomes are plausible and partially supported by intervention studies (e.g., Rosier & Tyler, 2017), it should be noted that the majority of studies in this area provide only correlational data. Therefore, the power of communication should not be overstated, and alternative and/or additional causal mechanism should be acknowledged. For example, the positive correlation between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction does not prove the power

of communication to create sexual satisfaction. It is equally plausible that partners who enjoy satisfying sexual encounters (e.g., because of high sexual compatibility) are motivated to talk about sexual matters more often and more openly. Thus, good sexual communication may be the result rather than the cause of sexual satisfaction. It should also be noted that some sexual problems that couples may encounter cannot be resolved through communication (e.g., incompatible sexual values). On the other hand, many sexual risks (e.g., unsafe sex) and concerns (e.g., desire discrepancy, gender orgasm gap) can be addressed through sexual communication and subsequent behavior adaptations (e.g., Dewitte et al., 2020; Noar et al., 2006).

Improvements of Dyadic Sexual Communication Skills

In everyday life, people use a variety of tools to improve their dyadic sexual communication and related skills. On social media (e.g., YouTube) and online forum (e.g., Reddit) platforms, participants discuss the question “What is good sexual communication?” and address claims that both affirm and challenge stereotypes such as “So many men are bad at communicating about sex,” or “Women withhold honest sexual communication to protect their partner’s perceived masculinity.” They turn to the sex advice literature, which often covers couple communication and makes suggestions for helpful sexual conversations (e.g., Marin & Marin, 2023). Therapists share related advice online (e.g., Zermeno, 2017). Consensually watching pornography with an intimate partner can also elicit open communication about sexual interests (Kohut et al., 2018). Training in dyadic sexual communication is sometimes part of sexuality education programs and is also often included in sexual and couple therapy. Evaluation studies confirm the effectiveness of such training (e.g., Rosier & Tyler, 2017).

A very important prerequisite for sexual self-disclosure to a new or established partner is a clear understanding of one’s own sexual likes and dislikes, accepting them even if they seem unusual or

inappropriate, and developing the ability to articulate them effectively. Effective communication skills imply the flexibility and willingness to adapt to different partners and situations. For example, in some situations, it might be helpful to disclose preferences in a light-hearted and playful manner, while in others, it may be necessary to communicate boundaries assertively and firmly. Educational materials, peer support, and media role models can provide inspiration and deserve further investigation in terms of their contents, uses, and effects (e.g., analyses of consent communication in pornographic materials and mainstream films; Döring & Miller, 2022; Jozkowski et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Dyadic sexual communication and related skills are associated with positive sexual and relationship outcomes, particularly for women. However, causal evidence is sparse. More longitudinal and intervention studies are needed to better understand the causal pathways between verbal and nonverbal sexual communication and sexual outcomes. Most research has focused on mixed-sex couples, with little evidence on the role of sexual communication for same-sex couples (e.g., Holmberg & Blair, 2009). The influence of culture and the media on dyadic sexual communication is also worthy of further investigation.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Flirting](#)
- ▶ [Internet: Online Dating](#)
- ▶ [Intimacy](#)
- ▶ [Pair-Bonding: Sexual Desire](#)
- ▶ [Relationship Satisfaction](#)
- ▶ [Relationship Satisfaction: Post-Sex Affectionate Activity](#)
- ▶ [Romantic Pair Bonds](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Desire](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Desire: Relationship Factors](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Fantasies](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Satisfaction: Relationship Satisfaction](#)

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