

# Let's think a little more about sex



By

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**Want a better relationship?**

Think about sex more.

Typically, everyone—moms, best friends, therapists—gives the same advice on how to improve a relationship: Be nice. Listen more. Help out around the house. And they're right.

But now researchers say that just thinking about sex can help. When we have sexy thoughts we are more likely to open up and share information about ourselves. That helps us bond.

The new research, which will be published in print next month in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, consists of [three studies with a total of 245 heterosexual participants](#) conducted by psychologists at the Interdisciplinary Center, a private university in Herzliya, Israel. In study one, participants were asked seven questions about what food, clothing and locations they would prefer for a first date. In between questions, pictures flashed on the screen so quickly the participants weren't consciously aware of them. Half the participants were shown erotic photos of a naked member of the opposite sex. Half were shown pictures of fish. Then they were asked to share a personal story via Instant Messenger with someone attractive (who was really a researcher).

In study two, some participants watched a scene from the movie "Original Sin" where the actors Antonio Banderas and Angelina Jolie have sex. Others watched a film on cat behavior. All were then asked to tell an embarrassing personal story while face-to-face with another participant of the opposite sex.

In study three, participants watched several videos of couples interacting sexually or several movies of couples talking about their feelings. Then they were asked to tell an embarrassing personal story via online chat to an attractive member of the opposite sex (again, really a researcher). They were also asked whether or not they wanted to go on a date with that person.

The findings in all three studies were consistent: The people who were exposed to sexual stimuli revealed significantly more personal information. They also were more likely to want to meet the person they had just opened up to online. There were no gender differences in the results.

Previously, psychologists looked at sexual arousal as our body's way to initiate sex with a desirable partner. These findings show that the point may also be to establish emotional bonding.

“Sexual desire makes you chatty,” says Gurit Birnbaum, a social psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center, who is the lead researcher on the new studies. She says this is because we are wired to form relationships.

This chattiness obviously helps out when two people first start dating. But it is good news for couples in long-term relationships, too. Dr. Birnbaum says that thinking about sex starts a positive cycle of emotional intimacy: When you think about sex and then disclose personal information, the other person likes you more. If the attraction is mutual, he or she typically reciprocates by sharing as well. That, in turn, makes you feel more affection.

How can you harness this sexually prompted chattiness to boost the emotional connection in your relationship? Dr. Birnbaum has some advice:

First, be aware of it. And be careful to whom you are blabbing. If you see a suggestive ad in a magazine and start oversharing to the bus driver or a cute co-worker you're not helping your marriage.

Pick up your partner's cues. If he or she seems more romantic, maybe it is a good time to talk. You don't have to delve into life's big issues. And certainly don't choose this time to bring up any problems in the marriage. But an amorous partner is probably an attentive audience.

Don't dump. Reciprocal, and gradual opening up is attractive. Spewing your emotions without control—or rambling about every insignificant detail—is not. And make sure it is a good time for your partner to talk. The middle of a weekend long visit from your in-laws is not the time.

Create a sexy atmosphere. If you're feeling emotionally distant, put on some music. Light candles at dinner. Wear that shirt your partner thinks matches your eyes. Watch “Original Sin” together.

And if your partner is in a happy, open and sharing mood, have sex. Remember, it boosts relationship satisfaction, too.

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