

Sex Better Than Money for Happiness

More Money Doesn't Mean More Sex... ...but More Sex Can Make You Feel Richer

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July 16, 2004 -- Good news for folks whose bedrooms have more activity than their bank accounts: New research shows that sex is better for your happiness than money.

That's not to say that being financially poor but sexually active is the secret to a happy life. But despite common theory, more money doesn't get you more sex, say "happiness economics" researchers.

After analysing data on the self-reported levels of sexual activity and happiness of 16,000 people, Dartmouth College economist David Blachflower and Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick in England report that sex "enters so strongly (and) positively in happiness equations" that they estimate increasing intercourse from once a month to once a week is equivalent to the amount of happiness generated by getting an additional \$50,000 in income for the average American.

"The evidence we see is that money brings some amounts of happiness, but not as much as what economists might have thought," says Blachflower. "We had to look to psychologists and realize that other things really matter."

Rich Man, Poor Man: What's the Difference?

Their paper, "Money, Sex, and Happiness: An Empirical Study," recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, essentially puts an estimated dollar amount on the happiness level resulting from sex and its trappings.

Despite popular opinion, they find that having more money doesn't mean you get more sex; there's no difference between the frequency of sex and income level. But they do find sex seems to have a greater effect on happiness levels in highly educated -- and presuming wealthier -- people than on those with lower educational status.

Overall, the happiest folks are those getting the most sex - married people, who report 30% more between-the-sheets action than single folks. In fact, the economists calculate that a lasting marriage equates to happiness generated by getting an extra \$100,000 each year. Divorce, meanwhile, translates to a happiness depletion of \$66,000 annually.

Whether that hefty happiness income boost is the result of marital bliss or more sex is up for debate. But their "econometric" calculations confirm what psychologists have long known: People who consider themselves happy are usually richer in sexual activity.

"Many studies confirm that people who are depressed have less sex," says psychologist and sex therapist Robert Hatfield, PhD, of the University of Cincinnati and a spokesman for the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. "Conversely, if you're not depressed -- 'happy,' as some might say -- you're more likely to have more frequent sex."

Does sex lead to happiness, or are happy people just more likely to lead each other to the bedroom? That's still under investigation, but there is evidence that psyche and sex feed off each other.

Semen: An Antidepressant?

Take that study in the May 2001 issue of the *Journal of Sex Research*, in which Georgia State University researchers found that people who are involuntarily celibate are frequently afflicted with non-happy feelings -- anger, frustration, self-doubt, and even depression. They conclude it's the result of "missed opportunities" of living without sex.

But according to another researcher, it may not be the sex per se, but lack of semen exposure.

"Semen appears to act as an antidepressant in women," psychologist Gordon Gallup, PhD, tells Web MD. "In our studies, women who have unprotected sex have lower levels of depression, as measured on the gold standard evaluation tool, than those who have the same amount of sex with a condom.

"In fact, we found no difference in depression scores between women having heterosexual sex with condoms, lesbian sex, or not having sex at all," adds Gallup, of the State University of New York in Albany.

And in a follow-up study to that finding, reported two years ago in *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, women having sex without condoms were more likely to display depressive signs once they stopped having sex than those on a sexual hiatus whose previous partners used condoms.

"Women [who have sex] without condoms are also more likely to fall victim to the rebound effect following the break-up of their relationship," he tells Web MD. "This suggests that there is a withdrawal effect that influences depressiveness when semen exposure stops."

Whether sex is protected or not, orgasm does trigger a release of endorphins, those "feel-good" brain chemicals that elevate mood and dull pain. "But I'm not sure that's the sole explanation, because the effects of endorphins wear off in about an hour," says Hatfield, whose money is betting on the feel-good benefits that result from touch -- especially with a spouse or other trusted lover.

"We know that people who touch and are receptive to touch are more likely to be happy and have fewer problems with depression and anxiety," he tells Web MD. "Especially in a committed relationship or marriage, sex provides more opportunity

for touch. I think orgasm is Mother Nature's icing on the cake, a reason to make you want to go back for more the next time."

SOURCES: Blachflower, D. "Money, Sex and Happiness, An Empirical Study," May 2000. Gallup G, *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, June 2002; vol 31: pp 289-293. Donnelly, D., *Journal of Sex Research*, May 2001. David G. Blachflower, PhD, Bruce V. Raunder professor of economics, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. Robert Hatfield, PhD, assistant professor of psychology, University of Cincinnati; and certified sex therapist; spokesman, Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. Gordon Gallup, PhD, professor of psychology, State University of New York at Albany.