Sexuality is a central, innate characteristic of each person from birth. Its key component is our gender: how we ourselves experience our gender and how we are perceived at first as girls and boys, and later as women and men. An integral part of sexuality is also a rapidly emerging interest in one’s own body and the different body of the other sex.

Out of the interest in one’s own body and its essential difference compared with the other sex is born the interest in getting close to the other person and experience the pleasurable feelings that arise from the difference. Sexual interest produces the motivation, which intimately approaches the world of desire. We want, wish and yearn to experience sexual intimacy and pleasure.

So far, academic research has only rarely looked into sexual desire at a theoretical level. Nevertheless, sexual desire represents a kind of ideal case study through which to examine the synergy and interaction of biological and socio-cultural factors that are associated with sexuality.

**Sexual desire and passion**

The basic element of sexual motivation is sexual desire. Sexual desire means sexual motivation, which is usually manifested as desiring sexual activity and pleasure. In other words, we yearn for sex. Greater sexual desire results in more frequent and intense attempts to achieve longed-for sexual satisfaction. People may yearn for sex for its own sake or may use it as a medium to attain some other aim.

Sexual desire is conscious yearning for pleasure-producing sexual activity with the object of one’s desire. Sexual desire can lead to rapid or gradual psychic arousal, subsequent physiological changes (rapid breathing and pulse, getting wet, erection), approaching the object of desire, physical contact that yields pleasure, and possibly resulting in sexual release. Sexual desire is also a key motive in forming short-term and long-term couple relationships.
Alongside the feeling of desire emerge sexual images, thoughts, dreams and fantasies. The aesthetic of the human body also produces sexual desire. Sexual motivation and desire drive us to seek, receive and evaluate various sexual stimuli. Desire regulates sexual arousal and enables sexual contact and interaction.

Apart from desire, another relevant concept here is sexual capacity, which refers to the maximum amount of sex of which a particular person is capable. A person with a greater capacity for sex is better positioned to have more sex, more frequently and with a greater number of sexual partners, and for a longer time. Desire and capacity are discreet concepts of sexuality.

Desire is close to the concept of lust, and when it manifests powerfully, it approaches the concept of passion. Passion is strongly felt desire that takes over one’s thoughts and feelings. Passion is an irresistible temptation to throw oneself fully into enchanting, wild, and intoxicating experiences which may seem like they alone finally make life feel worth living. Passion may be in response to a metaphysical hunger to experience more. For some, passion instead looms as a frightening, primitive, subconscious and dangerous force that may seem to wrest control from the rational self.

An inevitable feature of passion is being aroused to the point of disorientation. In an aroused state, a person’s psychological powers set fire under his or her biological potential. The more we think of the partner as the fulfillment of our sexual dreams, the more powerfully our passion and arousal swell within us. In other words, passion blossoms between the ears.

Passion emerges with the most absolute certainty when we feel that we have encountered our ideal partner. This partner represents an archetype or a veritable icon of the sexual ideal that a given person has formed out of the various clues obtained from his or her social environment. Such generalized ideals are manipulated effectively in the world of commercial sex. Thus are created the models for ‘sexy woman’ or ‘hot guy’ in our culture at large.

In extreme cases people strive to realize their lust and passion regardless of the objections of the object of their desire. Passion can become an obsession that fills one’s mind and leaves no room for hearing out the feelings or desires of the other person. In choosing and approaching the object of passion and in responding to the feeling of lust, people frequently overlook their own previous resolutions and principles, social or practical barriers that stand in the way of acting out their feelings, as well as the relationship’s potentially negative effects. A single momentous instance may surpass all of an individual’s later life in its entirety. Feelings like this may also translate into sexual dependency or hypersexuality. In its most potent manifestation, the urge to act out desire may turn into an oppressive obsession.

Although people generally avoid risk taking, one could claim that the ultimate fascination and desire in the deepest recesses of people’s life and dreams is the
longing for passion, the dream of an encounter that changes one’s life in a single strike. People who have not experienced such rollicking emotion may wonder if there is something wrong with them. Are they too fearful and cautious to live fully and deeply, occasionally even at their full potential? The fear of passion is indeed a central aspect of our culture.

The fear of passion resides already in Greek philosophy and the teachings of Christianity. Plato pondered how much passion life should contain. He concluded that passion had no place in life, that it was insincere, painful and destructive. To attain happiness, people should reject passion. This view of Plato’s has since had a significant impact on the status of passion in the history of ethics.

In more recent times, the denigration of the meaning of passion, or a downright fear of passion, have stemmed largely from the Christian ideology of love. This ideology separates the spirit from the body, and love from sexuality. Spiritual love, based on rationality, has been elevated to an ideal. This type of romantic love is not (cannot be) blurred by sexual lust. In this conception of love, the body as well as sexuality are secondary.

Critics of passion have claimed that passion is not love, because it is not subject to our will. Passion has also been branded as unserious, with no genuine intention to commit. It has been thought that the longing for passion rips people apart to a desperate degree. Some have feared that passion saps love dry and prevents people from encountering the emotions of others. They feel that people should proceed more distantly in relationships, and that people who refrain from sinking fully into the throes of passion in the early stages of a relationship will not see their relationship go stale at a later stage.

The relationship of spiritual and rational love to carnal passion is similar to that of eroticism to pornography. Eroticism almost exclusively emphasizes a spiritualized longing and desire, whereas pornography is focused on simplified physical fulfillment. As a matter of fact, eroticism constitutes what is conventional and in accordance with prevailing morals and customs. It is not necessarily even concerned with seeking physical fulfillment. Pornography, on the other hand, is concerned with immediate physical satisfaction. Many aver such frank physicality.

Some people have adopted an ideologically reasoned positive stance toward passion. For such people, life without adventure and risk represents a disgusting idyll of the petit-bourgeois; certainty and safety turn sexuality and eroticism boring. A passionate relationship shakes up a slew of other values as well and changes all of life. From this perspective, passion can be a revolutionary social force.

Archetypes of passion are particularly abundant in cinema. In movies, passion is often a vehicle to the fulfillment of dreams. Tales of passion are narratives of dependency, desire for lust, and feeding that lust over and over again. Movies also offer us a set
of instructions for expressing sexual feelings and interest, the art of seduction, and ways of touching another person. Films shape our fantasies. Private passion and desire become collectively shared, collectively owned.

The scripts in passion-films usually repeat the same pattern: giving in to the throes of passion becomes increasingly dangerous and leads to the death of at least one partner. Passion releases fierce and surprising forces and emotions, with unforeseen consequences. It is no wonder then if we connect passion with danger and death in our imaginations.

Passion tales often involve a depiction of the road from success to perdition. Frequently, the stage is set by raising the female lead on a high pedestal. Later, she gives in to an animalistic passion and greed. She then inevitably faces a descent into ruin, perhaps death in a gutter, or else undergoes an eleventh-hour rescue through religious repentance.

In men, an insane passion or profound desire toward a loved one signifies weakness and thus also leads to a man’s destruction. We learn that being guided by emotions rather than rational thinking takes us to fatal waters. It is safest to think rationally and control our passions.

Movies serve up dangerous objects of passion that simultaneously shape our stereotypical conceptions of certain human types. Particularly dark, openly sexual women are representatives of peril and should therefore be avoided. At most, men may be permitted to have an adventure with this type of woman, as long they are careful not to take it too far. Blond women who don’t make us crazy with passion represent spousal safety. Such generalizations are examples of some of the recurrent codes in the cinema of our Western culture.

Women too should avoid passionate relationships with men, because no-one is ever safe from the consequences of passion. Men who are ravaged by passion are Peeping Toms and stalkers and can make life a living hell. On the other hand, women who allow themselves to give in to a passionate relationship may suffer repeatedly because of men’s unfaithfulness. And a woman who gives free reign to her own passion risks her very life. Who has the courage, then, to take a risk and truly give in to this kind of desire? Or is it the risk that makes passion so irresistible?

The origin of sexual desire

The examination of sexual desire has yielded a continuous polemic of its essential origin and its many meanings for human beings. The most popular subject of study has been the extent to which sexual desire is a product of biological or evolutionary development and to what extent desire is created as learned cultural values and behaviour patterns. According to the theory of evolution, sexual desire ensures the continuation of the species, and natural selection determines that men are more likely
than women to desire short-term sexual relationships. In the social construction theory of knowledge, male and female desire are deemed equal, and whatever differences there are in male and female desire are a product of learning and culture.

Evolutionists view sexual desire and the search for desire as an internal motivation. According this view, even non-reproductive sexual behaviour represents surrendering to evolution, with the ultimate aim of increasing the possibility of fertilization.

Pondering the origin of desire is not only the purview of academic theoreticians, but it has important practical consequences all the way from education and treatment to legislation. The more biological desire is seen as, the greater the number of arguments on behalf of acting it out as well as for the necessity of restricting it. Where desire is seen as learned behaviour or as cultural embodiment, it is seen as something that can be influenced, and the possibilities of acting out the desire are not considered as important as in the biologically oriented view.

Among explanations of sexual desire, some focus purely on genes and hormones and omit environmental factors, while others see only social and cultural factors and pay no heed to biology. Generally, the scientists in these different schools of thought have very little tolerance or respect for one another’s viewpoints.

Tolman and Dimanod introduce that, historically, sexuality has been depicted in various theories, studies and among regular people as an innate, unchanging and biologically determined drive. Philosophers and professionals have often analyzed the phenomenon of sexual desire specifically as an instinct or urge. The German physician Albert Moll divided sexual motivation into two parts: “detumescence”, which was the drive to release sexual tension, and “contrectation”, which was the instinct to approach, touch and kiss the sexually stimulating object. In other words, the instinct existed both in the absence of an object as well in relation to it.

Although sexual desire has been restricted, celebrated, sublimated and labelled in various ways in different cultures and eras, it has nevertheless usually been assumed to be based in biology rather than society and culture. Sexual desire has been linked particularly to the function of hormones, such as androgens.

Hormones have been shown to be linked to sexual desire in many ways, also in animal studies. Spontaneous, strong sexual desire has been associated with hormone levels present in the sexual glands. Androgen doses have been shown to increase sexual desire among both women and men. Among women, variations in estrogen levels have been proven to be associated with a concomitant fluctuation in sexual desire. The differing sexual motivations between men and women have been explained by way of their different testosterone levels.

Androgen levels in women are substantially lower than in men. Women’s high level of estrogen plays a role only on several days during each menstrual cycle, around
ovulation. Men’s androgen levels are high on a steady basis. Compared with animal studies, men’s levels have even represented maximum values in terms of sexual motivation. Women reach these levels only during ovulation.

No link from hormonal levels has been established to the arousal that results from erotic stimulation. The assumption has been that this type of arousal is more significant in shaping the sexuality of women than of men.

Sigmund Freud considered pleasure to be the origin of human life; it was the attempts to control pleasure both in private life and in society at large that gave rise to neuroses. Freud came up with a “biological” meta-theory in which biological instincts control pleasure. These instincts are focused on the body’s vital pleasure-producing erogenous zones. According to Freud, the sexual instinct was the most important biological instinct. It focused on the genitals and produced the desire for pleasure.

According to Freud, pleasure relied on three cognitive meta-processes: the id (instincts), the ego and the super-ego. Which one won – whether it was the pleasure-seeking id or the reasoning ego depended on the strength of the inhibiting efforts of the moral super-ego, applied especially to the impulses for desire originating from the id.

Freud’s importance in sexual desire was and is substantial, because the opportunity to act out on desire, in this school of thought, has been interpreted as a significant pre-condition for health. Yet this way of thinking has imprisoned people by their instincts, and has overlooked highly different growth and cultural environments. This assigns sexual desire with different individual and communal forms and meanings.

Following a disagreement with Freud, Wilhelm Reich took the necessity of acting out sexual desire even farther than Freud. In his view, sex served a deep, biological need to ease tension. Sexual arousal produced biological orgone energy, which was released through orgasms. Sexual repression that resulted from the adoption of norms regulating sexual behaviour resulted in neurotic behaviour, anxiety, and violence.

These and other biology-oriented ideas have produced claims and perusals of the absolute necessity of sexual release and pleasure, and of whether men have a greater need for sexual release than women. “Emptying the sack” has sometimes been considered a necessity and even assigned minimum requirements in terms of frequency. This idea has also spurred a dispute as to whether men have greater sexual needs than women.

In bio-cultural views of sexuality, sexual desire is fundamentally the product of evolution. It is channelled, regulated and constrained through memories, situational factors and cultural understandings. These border conditions offer hints and point out, for example, who is a suitable partner and of whom we should beware. According to this view, even if sexual desire has a biological origin, its expression is a soundly social construction.
The social construction theory of knowledge is in a way a counterpoint to the definition of sexual desire that is biologically determined. The theory explains the differences in men’s and women’s sexual desire as a consequence of different cultural and psychosocial processes that have socialized men and women to experience sexual feelings and events that are considered appropriate for men or women. The social construction theory of knowledge also highlights the political nature of such conceptions by making reference to various social forces that determine and maintain different definitions of sexuality in different cultures and times.

Analyses of educational materials used in schools have shown that schools have mainly discussed the sexual desire of men, not women. By disseminating the message that women’s sexual desire is different and less significant than men’s culture is producing a self-fulfilling prophecy. We will find out in the following whether research supports this assumption.

**Manifestations of sexual desire**

Sexual behaviour and sexual fantasies are shaped and transmitted through powerful cognitive processes. Sexual desire, on the other hand, is often (not always) more spontaneous, less conscious and associated with unconscious biological factors (particularly hormone levels). Sexual desire is therefore an especially useful study subject in attempting to discover how people’s internalized socio-cultural norms regarding sexual feelings and experiences interact with the body’s unconscious biological processes.

Sex researchers have been more likely to focus on measuring the frequency of sexual thoughts and acts in various cohorts, rather than on the meaning and subjective quality of sexual desire for people living in different social contexts and life situations. This represents an important challenge to the field of sex research.

David Buss has developed a sexual strategy theory applied from the theory of evolution. He proposes that desire is the basis for sexuality and mating. In couples, problems and violations of desire and fulfilment are among the primary reasons for incompatibility and conflict. When a relationship is a successful conduit for desire, on the other hand, a solid foundation for maintaining the relationship is formed and harmony between the partners is established.

In the sexual strategies theory, desire and fulfilment are closely related to various strategies for highlighting one’s own attractiveness, retaining one’s partner, and putting down competitors. These strategies are implemented in slightly different forms in both short- and long-term relationships. Sometimes the strategies are used to get rid of a partner. The sexual strategies theory also addresses conflicts between the sexes, reasons for the dissolution of relationships, and harmony between the partners.
If a man and a woman have similar sexual desires, the couple is able to focus negotiations concerning their interaction for other purposes. The partner who wants more sex is in a weaker position in the relationship, more dependent on the other partner and on the pleasure to be obtained through that partner.

Roy Baumeister has presented different manifestations of sexual desire in earlier studies. Differences in sexual motivation are manifested in how much sex a particular individual wants, the type of sex and partner, and the frequency of fantasies, masturbation, partners and sexual thoughts, as well as the willingness to make sacrifices in other areas of life in order to obtain sex, and other similar considerations.

**Measures of sexual desire:**

- Thoughts, fantasies and spontaneous arousal
- Desired frequency of sex
- Desired number of sexual partners
- Masturbation
- Continuous willingness to engage in sex
- Emergence of sexual desire in youth
- Seeking out experiences and initiating them
- Desiring a variety of experiences
- Investing resources for sex
- Attitudes that are favourable to sex
- Infrequent lack of sexual desire
- Self-assessed degree of desire

Earlier studies have shown that men think about sex more often than women, experience desire and spontaneous arousal more often, have more masturbation-related sexual fantasies, and more frequent and variable fantasies. Men have also been shown to desire greater frequency of intercourse in relationships, compared with women. Men have shown greater desire for a greater number of sexual partners, have also had a greater number of partners, and a greater number of parallel relationships. Men were also more likely to report having sex with a partner they just met for the first time.

Studies also show that men masturbate more frequently, exhibit a more continuous level of sexual desire even after a break-up (there is greater variation among women), and experienced the onset of sexual desire at a younger age than girls. Men also initiate sex more frequently, whereas women are more likely than men to reject sexual advances. Men show more interest in a variety of sexual experiences, including certain paraphilias (unusual objects of sexual interest).

Men use more money to purchase sexual products and aids. They also pay women for sex. They are more likely than women to risk a marriage for a parallel relation-
ship. These relationships have sometimes led even to political scandals and stepping down from a position.

Men exhibit more liberal attitudes about sexuality than women, particularly with regard to short-term relationships. The same applies to their attitudes toward infidelity, pornography, and prostitution. The only exception is in attitudes regarding homosexuality, toward which most men show no sexual interest. Women are more likely to fantasize about sex with another woman, whereas men view their own and their partner’s genital organs more positively than women.

Sexual autobiographies collected in Finland in the 1990s often describe sexual images or fantasies. Men were much more likely to describe them. Among women, the images depicted a rich eroticism that was not dependent on intercourse. Women were more likely to dream of having sex with another woman, of bondage, and of making love in a romantic, exotic environment.

Similar dreams among men had to do with fantasizing about making love with a random stranger (a passer-by) and with recalling previous sexual experiences that had been very good. The sexual imagery of men approximated everyday life somewhat more than that of women.

In the sexual autobiographies, middle-aged women often dreamed of bondage, making love with another woman, or rape fantasies. Young women dreamed of sex with another woman, making love in a romantic, exotic environment, bondage, impersonating a whore, and being the recipient of sexual attention. The influence of pornography was apparent in the images reported by young women.

Men in the older age group reminisced especially about good sexual experiences they had had earlier in life, imagined having intercourse with just about anyone, or imagined how a particular sexual encounter would take place. Middle-aged men talked about sex dreams and described visually-oriented sexual events. Young men as well dreamt of making love with just about anyone and of being the object of sexual attention. Both young men and women were aroused by the idea of being desirable and of being the recipient of candid sexual propositions.

How much desire?

Desire is an individual characteristic and varies depending on the current partner and life situation. Some people have stronger sexual inclinations than others already as children, whereas some only learn to desire truly following a unique and arousing sexual experience. For many, desire fluctuates significantly at different life stages. For example, a new partner may ignite dormant desire into full-blown flame. On the contrary, ageing or widowhood may diminish sexual desire in the mind of an individual, even to the point of insignificance.
Our sexual desire can be activated by something we think, see, smell, hear, or touch – by an external stimulus, such as meeting a person we find sexy. Desire may also awaken through reminiscing about pleasurable experiences, imagining something one has not yet experienced, or through fantasies. The object of desire may be another person or it may also be oneself (masturbation).

It has been shown that, in women more so than in men, sexual desire often derives from a particular situation. In women, sexual arousal is more influenced by being subjected to particular sexual stimulation, internalized sexual scripts, and adaptation to particular psychological and socio-cultural situations and contexts. Men have been shown to be more likely to experience desire regardless of such situations or barriers.

Throughout the FINSEX study, respondents have been asked for information and their own assessments about the frequency with which they crave sexual contact because of sexual desire, as well as about possible lack of desire in the respondent and her/his partner.

The measures of sexual desire included in the FINSEX study (by year) were:


c) Satisfaction with the frequency of sexual intercourse in the current relationship (1992, 1999, 2007)

d) If respondent could choose, preferred frequency of sexual intercourse (1971, 2007)

e) Frequency of sexual desire (2007)

Compared with Baumeister’s list of indicators of sexual desire, presented earlier, this study utilized respondents’ own assessments regarding sexual desire, preferred frequency of sex, and lack of sexual desire. The study also gathered data about the emergence of sexual desire in youth (sexual activity), attitudes that are conducive to having sex, sexual initiative-taking, and masturbation. We will look into the data in later chapters in connection with these latter topics.

In 2007, for the first time, Finns were asked to evaluate their own sexual desire in response to the following question: “How often do you experience sexual desire?” The framing and wording of the question were elaborated further: “This feeling (of desire) may entail a desire for sexual intercourse or other sexual activity, planning such activity, or frustration because of a lack of sex”. Respondents were able to describe how often they experienced sexual desire by choosing one of eight responses, ranging from “More than once a day” to “Never”.

The most typical response among both men and women was that they experienced sexual desire several times a week. In terms of frequency, this amounted to 14 times
per month. On average, men experienced sexual desire much more frequently than women, on average 21 times per month (medium value 12), whereas women experienced it on average 9 times per month (medium value 4). Young people, compared with older people, were much more likely to feel desire – men, on average, every day, and women, a few times a week. Nearly one in three young men, but only five percent of young women reported feeling sexual desire more than once a day.

![Figure 1. Feels sexual desire at least a few times a week](image)

Men in the older age group experienced sexual desire on average twice a week and older women slightly less than once a week. Nearly half of the women in this age group and less than one-tenth of men experienced sexual desire less frequently than once a month. For these people, sexual desire was an unimportant aspect of life, at least for the time being. They did not think about sex much, often because they had no regular partner.

Compared with young and middle-aged women, men in the same age groups experienced sexual desire twice as frequently. For men in the older age group, sexual desire was four times as frequent as for women. These gender differences in sexual desire are supported by earlier international research.

Among women, sexual desire was more frequently associated with whether they had a spouse or regular partner. For men, the frequency of sexual desire remained mostly the same regardless of marriage, cohabitation, living apart from a partner, or living alone (in the oldest age group, too few respondents were cohabiting or living apart to draw any conclusions). “Living apart”, here, refers to a regular relationship in which partners live in separate households (living-apart-together, or LAT, relationships).
Women living apart from a partner were more likely to experience sexual desire than other women. Single women were least likely to experience sexual desire. They were often missing an object of desire, without which they rarely felt sexual desire.

These averages describe a nearly three-fold difference (five-fold in the older age group) in the sexual desire felt by single men versus single women. It must therefore be challenging to match the sexual desires of available men and women who are interested in one another. Often, the prince really has to awaken the sleeping princess.

An interesting observation in terms of male and female sexual desire is that the level of desire reported by men is compatible with the level of desire in women approximately 20 years younger, and vice versa. This may explain relationships where an older man has found a much younger spouse. If sex and desire are important in this type of couple formation, the choice may not only be appealing on the basis of feelings, but also on the basis of rational reasoning.

In this way, a young woman may get herself a partner whose sexual desire does not significantly exceed her own. Based on these averages, it would be much more difficult for an ageing woman to find a young man whose sexual desires are well suited to her own.

Interestingly, male and female respondents showed much less deviation when responding to a question about preferred frequency of sexual intercourse if they were able to choose the frequency. In this case too, men showed a preference for greater frequency, on average a couple of times a week, whereas women reported desiring sex on average slightly more than once a week.

Young women and young and middle-aged men reported preferring sex at least a couple of times every week. Middle-aged women and older men would have preferred to have sex slightly more frequently than once a week. Older women would have been satisfied with two or three times per month. In this comparison, too, men’s preferred frequency of sexual intercourse coincided with the desires of women approximately 20 years their junior.

Half of all women and men desired sex at a frequency that coincided with the number of times per month that they reported feeling sexual desire. For them, sexual desire was compatible with their desire for intercourse. Women (one in four) were more likely than men (one in ten) to report wanting a greater frequency of sexual intercourse than their reported frequency of sexual desire. Half of the women who felt no sexual desire nevertheless wanted sexual intercourse. Perhaps they were taking the wishes of a partner into consideration, and not acting out their own sexual desire when engaging in intercourse. Nearly half of men, but only one-fifth of women, reported wanting sex less frequently than their reported frequency of sexual desire.
Compared with women, sexual desire in men was more likely to represent more variant sexual desire than mere desire for intercourse. This may have resulted from men’s experience of their own relationship (or lack thereof), where acting out their actual sexual desire through intercourse was not very realistic. As a result of the average differences in male and female desire, men were more likely to have been disappointed in fulfilling their desire for intercourse. Women were more likely to experience sexual intercourse when they desired it.

This experience gap between the sexes was also visible in responses to a question about whether or not respondents were satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in their current relationship. Approximately 60 percent of middle-aged women were satisfied with the frequency of sex in their relationship, but only a third of men of the same age felt similarly. Two-thirds of men and one-third of women would have liked more frequent intercourse. In other words, middle-aged women had been much more successful than men in satisfying their need for sexual intercourse.

Among the younger generation, women’s desire for sexual intercourse was realized more successfully than men’s. Differences between women and men of this generation were, however, significantly smaller. A desire for more frequent intercourse was reported by 46 percent of women and 56 percent of men. Nearly half of older men but only a quarter of older women would have wanted more intercourse. It was only among young adults that men’s and women’s desires in terms of frequency of intercourse matched one another relatively well.

Men rarely wanted less sexual intercourse than they were having. Conversely, women who would have wanted a lesser frequency of intercourse made up 15 percent of
older women, 5 percent of middle-aged women, and 4 percent of young women. It seems that they had often engaged in intercourse only to satisfy a partner.

Between the early 1990s and 2007, a significant change took place in the proportion of women who longed for more sexual intercourse – it doubled in all three age groups. The change was more significant from 1992 to 1999, but the trend continued through 2007. The proportion of men reporting a desire for more sex increased as well, but only by about ten percentage points. Nevertheless, the proportion of middle-aged and older men who would have wanted more intercourse was nearly two-fold compared with women in the same age groups.

The increase in women who wanted more sexual intercourse can be an indication of a number of things. It could mean an increase in female desire. We will return to this topic in the next section by analyzing the changes that have taken place in the lack of sexual desire among women. It looks like the explanation is not in the increase of sexual desire among women. Another possibility is a lower intercourse frequency, which may precipitate longing for a return to a situation that better satisfied own desires. I will revisit this theme in greater detail in the “15 minutes of happiness” chapter. We will see that this may contain the answer for why women are now more often reporting that they would like to have more sex in their relationship.
A third possibility is that the gatekeeper’s role in the relationship has shifted from women to men more than was previously the case. Thus, it could be more difficult than before for women to realize their sexual desires. This may be true of individual couples, but the growing proportion of men who want more intercourse indicates instead that no major changes have taken place in sexual decision-making in couples. A fourth option is that the external circumstances beyond the relationship have changed, and as a result, people have had less shared time and less energy left over for love-making.

Slightly more than half of married men and one-third of married women reported a desire for more intercourse. Among cohabiting couples, approximately half of both women and men would have preferred to have sex more often. People in living-apart-together relationships were the most satisfied with the frequency of intercourse. Of them, approximately 40 percent of both men and women would have wanted more intercourse. In practical terms, the desire gap between men and women, when viewed through frequency of sexual intercourse, focused on marriage.

The desire for intercourse between married women and men differed to a substantial extent only in relationships that had lasted more than ten years. In long-term relationships, men were much more likely than women to desire sexual intercourse more frequently. On the other hand, the proportion of men wanting more frequent intercourse was highest in relationships that had lasted slightly more or less than ten years, and highest among women in relationships that had lasted slightly less than ten years. To the extent that sexual dissatisfaction is an important factor in explaining marital infidelity, this stage of marriage is a particularly critical period.

**Lack of sexual desire is on the rise**

The reverse side of sexual desire is the lack of desire, or libido loss. It is the most common sexual problem requiring counselling, treatment and therapy, to which too little public and private support and assistance has been available thus far in Finland. In relationships, the constant lack of sexual desire on the part of one partner unavoidably complicates the couple’s communication and erodes the satisfaction that they feel with the relationship. Especially in new relationships, the perhaps unexpected lack of sexual desire in one’s partner may easily lead to separation.

In 1992, 1999 and 2007, the FINSEX survey included a question asking respondents whether they had had a problem with lack of sexual desire in themselves or in a partner within the last year. Lack of desire was defined here as a problem, if a respondent reported that the issue arose at least fairly frequently, either in the case of the respondent him- or herself or in the partner. The introduction to the question specifically addressed the incidence of various sexual problems.
Lack of own sexual desire was significantly more common among women than men. In 2007, 41 percent of women and 12 percent of men had experienced lack of sexual desire at least fairly frequently. The reported prevalence of lack of desire increased among men and women between 1992 and 2007, but only among women did the trend continue also from 1999 until 2007. As a result, the desire gap between women and men has grown even more.

In a number of international studies, the proportion of people who have no interest in intercourse has fluctuated between 10 and 15 percent. In the present study as well, 14 percent of women reported experiencing lack of sexual desire very frequently.

Lack of desire was more common among older than younger people. In 2007, half of the women in the older age group and one-third of young and middle-aged women had been affected by fairly frequent lack of desire. Among men, the respective proportions were one-fifth and one-tenth. The effect of ageing on lack of desire was much less significant for men.

Libido loss becomes a social issue and is often a problem for anyone who has to contend with it in a regular relationship. In 2007, 46 percent of married women but only 13 percent of married men had found their own lack of sexual desire a fairly frequent problem. Those in cohabiting and living-apart relationships were experiencing lack of desire somewhat less. In all of the above relationship types, though, from 1992 to 1999 and further through 2007, the proportion of women experiencing libido loss was growing.
In relative terms, the largest increase in problems of lack of desire occurred in cohabiting relationships. Previously, cohabiting couples and living-apart relationships had featured the same extent of loss of desire, but recently cohabiting relationships have begun to resemble marriages in terms of lack of sexual desire.

Some of the men and women who experienced sexual desire at least several times a week also reported experiencing lack of desire. For example, eight percent of men and women who experienced sexual desire once a day had regardless also experienced fairly frequent lack of desire and considered it to be a problem. Nevertheless, actual problems with lack of desire focused on the men and women who experienced sexual desire less than once a week. In this group, slightly less than half of men and more than half of women reported a frequent problem with lack of sexual desire.

The responses concerning a partner’s lack of sexual desire coincided well with respondents’ reports regarding their own lack of desire, in the sense that men were more likely to report lack of desire in a female partner than women were to report lack of desire in a male partner. One difference was that women reported lack of sexual desire in their partner in exactly the same degree as men reported experiencing lack of their desire. In 2007, lack of sexual desire in the partner was a frequent problem for 13 percent of women and 25 percent of men. Although it occurred in greater proportion among partners in the older generation (16 percent of women and 29 percent of men), differences between age groups were not substantial.

Men reported a partner’s lack of sexual desire significantly less frequently than women themselves reported feeling lack of desire. It seems quite likely that men were
not always fully aware of the lack of desire on the part of their partners, who had been able to conceal it from them. In this way, women were protecting their own sexual image in the eyes of a male partner and had avoided hurting his feelings with repeated complaints about not feeling desirous.

For women, a male partner’s lack of sexual desire is easier to observe as a lack of erection (even though this is different than lack of desire), but for men, identifying lack of desire in a woman by how lubricated she is may be more difficult (especially when using lubricants). When a woman had not shared her lack of desire with a man, he had not always been cognizant of it. This serves as a good example of how partners do not always express or share sexual issues with one other, even within couples.

Married respondents were somewhat more likely to report lack of desire in their partner, compared with cohabiting and living-apart couples. In 2007, the figures for married women were 14 percent and for men 30 percent. Lack of partner’s desire remained near 1999 levels, but in 2007, lack of desire was reported much more widely than in 1992.

In 2007, of respondents who were in couples, five percent were in a relationship where mutual, frequent lack of desire was present. Conversely, one in five relationships had never experienced lack of desire in either partner, not even temporarily. Others had experienced it on occasion.

In our society, sexual desire has become a rather essential component of a satisfying relationship. Lack of sexual desire in one’s partner has ended many relationships or led the partner with more sexual desire to seek compensation for the perceived shortcomings or deficiencies in temporary or long-term parallel relationships.

Lack of sexual desire is one of the central areas in the treatment of sexual dysfunction. Pharmaceutical companies compete to develop various products to enhance sexual desire. Desire is being molded into a commercially regulated subject. Perhaps the end result is that it will be taken more seriously as a social issue. The greater the economic interests associated with desire, the more seriously the thematics of desire will be viewed in society. This has already happened in the case of male erectile dysfunction with drugs for its treatment flooding the market.

It is surprisingly common for people to experience lack of sexual desire even in new relationships. This is not, therefore, only about the boredom that sets in in a longer relationship. One in ten men and women noted recurrent lack of desire in their partner in relationships that had lasted two years or less. In addition, one in four women in short relationships reported experiencing recurrent lack of desire.

Among men in long-term relationships lack of sexual desire has not changed much in contrast with short-term relationships, as reported by both men and women. Approximately 15 percent of male and female respondents in relationships that had
lasted more than three years reported this problem in men. The rate did not deviate significantly even in relationships that had lasted more than 40 years.

Female lack of desire was significantly more common in relationships of more than five years. Men reported it in one-third of their female partners and women themselves reported it at a rate of about 45 percent. According to the responses of women themselves, more than half had trouble with sexual desire in relationships of more than twenty years. Contrary to popular belief, the duration of the relationship did not significantly affect problems with lack of desire, regardless of gender.

**Lack of desire and the impact on relationships**

Loss of sexual desire, whether in oneself or a partner, was strongly associated with the feelings respondents had about their relationships. Loss of desire had no impact on whether one shared a feeling of love with the partner, but it did affect assessments of relationship happiness. The proportion of men who considered their relationship very happy was substantially lower when a partner repeatedly experienced lack of desire (17%), compared with no reports of such problems (47%). Among women the respective figures were 24 and 40 percent. Only five percent of male and female respondents, however, considered their relationship unhappy even in the presence of problems with a partner’s sexual desire.

Libido loss in oneself or one’s partner was linked directly to how easy or difficult it was to discuss sexual matters with the partner. It is impossible to say to what extent lack of desire resulted from a problem in communication, or to what extent the lack of desire itself had made talking about sex more difficult. Where lack of desire was present, approximately 40 percent of both men and women had found it difficult or awkward to discuss sex with their partner. When a partner suffered from lack of sexual desire, the proportion of respondents who found it easy to talk about sex openly declined from 58 to 17 percent among men and from 44 to 17 percent among women – this in spite of the possibility that discussing the topic might have alleviated lack of desire.

There is a frequent assumption, or at least a wish, that the problem of loss of desire in a relationship can be compensated by other forms of closeness and touching. This study, unfortunately, reveals that in most cases the opposite is true. The proportion of respondents who felt there was too little intimacy and touching in their relationship was significantly higher among those relationships where one partner was experiencing lack of desire. In these cases, the share of respondents who found there to be too little physical closeness in their relationship increased by as much as from 9 to 61 percent among men and from 18 to 54 percent among women.

Problems with loss of sexual desire also reflected on how important sex was considered for relationship happiness. If a respondent’s partner had experienced lack of desire, 26 percent of men and 42 percent of women did not consider sex very
important for relationship happiness. Of other respondents, only 8 percent of men and 18 percent of women felt the same way.

Not all relationships were similarly affected by loss of desire in oneself or one’s partner. Among both genders, one-fifth of respondents found their relationship very happy in spite of recurrent lack of sexual desire. Even here, approximately 15 percent of women and men found it easy to talk about sexual matters. About 40 percent of those who experienced lack of desire themselves, or in their partner, reported having the right amount of closeness and touching.

**The link between loss of sexual desire and other life factors**

Earlier studies have identified a number of factors that are linked to a decrease in sexual desire: long marriage, dissatisfaction with one’s partner, large number of children, and financial worries. Pregnancy and childbirth have also sometimes been observed to have long-reaching consequences for a woman’s sexual interest.

Sexual desire has been shown to decrease in approximately one in two women during the third trimester of pregnancy. It becomes more difficult at the same time to have orgasms. Three months following birth, one in four or one in two (depending on the study) women have shown decreased sexual desire. Six months following birth, the proportion still ranged from one in five to one in three. Factors linked to decreased sexual desire post-partum include higher education, psychological symptoms experienced during pregnancy, and concern about the effects of pregnancy.

In this study, the factors behind lack of sexual desire included various problems in the respondent’s own life or in the relationship. Approximately one-third of desire problems among men were associated with some illness that interfered with sex. Among women, one in five suffering from lack of desire had had some detrimental illness.

People with psychological problems and pressures were most likely to experience lack of desire. According this study, this link only accounted for about 10–20 percentage points. Other factors associated with lack of desire included alcohol use, childlessness, or a small number of children.

Respondents who experienced lack of sexual desire were more likely than others to have problems with arousal: in men, problems with getting an erection and in women, getting wet. One-fifth of men who had suffered from repeated lack of desire also experienced problems getting an erection in sexual intercourse. One-third of women who experienced loss of desire also had repeated problems with vaginal lubrication. This issue only affected a few percent of the women who had no trouble with arousal.
The difference between people who repeatedly suffer from lack of sexual desire and others is essentially that the former were much less likely to have found sexual relations in general and their last love-making sessions pleasurable and enjoyable. Only one in four respondents who suffered from lack of desire found sexual intercourse very enjoyable, whereas the proportion among other men and women was two-thirds. Part of the missing pleasure was the outcome that among those who had problems with desire, one in two women and one in ten men did not have an orgasm the last time they had sex.

Among those who suffered from reduced desire, the quality of sexual intercourse had been eroded by more monotony in terms of intercourse methods, shorter intercourse, and, especially, dissatisfaction with the speed of sexual response in the partner. One-third of women with lack of desire frequently considered the partner’s performance too fast, and one-third of men found their partner too slow to climax. Sexual disappointments with a partner had clearly diminished people’s zeal for sex.

As is both understandable and expected, lack of sexual desire was related to how welcome a partner’s sexual initiatives were. Two-thirds of men but only one-third of women experiencing lack of desire reported generally acceptings their partner’s initiation to have sex. Among other women and men, nearly everyone reported doing so. If the problem was a partner’s lack of desire, sex that was initiated by that partner was received with even greater enthusiasm than among male and female respondents whose partners had no significant problems with libido loss.

People who suffered from lowered libido also assigned a lesser value to sexual desire, or experienced frequent frustration and anxiety over the issue. Two-thirds of women who suffered from loss of desire thought that wanting sex constantly was either perverted or sick. The proportion of other women who felt the same was 40 percent. Among men such thoughts or opinions were less frequently associated with lack of desire. One-third of men suffering from lack of desire considered a constant desire for sex perverted or sick, whereas the rate among other men was one in four.

Lack of sexual desire affected respondents’ sexual self-confidence and self-awareness. Only a minority of those suffering from lack of desire – 28 percent of men and 15 percent of women – considered themselves sexually active. Also, three-quarters of men and women did not consider themselves sexually very skillful. Only less than half of those not affected by lack of desire suspected the same. With regard to respondents’ views regarding their own sexual attractiveness, lack of desire had little impact.

Lack of sexual desire in one’s partner seemed to have little to do with respondents’ own sexual self-confidence. It seems that respondents did not connect lack of desire on the part of a partner to themselves, but viewed it as a characteristic in the partner specifically.

Sexual desire or lack thereof affects sexual life in many different ways, which we will discuss in later chapters of this book.