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TAKING HAPPINESS INTO YOUR OWN HANDS

Today, masturbation is recommended as a tool for practicing and expressing one's own sexuality and the ability to experience pleasure, and as part of therapy in treating various sexual problems. Masturbation is a key means to experience and express sexuality, alone, or together with a partner. In the latter case, especially if one is the object of such stimulation, the term is manual stimulation. Manual stimulation is an essential part of a wide array of lovemaking techniques.

A short history of masturbation

The Latin root of the word 'masturbation' is *manus stuprare*, meaning self-abuse or self-defilement by one's own hand. It has also been claimed that the word's origin lies in the more neutral *manus turbare*, which means to agitate or disturb by hand. All over the world, apart from the word masturbation, the activity has been given modern names such as self-loving, self-caressing, self-fondling, self-pleasuring, and self-stimulating. Particularly the area of medicine has used rather reluctant formulations when discussing masturbation, allowing the speaker to take a comfortable distance from an awkward topic, preferring to sound more scientific. Clearly, there is no harm in speaking about masturbation in plain terms.

Historically, masturbation signifies the most private, secret, and undervalued sexual practice of all. In spite of its private, hidden character, various communities have tried to control and label masturbation as something negative. The source of the plethora of prejudice directed at masturbation is, again, the theory or teaching that sperm is to be conserved. "Wasting" the seed for purposes other than reproductive activity has been said to result in weakness and illness. The solution offered has been to save the seed.

The Western tradition has examples of real panic with regard to masturbation. One of the oldest written documents revealing such alarm comes from Jean Gerson, who lived in the 14th century and portrayed masturbation as a disgusting and terrible sin. He recommended recipes for resisting it, including cold baths, whipping, abstaining from alcohol, prayer, and good company. In dormitories, the lights had to be left on all night, one's hands had to be kept outside the covers, and boys were asked to report on those who had behaved "badly".

Masturbation has been the ideal target for the self-control taught within Christianity and Judaism as part of the regulation of everyday life. Male sexual purity was considered a basic social virtue. The idea was in “civilizing the beast” within. Through sexual purity, states could ensure that it had a sufficient supply of healthy men to serve in their mass armies. It was said that pleasure was really Satan in disguise, trying to tempt people. Because sex was the most seductive activity, it was also deemed the most dangerous. And because it (including masturbation) was immoral, it followed that it had to be unhealthy.

Weapons to combat masturbation included religious and medical argumentation. In the 18th century it was said that masturbation caused mental illness, which was a prelude to the eternal punishment that would ensue. In texts published by Simon André Tissot in 1758, masturbation was thoroughly medicalized. Tissot set particular focus on the effects of masturbation on the neurological system. He claimed that masturbation resulted in excessive blood flow to the brain, which could cause impotence or insanity.

In the 19th century, John Harvey Kellogg’s “treatment” for chronic masturbation was to insert a silver thread into the foreskin, causing sufficient pain to prevent masturbation, or in the case of women, to burn the clitoris with carbolic acid. All means were allowed in the war against masturbation. Originally, even male circumcision was first initiated in hopes that it would prevent people from masturbating. The original justification has been forgotten, and new justifications have emerged in support of the now-established custom of circumcision.

It used to be said that women who engaged in masturbation would develop an unnaturally large, penis-like clitoris, or that they would lose their attractiveness. According to the neurosis hypothesis of masturbation, it was claimed that excessive masturbation caused the draining of sexual energy, further leading to weak nerves and neurosis. In addition, the damages caused by masturbation were said to render the masturbator incapable of fulfilling the requirements of marriage sexually and of having children. These fabricated dangers were meant to curb masturbation through fear and guilt. All in all, the guilt that was associated with masturbation also formed a central aspect of the overall dread that people felt toward sexual relationships.

Havelock Ellis’ “Studies in the Psychology of Sex” (1899) was the first work to attempt to abolish some of the prejudices related to masturbation. According to Ellis, only perpetual, constant masturbation could be harmful. In the United States, enlightened medical professionals launched a full-fledged offensive in the 1920s and 1930s against the myth that masturbation caused insanity. It took an entire generation until the public at large internalized this knowledge.

In the West, the myths associated with masturbation were finally challenged and questioned thoroughly in connection with the 1960s sexual revolution. New sources of information became available, and sexual matters and the values attached to them

underwent a process of re-evaluation. Sexual research evolved. Masturbation was not only acceptable, but recommended as an important exercise as part of sexual therapy. Instead of viewing it as a dangerous sin, masturbation was established as a virtue that could help people promote their own wellbeing and hone their sexual skills. The assumption has been that the new trend initially affected the masturbation habits of more highly educated people, who had access to the new information.

New knowledge regarding masturbation spread particularly slowly in the area of the former Soviet Union. As late as the 1990s, there were influential Russian authorities who still viewed masturbation as psychologically damaging and conducive to illness and mortality. Similar warnings were also still heard in the 1990s in Estonian medical schools. It can be assumed that views like these have continued to affect the masturbation habits of even the younger generation.

Unfounded fears attached to masturbation

The belief that masturbation (which has been called by many different names over time, and still is) was dangerous persisted even in the Finnish medical establishment through the 1950s, when health education textbooks still contained serious warnings about its risks. Moral education warned of masturbation. The warnings endured, and they still do among the people, in a way that resembles urban legends. There are still many people who needlessly worry about whether masturbation is harmful or not.

Sexual autobiographies collected from average people show that fears regarding the negative effects of masturbation have been common in Finland, Estonia, and St. Petersburg. Many writers were frightened of harmful effects, which they had read about in various publications, or heard about from other people. The fear of going crazy and the guilt induced by masturbation were quite common especially before the 1970s. Many people described their attempts to stop masturbating, usually without success.

In the last three surveys respondents have been asked to respond to the following statement: "Masturbation is not harmful to health." The responses of different generations indicate that masturbation-related fears are slowly dissipating. In 2007, approximately 90 percent of young and middle-aged men and women knew or presumed that masturbation was not harmful to health. Among the oldest generation, 80 percent of men and 70 percent of women felt the same. Of the youngest generation, approximately four-fifths strongly agreed with the statement. Nevertheless, 2–5 percent of respondents of various ages continued to believe in masturbation's negative effects on health.

The generation who came of age following World War II had been much more insecure about the effects of masturbation. Fifteen years ago, only slightly more than half of men and women in that age group believed masturbation was not harmful. At the time, there was a lot of uncertainty. As time has passed, conceptions among

the older generation have gradually evolved so that fewer now view masturbation with such distrust. At the same time, by an increase of approximately ten percentage points, the younger and middle-aged generations have also shown growing faith in the harmlessness of masturbation.

Orgasms in masturbation

With greater awareness of the safety of masturbation, the proportion of people who have also experienced orgasms over and beyond intercourse, or exclusively through masturbation, has grown. Among young and middle-aged men, only a few percent had not experienced orgasm through masturbation by 2007. Close to 90 percent of men in the oldest age group had experienced orgasms through masturbation. Of young and middle-aged women, more than 80 percent had experienced orgasms through masturbation, but only less than 60 percent of women in the older age group had.

This question was presented to respondents only in 1999 and 2007. In the eight intervening years the proportion of those who had experienced orgasms from masturbating increased in all age groups. This means that many had experimented with it for the first time only in later adulthood. Among older women, for example, the proportion of those who had experienced an orgasm through masturbation increased from 44 to 59 percent, and among men in the same age group, from 74 to 88 percent. Part of this change can be attributed to the fact that younger women and men who had more experience with masturbation now became part of this generation. In spite of bigger numbers, however, women's orgasms from masturbation were still clearly lagging behind men's masturbation activity.

The age when respondents first experienced an orgasm through masturbation varied widely for both women and men. Many had had their first masturbation-orgasm before school age. Thirteen percent of boys and 9 percent of girls had experienced their first orgasm by age ten. More than half of boys and nearly a third of girls had their first masturbatory orgasm before upper-primary school, before the age of 13. When masturbation is first mentioned in school health education classes (if it is mentioned at all), most young people already have personal experience of it.

The average age of young men experiencing their first orgasm through masturbation was 13, and 15 for young women. These averages had fallen by almost two years among boys and by three and a half years among girls when compared with the oldest age group. Younger adults had taken charge of their sexuality particularly through masturbation at a progressively younger age.

The timing of the first experiences of masturbation among men and women have differed significantly in that only a few percent of men had been 20 years old by the time of their first experience, whereas it was much more common among women. In the middle-aged group, one-fifth of women and in the oldest age group, approxi-

mately 40 percent only discovered masturbation after the age of 20. Many had not experienced it until their 40s and 50s. The oldest reported age of a first-time masturbation experience was 67 years. Among men, too, there were individual cases where respondents had been past the age of 25 when first experimenting with masturbation. The oldest reported starting age for men was 60 years.

Enormous increase in masturbation activity

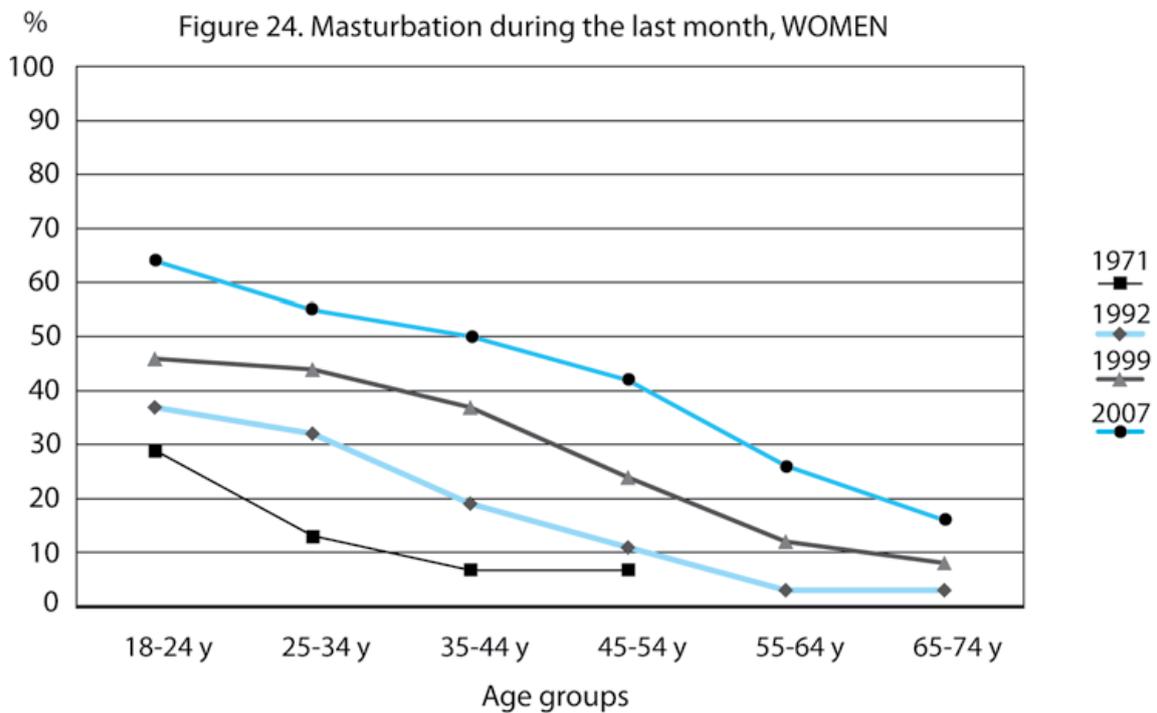
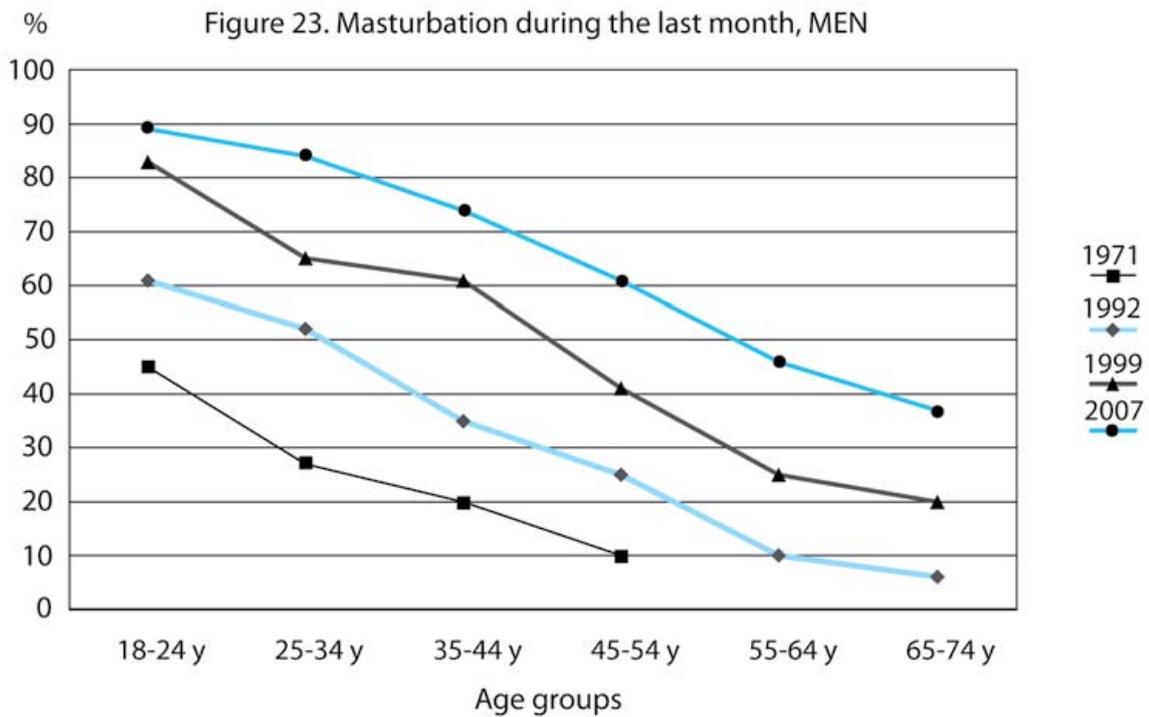
Over the last decades, the rate of Finnish people who masturbate has truly exploded. The proportion of male respondents jumped from 74 to 97 percent, and of women, from 51 percent to a whopping 93 percent. The figures for the youngest respondents are actually somewhat higher. In 1971, only approximately 60 percent of middle-aged men and approximately 30 percent of middle-aged women had occasionally experimented with masturbation. Thereafter the experimentation and practice of masturbation has progressed rapidly from one generation to the next.

Masturbation frequency is still substantially higher among men than women. The latest research has found that, in the group of young adults, 70 percent of men and 33 percent of women had masturbated in the week preceding the survey. The figures for the preceding month were 85 percent and 59 percent. Among the middle-aged, nearly half of men and more than one-fifth of women had masturbated in the course of the preceding one-week period. The figures for the last one-month period were two-thirds of men and half of women. In the oldest age group, the figures for the past week were one-fifth for men and less than one-tenth for women, and for the past month, half of men and one-fifth of women.

When comparing the masturbation frequency of men and women of different ages, women lag approximately 20 years behind men's curve in the growth of masturbation activity. The issue is, therefore, above all about the timing of the change. It is entirely possible that gender differences will disappear completely in the future.

Gender differences in the timing of the growth in masturbation activity in Finland approximate differences found between Finland and Estonia as well as Finland and Russia. Because of strict public policies that oppose sexual education and different manifestations of sexuality in the former Soviet areas, similar changes in the growth of masturbation activity have occurred two or three decades later than in Finland.

Masturbation frequency increased substantially with each survey. For example, the proportion of respondents in the youngest age group who had masturbated during the preceding month grew between 1971 and 2007 from 36 to 85 percent for young men and from 21 to 59 percent for young women. Of those who had masturbated in the last 24-hour period, the proportion of young men had jumped from 4 to 29 percent. Among young women the same figure only climbed from 2 percent to 7 percent. The latest figures still showed a marked gender difference.



An example of the scale of the change is that in 1971, according to middle-aged women, two-thirds had never practiced masturbation. In 2007, 92 percent of women in this age group reported having masturbated. Two-thirds had done so during the last year and nearly half had masturbated during the last month.

An important factor contributing to this seismic shift is that people have maintained the masturbation habits adopted in youth. In other words, masturbation does not constitute youthful experimentation that gradually gets left behind as people mature and marry.

As people's experiences of what type of touching best arouses them have become increasingly refined over the last decades, even the last few years, it may be assumed that they are more likely to utilize this experience with sexual partners. Men and women can tell one how they want to be touched and, conversely, ask what feels best for a partner. All of this should have a beneficial effect on the quality of sexual wellbeing and pleasure in relationships.

Who are the people who masturbate actively?

Men and women who started masturbating earlier have also practiced it more actively in all age groups. The differences are substantial. The frequency of masturbation fluctuates according to the age when it was begun, from approximately several times a week to several times a month. The people who started masturbating younger were least worried about any unsalutary effects.

Respondents who began to masturbate younger also had sexual intercourse at a significantly younger age. Among men, the average difference compared with other people has been as high as three years, one and a half years among women. For men, the difference held in all age groups, but there was no difference for women who had come of age in the 1950s and 1960s. Among them, masturbation was scarce and sexual intercourse was regulated much more strictly than today.

Men who had started masturbating earlier than others continued to exhibit a more frequent desire for sex as adults. The average difference varied from wanting sex once every day to wanting it a couple of times a week. The difference was less noticeable among women, among whom the difference fluctuated according to the age of starting masturbation, from wanting sex nearly every day on average to wanting it a couple of times a week, and among young women, from desiring sex every day to several times a week.

The highly educated practiced masturbation more regularly and more actively than others throughout the study's time span. The critical factor in this had been that immediately upon the sexual revolution of the 1960s, respondents with the highest education were getting more recent and better information about masturbation. This information encouraged them to be the first to see what it was all about. The proportion of highly educated people who had never tried masturbation declined quickly and was much smaller than among people with less education. Gradually, following this period of experimentation, masturbation became actively practiced among those who had discovered it. Recently, however, the predictive value of education in terms of masturbation frequency has declined.

A clear-cut correlation between high masturbation frequencies was being someone who experienced sexual desire frequently. This correlation was not as strong, however, among people who would have strongly preferred to have more frequent sexual intercourse in their current relationship.

The association between frequency of sexual intercourse and masturbation frequency was slightly curvilinear. Respondents who had the least or most frequent sexual intercourse also practiced masturbation somewhat more actively than others. Having less frequent intercourse than other people was no longer an effective predictor of masturbation frequency. A much more significant predictor associated with this life situation was the desire for more frequent intercourse. On the other hand, for people who would have preferred more frequent intercourse, masturbation represented an alternative practice to experience pleasure beyond an active sex life. The two do not exclude, but complement each other. As a matter of fact, the women and the young men who considered sex important for the happiness of their relationship were also the ones to most actively masturbate.

A new trend was that among young women, those who experienced vaginal orgasms fairly rarely at most were markedly more active in masturbating, compared to women who experienced orgasms through intercourse more regularly. The same trend is also observable among middle-aged women. A higher masturbation frequency among women, then, may just as well be connected to unrealized wishes for sexual intercourse, as it can to sexual intercourse that too often ends without an orgasm.

Some of the most active masturbators sought stimulation from pornography. Men who masturbated particularly actively were more likely than others to make use of sex magazines, videos or DVDs and online porn. This was most obvious among middle-aged and older men. A new phenomenon was that many young women who masturbated actively also used porn, including online porn. Middle-aged and even older men and women who masturbated more actively also frequented sex shops more actively.

Masturbation frequency was not associated with dissatisfaction with the quality of sex or intercourse. Rather, respondents' own assessment of how satisfying their sex life was as a whole was linked to masturbation frequency in a significant way. This had to do with dissatisfaction with the frequency of sex. Wanting sex much more often than actually having it had led respondents to view their sex life as not particularly satisfying.

A general trend was that over recent decades, people masturbated much more frequently regardless of how satisfied they were with their sex life. Masturbation was not a particular purview of those who were unsatisfied with the rest of their sex life.

The changes in masturbation frequency in relation to sexual satisfaction were noteworthy. For example, in 1971, only slightly more than one-tenth of men and only a few percent of women who found their sex lives satisfying had engaged in mastur-

bation in the week prior. In 2007, the same figures had ballooned to two-thirds and more than one-third. Active masturbation had become a vibrant part of the sexual practices of people with satisfying sex lives.

The fundamental situation was, though, that men and women who were less satisfied with their sex lives masturbated more actively. In part, masturbation was compensation for the unmet portion of their sexual desire. For example, of young men who were dissatisfied with their sex lives, in excess of four-fifths had masturbated in the week prior. Among middle-aged men the same proportion was nearly three-fourths. Of young women who were not satisfied with their sex lives, two-thirds, and of middle-aged women, more than half had practiced masturbation within the preceding month. The strongest increase, though, had occurred among women who were satisfied with their sex lives.

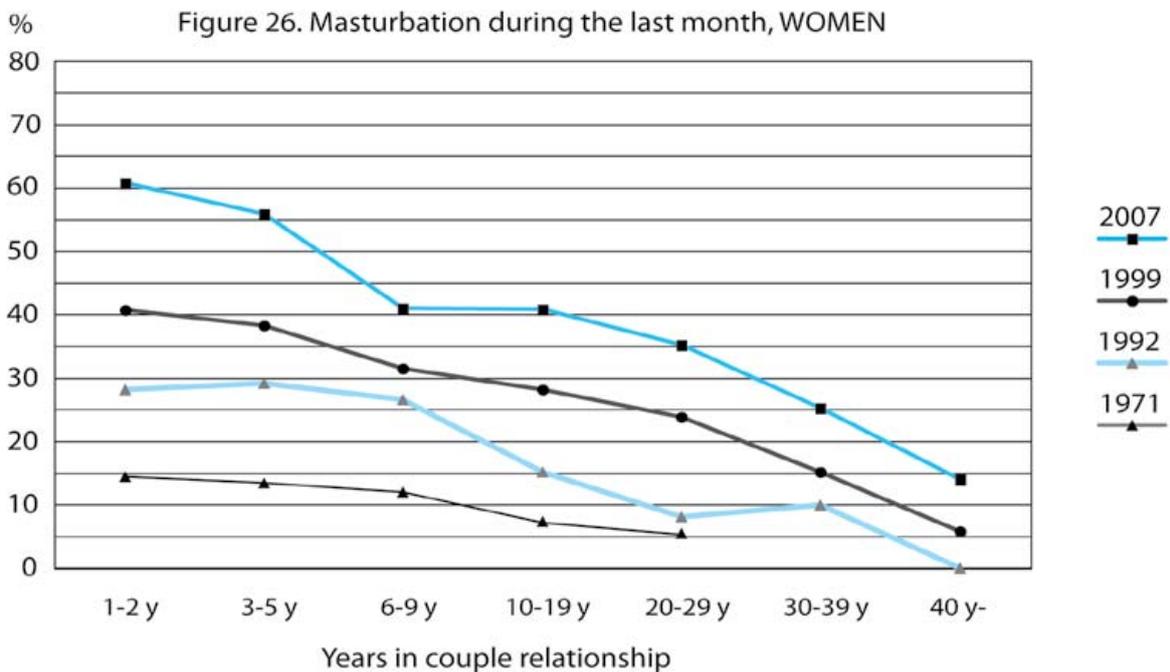
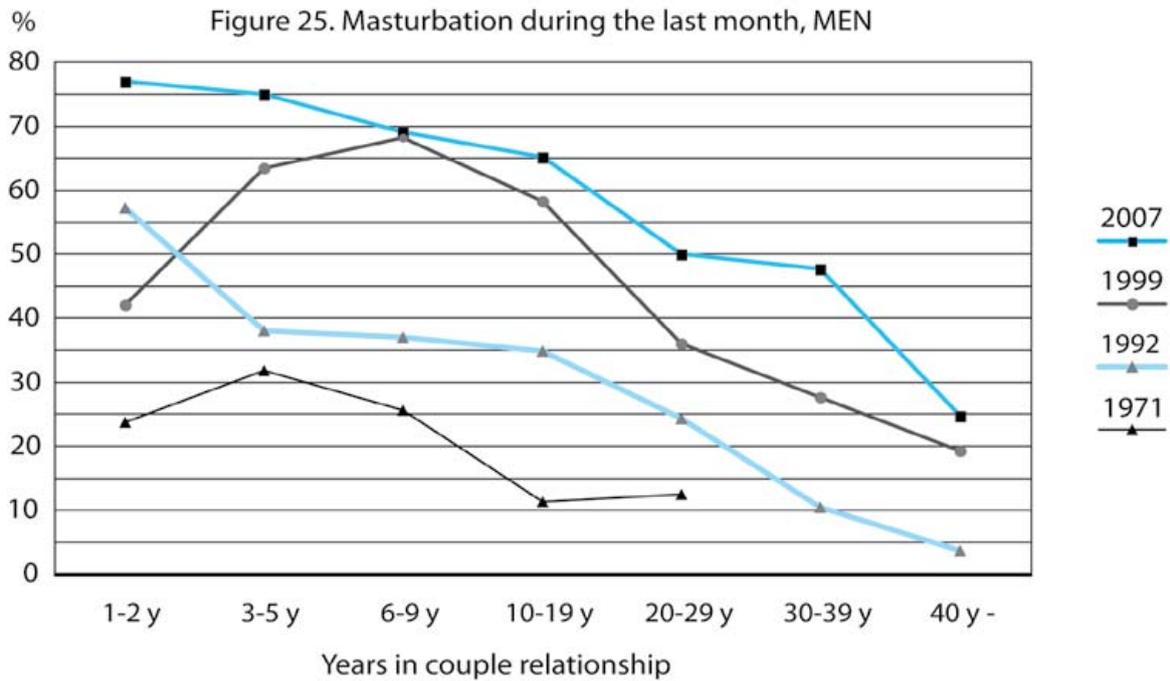
Masturbation is increasing in relationships

One of the biggest transformations in the sexual lives of Finns in recent years has been the robust escalation of masturbation in daily life, mostly regardless of people's relationship situation. Although single people and those who live alone have masturbated more actively in the absence of a partner, as would be expected, masturbation rates have intensified rapidly also among people who are in various types of relationships. Young adults have been more active masturbators regardless of relationship type, and men have been more active than women in all eventualities.

Four in five single men had masturbated within the last week. The increase from eight years before was 24 percentage points. Masturbation was equally active and had increased similarly among young men in living-apart relationships. Comparable increases had occurred among young married men. In 2007, 61 percent had masturbated in the last week. The same level of activity was found among cohabiting men. In the space of fifteen years, the figures for men had nearly doubled in all relationship types.

Also among middle-aged men masturbation rates had doubled or tripled in different relationship types during a fifteen-year period. The same increases also applied to older men who lived alone or were married.

The proportion of women who masturbate has also grown drastically. Over the last eight years, masturbation grew more popular among young women in all relationship types by approximately 15 percentage points. Among young women in living-apart relationships, more than two-thirds and of married and cohabiting young women, half had masturbated in the last month. In fifteen years, these figures have doubled among young adults and tripled among middle-aged women. For married women and women in living-apart relationships, the figures had increased six-fold. Even among the oldest women, relative increases particularly in terms of masturbating in the past month approximated those of other women, though the levels were lower.



All of this change and the increased popularity of masturbation have blown a new sexual wind into all relationship types. It speaks of a growing eagerness to seek sexual gratification, but also of possible problems in finding enough satisfaction from intercourse in relationships.

In 2007, among young women and men, the percentage of respondents who practiced masturbation did not vary much by length of relationship. In other words, people did not masturbate more actively in the beginning of a relationship, compared with relationships lasting more than ten years. Among middle-aged respondents, however, masturbation was somewhat more active in relationships exceeding six years. In relationships of 20 or more, the difference was no longer visible. Among women, differences only emerged in relationships lasting past the 20-year mark, which featured less masturbation. These women are part of the older generation, which had not learned to masturbate very actively.

People in relationships who would have preferred to be having more sex were more active in masturbating. In those cases, masturbation to some extent functioned as a substitute for sexual intercourse. Among men, this link was very strong, but also noticeable among women. The masturbation activity of respondents who had a strong desire for more frequent sexual intercourse in their relationship was equal to that of people living alone. In fact, among the oldest women, those who longed for more sex in their relationship actually masturbated twice as actively as older women who lived alone.