

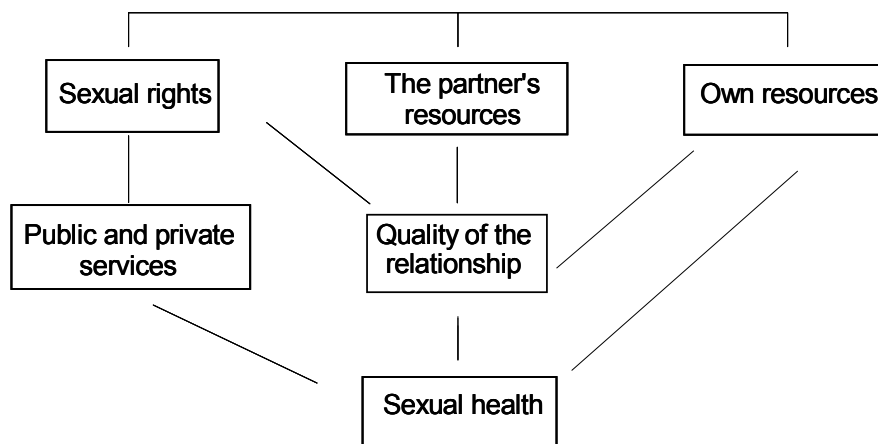
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### 3. Sexual Health Promotion on the Individual Level

Earlier in this book the concept of sexual health was discussed as a large thematic unity linked to culture, societal structure and public health. From the point of view of an individual, however, sexual health is shaped in various practical couple and other sexual interaction events, which have both physiological and psychological effects. These factors can have both positive and negative effects on a person's sexual health. Sexual health is promoted when the individual has a possibility of realising his or her sexuality in a spontaneous, enjoyable, and safe way.

As its definition implies, sexual satisfaction is a necessary condition for sexual health. Although some may find sexual satisfaction unnecessary or seek satisfaction alone, the vast majority feel that the best way to promote their sexual health is in a relationship with a suitable partner. The engagement and quality of this kind of a partnership are regulated by various factors. Important factors that impact the individual's sexual health are shown in Figure 1 and I discuss them in more detail in this chapter.

Figure 1. Sexual health promotion on an individual level



Sexual health is determined through a process of interaction situations and couple relationships which in turn are affected by the conditions and norms set by the community and larger cultural environment. In addition, the interaction process is influenced by the characteristics and resources of a person and his/her partner. Adequate sexual rights are a necessary condition for the satisfactory realisation of sexuality. Unsatisfactory sexual relationships may be the result of lack of adequate information, inexperience, functional disturbances or conflicting goals. Public and private services can be used to improve the quality of the sexual relationship and thus the sexual health of the partners.

Professionals in the fields of general social, health and sexual policy all make decisions which impact greatly on sexual health. When they acknowledge the sexual rights of all human beings, the rights of everyone to the services promoting sexual satisfaction will also be granted. These services can create the necessary pre-conditions for forming partnerships and relationships characterised by sexual satisfaction.

Sexual counselling and treatment offer the practical means in an inter-human context of improving an individual's resources, such as knowledge or skills, or providing relief for a physiological ailment. Some resource or property or lack of them means much more to some individuals than others. Problems connected with sexuality and ways to solve them vary according to these individual meanings.

## Sexual Rights

We have already dealt with sexual rights on a general level. I shall only recapitulate the most common factors related to forming a partnership and with the availability of services.

Culture, society and the community affect sexual interaction by, for instance, through legislation determining the limits of acceptability. They can affect, even censor information that can be disseminated in the general media and information material about sexuality and values and ideals connected with it. This will determine what kind of knowledge and resources people have in forming partnerships, with what kind of partners and how their experiences are going to develop.

The independent sexual choices and activities based on the needs and desires of an individual are limited in some cases by legal sanctions (punishment), in some cases by the reluctance of the partner to fulfil the other partner's wishes, arising from general opinions or values. Sexual choices and activities are limited and often practically blocked by the opinions of family members and other close people about what kind of a partner or sexual life is considered appropriate. The social environment can put pressure on an individual to act against his or her inclinations or desires. Most people avoid contacts with people who are labelled perverts in order to avoid stigmatisation. The basic question

is public acceptance or condemnation. In many individuals this can lead to totally avoiding the desired relationship.

The intimate social environment and the family also affect the quality of the relationship. From his or her environment the individual gets information, opinions and feedback to help him or her construct his/her self-esteem and interactive skills. When problems occur in the sexual life of an individual, there is reason to question if they have common points with the social network of the individual.

Each person ought to also respect the sexual rights of other people. The present-day discourse on sexual morality does emphasise negotiation and mutual understanding instead of judging the acceptability of single acts or inclinations. If consenting adults have formed a relationship and agree on what they want to experience, no sexual activity is to be condemned or considered a perversion. But if either one pressures or forces the other one to something against his/her own will, the right to sexual self-determination is violated and sexual health is damaged. The society attempts to save its members from these deeds.

Human beings have the right to obtain from the society services promoting sexual health. Everybody has the right to get the information, counselling and treatment he or she requires. This applies to both establishing and maintaining the relationship. These services can be used in various ways to promote and enrich the individual's resources for interaction and sexual satisfaction.

## Own Resources and Characteristics

The individual puts into practice his or her sexuality in relationships, the initiation and maintenance of which requires certain resources and characteristics. The more versatile and valued resources a person possesses, the easier it is for him or her to form relationships which provide mutual satisfaction. Humans are unequally endowed with resources. This inequality also relates to our sex appeal. This characteristic is affected by many of the resources we possess.

The resources often needed in promoting and sustaining sexual health will probably become most tangible in situations where one is looking for and selecting a partner. Looking at the characteristics people assign to their ideal partners in contact advertisements, some necessary conditions can be discerned which the partners are expected to fulfil. At the same time these are characteristics beneficial to good sexual health.

Age, size (length and height), physical appearance, health and a good physical condition are basic factors determining the desirability to form a relationship with a certain person. A high age can be a significant impediment in forming a relationship especially for

women. Of course we cannot affect age. Also, many other expectations connected with partner selection are connected with the genetic-biological basic characteristics of the individual. Good genes are beneficial also in sexual health.

Human beings can control their weight, dress well and exercise. All these activities increase the possibility of initiating a desired relationship. Active physical exercise can also bring together partner candidates interested in the same kind of activities. Often birds of a feather flock together. On the other hand, the more a person comes into contact with different people, the more likely he or she is to meet a satisfactory partner. Thus, a mobile job and other travel opportunities increase a person's resources.

People have a tendency to be interested in and select partners who are in a way on the same level regarding these qualities. An exception to this is height, for women look for men who are typically about 10-15 centimetres taller than they are. The same kind of tendency is connected with self-esteem to a large extent: if a person feels the other one is for some reason on a "higher" level, he or she is reluctant to try to initiate a contact and views the approaches of the other one with suspicion. His or her self-esteem is not sufficiently high to be able to trust in the sincerity of the other one.

One factor challenging self-esteem is body-image. If a person feels overweight, he or she may lack confidence in his or her possibilities. Culture and the model world connected with it create, especially for women, totally unrealistic ideals which only a few feel they can ever attain. The result is a lot of plastic surgery, excessive body-building and weight loss, sometimes leading to anorexia. Some persons try to shape their bodies by any means to meet the prevailing cultural ideals. If a person alienated with his or her body gives up, he or she may no longer take care of him/herself. This may be the beginning of a vicious circle difficult to break.

People search for partners who are sufficiently self-confident and independent to be able to voice and realise their own ideas and needs. Self-confidence is one of the most valued characteristics in the partner and simultaneously one of the most important factors promoting sexual health. To attain high self-confidence and to help build it in others is, unfortunately, difficult. When humans develop their resources and receive positive feedback, they also strengthen their self-confidence. Therefore, they can maintain some control in making choices instead of submitting to the choices of others.

From the point of view of sexual interaction and satisfaction, the opinions and beliefs about their skills as lovers affect the courage and versatility of peoples' sexual expression. Peoples' love-making skills can be improved with knowledge and guidance. If the perception of oneself is realistic, a good sexual self-esteem and positive feedback from partners can turn the growth curve of sexual health upward.

People also increase their self-confidence by gathering economic, professional, cultural and social capital. People view each other on the basis of this accumulation and direct their interests towards a partner assessed to be suitable. Women especially often set as one condition of their interest that the partner should be on at least the same level regarding these resources and properties. Some people get their resources in childhood families while others accumulate them by studying, hard work, hobbies and other leisure activities.

A person's economic and social status and background affect his/her values and goals in life as well as his/her lifestyle and time use. They also determine how much importance and expression a person gives to factors enhancing sexual health in his/her life in general.

Part of the motives and their expressions concerning human coupling and sexual interaction is a result of values and lifestyles. Additionally, there is a basic sexual desire which regulates how much the person thinks about and needs sexual activities and how much time and other resources he or she uses to initiate and support new relationships and sexual activities in them. Desire is the potential for pleasure.

Desire also affects people's values and attitudes. The greater the sexual desire, the more importance he or she gives to sexual matters and the more liberal his or her attitudes are towards the initiatives and wishes of the partner. If a person succeeds in selecting a partner with a similarly strong desire and similar sexual liking, the pre-conditions for a mutually satisfactory sexual life are good.

Interaction skills significantly affect sexual health. An open and flexible communication is always advantageous in couple and sexual relationships. A person with good interaction skills is able to express him/herself and his/her wishes, listen to the other person and develop interaction skills with the partner. Interaction skills are crucial also when the situation demands the ability and courage to take care of one's own safety in sexual relationships. A person with interaction skills can discuss any subject in any situation and can defend him/herself in resolving disagreements. A person with good interaction skills knows how to touch his or her sexual partner both mentally and physically in the right way and at the right moment.

The development of interaction skills is especially important in promoting sexual health. A good lover provides more satisfaction to both him/herself and his/her partner. The skills needed in lovemaking can be developed with the help of written and visual educational material as well as counselling and guiding people in practical exercises. As knowledge and skills grow, so will also self-esteem. A good lover provides him/herself and the partner enjoyable sexual experiences and thus good sexual health.

## The Resources and Characteristics of the Partner

A human being will survive without partners, but would then miss many kinds of experiences that enrich life and make it easier. One can enjoy sexuality without a partner, but would then miss the physical and psychological satisfaction of a good relationship. There is a major difference already in one's own touch and the partner's touch.

Whether a person has a partner does not, of course, in itself produce good sexual health. The decisive factor is the quality of the interaction in the relationship developing with the partner. The characteristics and resources of the partner greatly influence the relationship interaction and whether it will have positive effects on the sexual health of its partners.

A partner can greatly enhance the sexual health of a person when he or she brings to the relationship a lot of various resources and valued characteristics. A desired partner gives a person inspiration and motivates him or her to display his or her best sides. In the worst case the relationship is destructive and tiring fighting and bitterness block the positive experiences of nearness.

It is important that the partner fulfils person's expectations and desires of a good sex partner. In an ideal case the partner has similar desires, he or she is pleasant, knowledgeable, equally desirous, as well as ready to meet the partner's sexual expectations. A good partner is a person who is easy and comfortable to be with, who makes it possible to discuss anything that comes to mind, and who inspires you to want to satisfy his/her sexual wishes. In this type of situation a couple interacts co-operatively for a mutually satisfying experience.

One of the most important resources of a partner is his/her ability to arouse desire and lust. The wonder which awakens the sleeping prince or princess is repeated over and over. There can be something inexplicable but also irresistible in this characteristic. A captivating partner can help one forget inhibitions and fears as well as everyday problems confusing one's mind.

Sometimes the good characteristics and interaction skills of the partner remain unutilised. This happens in long-term relationships in which both or one of the partners have lost their interest in the relationship. A partner could have felt almost perfect in the beginning but his or her attraction has passed with years and another man or woman may have began to feel more tempting. In this situation the person is not ready to invest all of his or her resources in the previous relationship but may invest them somewhere else. This creates a crisis, the solution of which requires clarification of the basic motivation of the relationship and looking at the partner from a new and, in a way, from an outsider's perspective.

In the same way that one's own resources can accumulate, the sexual health of the people in a relationship can be improved by increasing the resources of a partner. A partner can increase his or her knowledge and skills both in lovemaking and interaction in the couple relationship. The motivation of a partner can be raised by taking a greater interest in him or her and using more advanced skills with him or her. Desire breeds desire and love breeds love. They also help patch up the possibly failing self-esteem of a partner.

## The Quality of the Relationship

One of the basic factors of sexual health is a relationship which adequately meets one's expectations. These expectations can vary greatly according to one's life situation and earlier experiences. Some seek in their lives excitement and ecstasy from casual relationships while others feel they can realise their sexuality only after a marriage which has lasted for years. One person gets satisfaction from excitement and the unknown while another only from familiarity and safety. From the point of view of sexual health any kind of relationship can be good if the person involved feels he or she is acting freely and getting full satisfaction from the relationship.

In most cases one of the pre-conditions for a satisfactory relationship is adequate stability and permanence. In a longer relationship people learn to find forms of sexual interaction which give satisfaction to both partners. Many get the courage to express sexual ideas and fantasies only after a relationship has lasted for months or years (even if then). Confidence in a partner can grow only gradually.

For most people a lasting relationship is the first thorough-going trip to the roots of one's own sexuality and desire. Some women develop the courage to fully embrace pleasure only after a self-examination of years or even decades. On the other hand, some men are ashamed of their ability to perform sexually because they feel inadequate. An eager and skilful partner is a crucial help along this trip.

In addition to the permanence of the relationship, sexual satisfaction in both sexes is determined by the regularity of sexual life. Sometimes sexual encounters even in a permanent relationship remain casual or periodical. Although the encounters were satisfactory, they do not necessarily provide an adequate basis for sexual health. The sexual health of both partners can be positively affected by increasing the frequency of sexual interactions.

There are a number of reasons why the sexual relationship of two individuals becomes dysfunctional or why it does not feel to be functioning after a promising beginning. These are caused by changes in the resource balance of the partners. It is possible that one of the partners has strengthened his or her resources while the other one seems to

be stagnating or even regressing. For instance, the unemployment of the other one partner, economical difficulties or serious health problems can seriously challenge the relationship. Also the considerable professional success of one partner can significantly destabilise a situation which has previously been felt as stable.

Imbalance or conflict can also be caused by a significant increase or decrease in the sexual self-esteem of either partner. The reason can be, for instance, the increasing functional disturbances caused by ageing. As a result, a partner can be experienced as less interesting or the other partner can begin to doubt that the other one does not sincerely desire him or her. This can immobilise the relationship. In these situations one has to analyse how the resource balance and the resulting adequate sexual motivation level can be restored. The responsibility for change is mutual. Help can be received from, for instance, family therapy or sexual therapy services.

## Public and Private Services

A person's sexual health can remain poor for very different reasons. The person may have, for example, inadequate resources to form a relationship, he or she can have physical or psychological difficulties with sexual interaction, the partner may be unsatisfactory or the interaction within the relationship can prove to be or become unsatisfactory. In these cases help from public or private services is needed to improve sexual health.

Part of the problems of the clients is caused by sheer lack of knowledge. Public information and educational material can be of help here. Problems can be reduced also by publicly disseminating current information about sexological research. The information leaflets distributed through the social and health care agencies are a useful addition to the versatile supply of information through the mass media. Sometimes useful information can be received by reading the medical question and answer columns in various magazines.

Counselling services or actual specialised sexual counselling is often needed in solving problems caused by psychological or physical insecurity and unsatisfying interaction in a relationship. The more specific the problem is, the greater is the demand for advanced professional competence of the helper. In promoting sexual health an important task is to create and sustain the basic, advanced and specialised training for professionals in the field. Research can also be used to promote professional know-how.

When the roots of the problem involve physiological or psychological sexual problems, often treatment or therapy is required. In this case the sexological services providing professional specialised know-how should be used. Health care service plays an important role in this promotion of sexual health.