

4. Sexual desire

Nature of sexual desire

Desire is the operative force in nearly all sexual expression. Desire is closely related to the concept of lust, and at its most powerful it approaches the concept of passion. There are people whose previous experiences may make it difficult to recognize or acknowledge desire. Therefore, they make attempts to suppress or deny such feelings. For others, lust represents an irresistible temptation to throw themselves into intoxicating experiences, without which life does not in fact seem worth living. It could be argued that the fundamental thrust of a person's life and dreams is the longing for passion, the dream of an encounter that changes one's life all at once. The cultural industry of the west, and films in particular, has already told successive generations that to control one's lust and to think rationally is safest in life. Countless films tell us that whoever surrenders to the throes of passion will come to a tragic end. It is for this reason that in our imagination, passion may seem related to danger and death. (Kontula, 2000b.)

Sexual desire is a conscious longing for sexual activity with the object of desire, resulting in sexual satisfaction. Sexual desire can result in rapid or gradual psychic arousal, the resulting physiological changes (rapid breathing and pulse, lubrication, erection), a need to approach the object of desire, physical contact that brings satisfaction, and the possible release. Sexual desire is also a central motive in the formation of casual and long-term relationships.

Something thought, seen, smelled or touched can activate sexual desire. In most of these cases, sexual desire results from an external stimulus, for example, meeting a person one considers sexy. Desire may also awaken by recalling satisfying prior experiences or by dreaming or fantasizing about something one has not yet experienced. The object of desire may be another person, but also one's own self (masturbation). In its most potent form, realizing one's desire may become an oppressive obsession. This phenomenon is called sexual dependence or sex addiction.

Desire is an individual characteristic, and changes depending on the partner and the situation. Some people already as children experience desire more powerfully than others, whereas others may only learn to feel desire after having a unique and arousing sexual experience. For many, desire varies significantly at different life

stages. A new partner may reawaken dormant desire to a new radiance, and on the other hand, ageing or widowhood may render sexual desire unimportant.

In contemporary society, sexual desire is seen as a rather essential condition for a satisfying relationship. Many relationships end because the partner is not considered to have enough desire, or the partner who feels more desire seeks compensation in short- or long-term parallel relations for the shortage or lack he or she experiences. The lack of sexual desire is also one of the most important areas in the treatment of sexual dysfunction. Pharmaceutical companies are engaged in an ongoing battle for market shares to come up with products to enhance sexual desire. Sexual desire is being converted into a commodity for industrial production.

It is not uncomplicated to take apart sexual desire, to come up with sub-concepts that are easy to quantify and study in a survey form that is designed for making generalizations. In the present study, sexual desire was analyzed by first asking respondents to describe their level of satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse in their relationship. The question was formulated like this: "Are you satisfied with the frequency of sexual intercourse in your present steady relationship?" There were five possible answers: "I would prefer to have intercourse significantly more frequently"; "I would prefer to have intercourse somewhat more frequently"; "The frequency of intercourse is exactly right"; "I would prefer to have intercourse somewhat less frequently"; and, "I would prefer to have intercourse significantly less frequently." By calculating the ratio to actual frequency of intercourse the respondents were divided into three categories according to sexual desire: strong, average and low desire.

Respondents were also asked to estimate how often the respondent or his/her partner had experienced a lack of sexual desire that had become problematic during the past year. The Finnish survey of 1971 did not yet address these issues, nor were they dealt with in Sweden. The studies conducted in St. Petersburg and Estonia, on the other hand, asked respondents to name their level of satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse in their relationship.

Satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse in the present couple relationship

Sexual desire is a relative and constantly changing concept. A person may feel sexual desire because he or she has not had an opportunity to make love for a while. On the other hand, people may also crave sex again very soon following the previous occasion. People may also long for more variation in sexual activities, even in the midst of a regular and active sex life. Some people may feel sexually satisfied even if he or she has only infrequent or even no intercourse. In the following, we will analyze the level of satisfaction that people in Finland, Estonia and St. Petersburg feel with regard to the frequency of intercourse in their current relationship.

4. Sexual desire

In Finland in 1992, 56 % of men in steady relationships were satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in their relationship, and the same was true of 73 % of the women. By 1999, these numbers had fallen to 45 % for men and 58 % for women (Table 4.1). In most cases, people who were not satisfied with the frequency of intercourse wanted to have sex more frequently. Since the overall frequency of intercourse in Finland has not declined, this indicates that people wanted sex more frequently than before in order to feel satisfied with their sex lives. We will return to this topic a little later.

Estonian men were less satisfied with the frequency of intercourse than men in Finland or St. Petersburg. This applied especially to younger men, born after 1951 (Figure 4.1). In St. Petersburg, men in all age groups were relatively satisfied with the frequency of intercourse. Young Finnish women were more satisfied with their intercourse frequency in 1992 than women in other areas at the end of that decade. But seven years later, Finnish women of the same generation were as dissatisfied as women in neighboring areas.

In Finland, married men and women were less satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in their present couple relationship than cohabiting and LAT people (Figure 4.2). In Estonia and St. Petersburg, marriage did not signal a decreased satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse in the same way as in Finland. Mar-

Table 4.1 Satisfaction with frequency of sexual intercourse in present couple relationship (%)

Preference for frequency of intercourse	Finland 1992	Finland 1999	Estonia 2000	St. Peters- burg 1996
<i>Men</i>				
I would prefer to have it clearly more often	9	20	31	19
I would prefer to have it somewhat more frequently	35	34	35	26
I am satisfied with the frequency	55	46	33	54
I would prefer to have it somewhat less	1	0	0	1
I would prefer to have it clearly less	0	0	1	0
Total	100	100	100	100
N	894	565	424	669
<i>Women</i>				
I would prefer to have it clearly more often	4	8	25	15
I would prefer to have it somewhat more frequently	14	24	21	19
I am satisfied with the frequency	74	60	45	61
I would prefer to have it somewhat less	6	5	5	2
I would prefer to have it clearly less	2	3	4	3
Total	100	100	100	100
(N)	861	566	448	755

Sexual Trends in the Baltic Sea Area

Figure 4.1 Satisfied with frequency of intercourse*

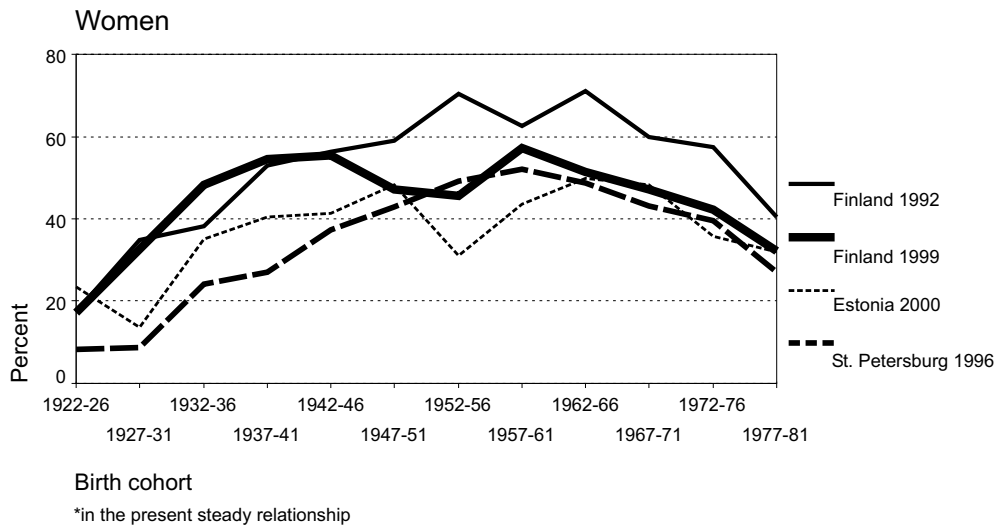
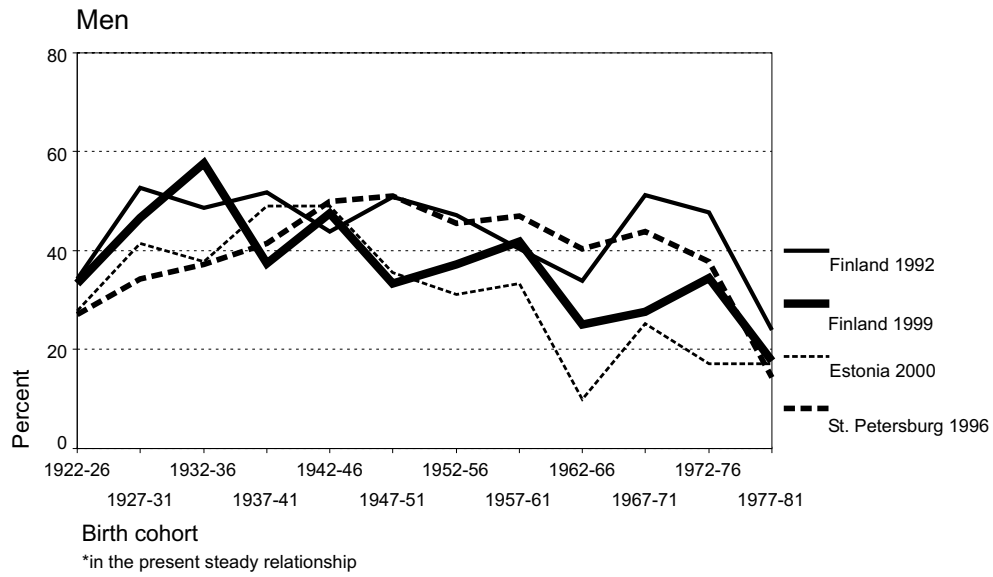
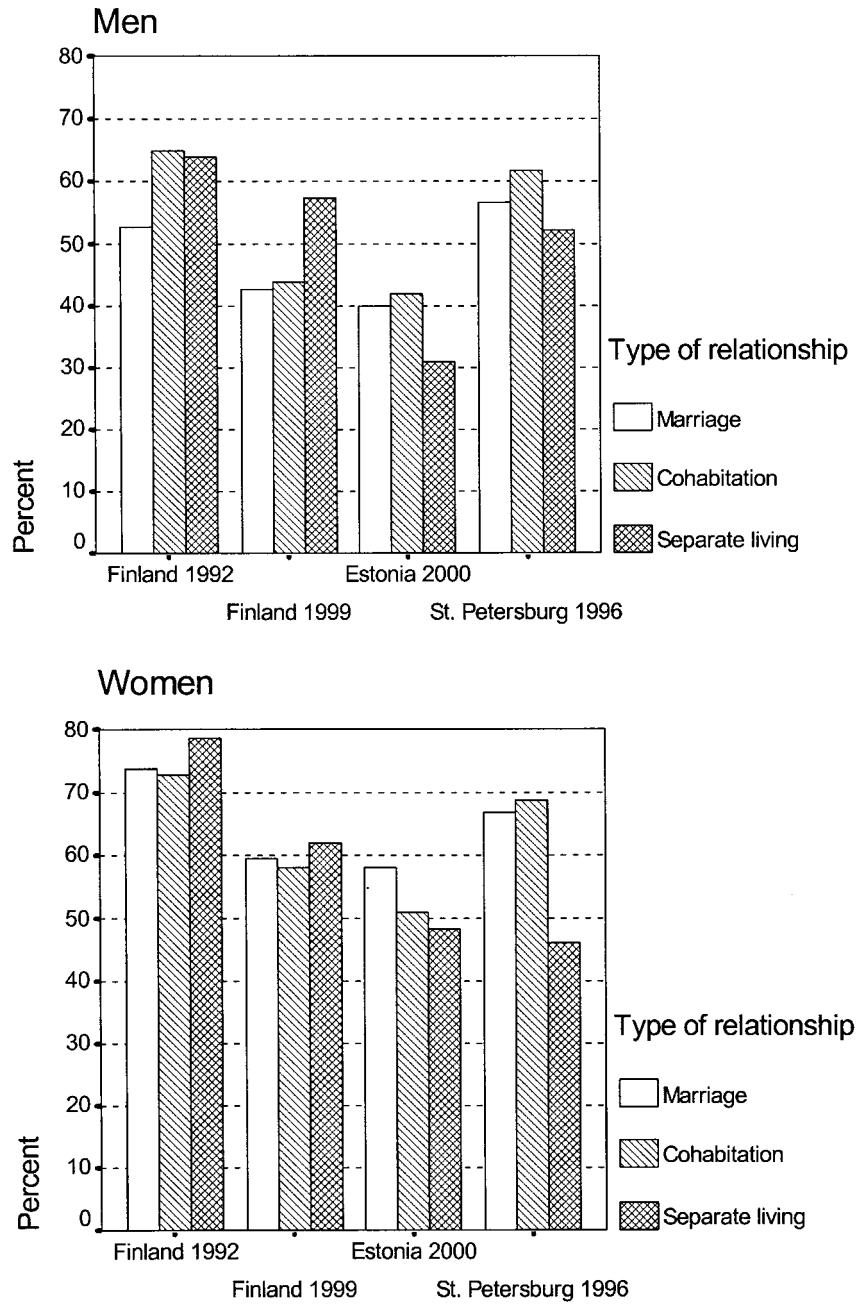


Figure 4.2 Satisfied with frequency of intercourse by type of couple relationship



ried and cohabiting men and women in St. Petersburg and corresponding women in Estonia found the frequency of intercourse more suitable than those living separately from their permanent partners. In St. Petersburg, cohabiting men were more satisfied with the frequency of intercourse than married or LAT men.

Below, we will examine the relationship of intercourse frequency in the present couple relationship to the length of that relationship; data is available from Finland from 1992 and 1999, as well as from Estonia. For men, the ratio between length of relationship and satisfaction with intercourse frequency was curvilinear: short and long relationships 'produced' more satisfaction than medium-long relationships (Figure 4.3). A noteworthy exception was that the level of satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse for Estonian men whose couple relationship had lasted less than five years was significantly lower than the same figure for Finnish men.

In 1992, women's attitudes about intercourse frequency did not vary systematically based on the length of the relationship. The 1999 Finnish study shows the same kind of curvilinear ratio between length of relationship and attitude about the frequency of intercourse that also appears among men. On the one hand, women in the newest relationships of two years or less and women in relationships that had already lasted at least 20 years were most satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in their relationships. In Estonia, women's satisfaction regarding the frequency of intercourse increased proportionately with longer relationships.

The higher the frequency of sexual intercourse in the relationship, the happier were the people who were in couple relationships in Finland, Estonia and St. Petersburg (Figure 4.4). Approximately half of men and about two-thirds of women were satisfied with the frequency of intercourse, when a maximum of four days had passed since the last time they had intercourse. If more time – from one week to one month – had elapsed since the last time intercourse had occurred, men in Finland and Estonia in 1999 were not as satisfied with this as Finnish men had been in 1992 or as men in St. Petersburg were. If more than one month had elapsed from the last time they had had intercourse, very few men in steady relationships were satisfied with the frequency of intercourse.

Women were rather satisfied with a frequency of intercourse when it occurred at least once a month. Only when more than one month had elapsed from the last time they had had intercourse, most considered the frequency unsatisfactory. The desire among women to have more frequent intercourse increased in Finland during the 1990s. In 1999, they were not very likely to be satisfied with a situation where more than two weeks had elapsed from the last time they had had intercourse. Women's wishes and expectations regarding intercourse have clearly grown higher in Finland recently.

Figure 4.3 Satisfaction with frequency of intercourse by length of relationship

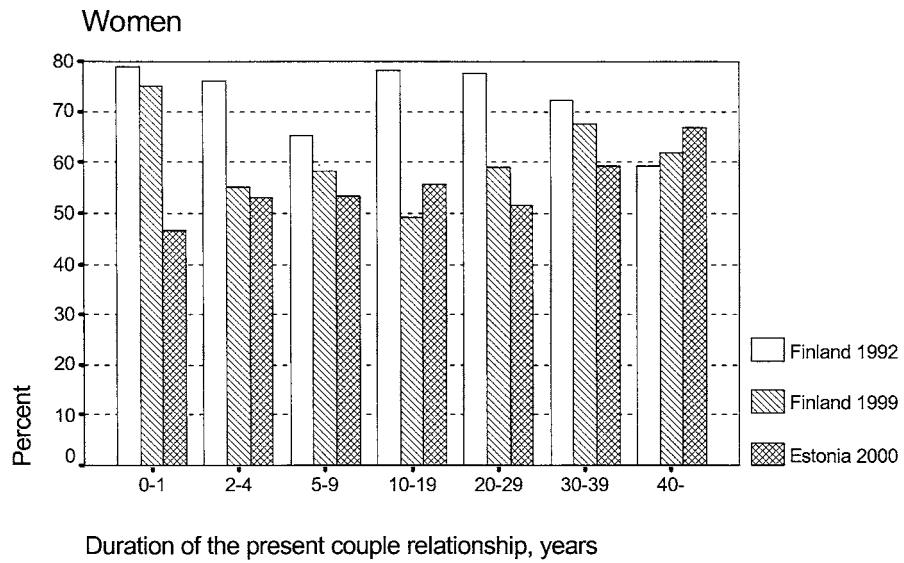
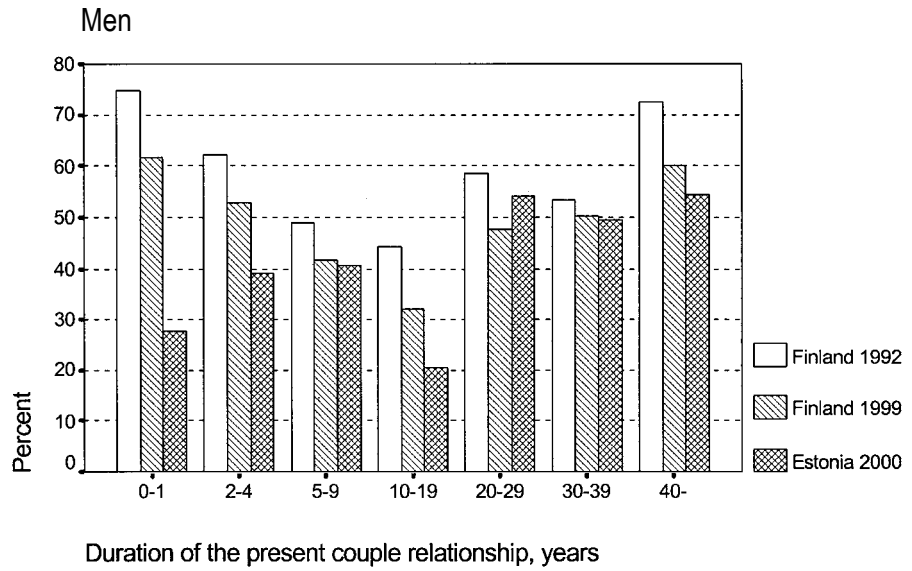
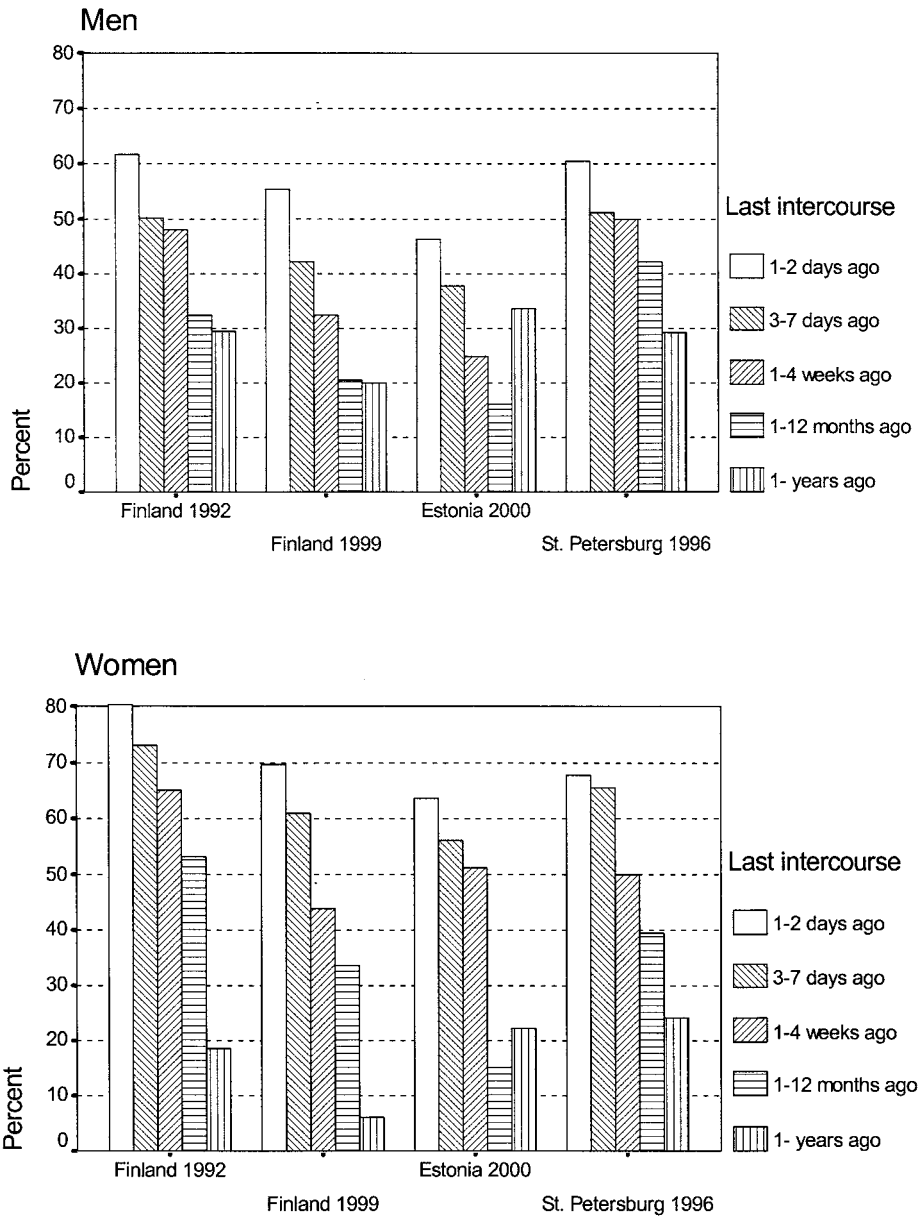


Figure 4.4 Satisfied with frequency of intercourse by time of last intercourse



Prevalence of lack of sexual desire

Sexual desire is an individual, human characteristic that can be different at different times and in different life situations. Often, desire turns into lack of desire. Lack of sexual desire is one form of sexual dysfunction and one of the most common reasons for seeking help through sexual counseling and sexological treatment. Lack of sexual desire becomes problematic particularly when the individual is in a couple relationship where the other partner has more sexual desire than the individual her/himself.

Lack of sexual desire was studied in Sweden and in Finland in 1992 and 1999. The Swedish survey sought to discover the prevalence of lack of desire during the previous one-year period, and whether respondents had considered it problematic. The questions appeared in the following form: "It happens that people have periods with diminished interest in sex. Has this occurred in your sexual life during the last 12 months? Has it been a problem in your sexual during the last 12 months?"

In Finland, questions about lack of sexual desire in the 1992 survey were only directed at those who had a steady sexual partner: "In the last year, have you had any of the following problems in your sexual life?" Nine possible problems were mentioned, among others 'lack of own sexual desire' and 'lack of my partner's sexual desire'. (Responses to some of the other problems mentioned in the same question will be discussed in Chapter 6.) In the 1999 survey, questions dealing with lack of sexual desire were repeated with the same wording, and were addressed to all respondents. In order to be able to compare Sweden and Finland's 1999 data to Finland's 1992 data, this chapter will only deal with people in couple relationships (married, cohabiting and LAT).

Approximately half of Swedish and Finnish men who were in a relationship had experienced a problematic lack of sexual desire during the past year (Table 4.2). Only about one in ten men had experienced it frequently. Lack of desire became significantly more common among Finnish men during the 1990s. Lack of sexual desire was much more common among women than among men: 62 % of Swedish women had experienced it, 74 % of the Finnish women in the 1992 data, and a high of 80 % of the women in the Finnish data from 1999 had experienced lack of sexual desire. Also the proportion of those who themselves had felt lack of sexual desire was higher among women than men. Of women in Sweden, 17 % had felt a frequent lack of sexual desire, and the same figure for Finnish women in 1992 was 28 % and by 1999, had climbed to 36 %. Paradoxically, lack of sexual desire had become more common at the same time as people expressed a wish for more frequent intercourse.

Lack of desire among men increased with ageing in all birth cohorts (Figure 4.5). The increased lack of desire among women in Finland in the 1990s only applied to middle-aged and young women, in other words, women born after 1936.

Table 4.2 Lack of own sexual desire during past year, people with a steady partner (%)

Frequency of lack of sexual desire	Men			Women		
	Sweden ¹ 1996	Finland 1992	Finland 1999	Sweden 1996	Finland 1992	Finland 1999
<i>Lack of own sexual desire</i>						
Very often	5/3	1	3	11/5	8	11
Somewhat often	12/6	6	10	22/12	20	25
Somewhat seldom	65/44	42	48	57/45	46	44
Not at all	18/47	51	40	10/38	26	20
Total (N)	100 1 127	100 794	100 506	100 1 031	100 800	100 519
<i>Lack of sexual desire of my partner</i>						
Very often		3	7		2	5
Somewhat often		13	17		4	7
Somewhat seldom		39	40		16	24
Not at all		45	36		78	64
Total (N)		100 777	100 497		100 770	100 497

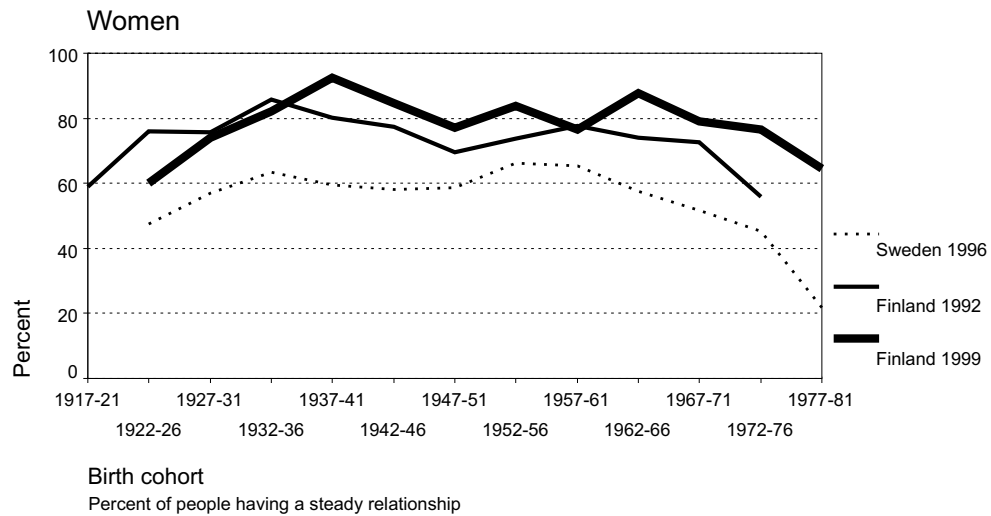
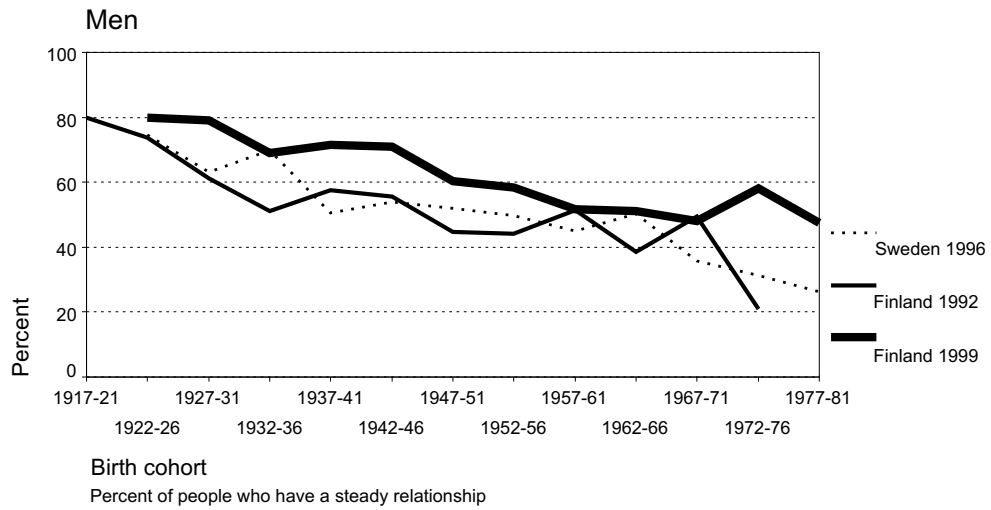
¹ In Sweden, the first figure refers to having experienced the phenomenon, the second one that it has been a problem.

In both 1992 and 1999, we asked our Finnish respondents whether their partner had experienced a problematic lack of desire during the past year. Both men and women viewed the lack of sexual desire in their partner as a lesser problem than their own lack of sexual desire.

To be able to analyze the lack of sexual desire experienced by Finnish respondents in the context of couple relationships, we combined the information on the respondent's own and his/her partner's lack of desire. Obviously, lack of desire is a problem that affects the relationship as a whole, whether one partner or another, or both partners feel the lack simultaneously.

Though we combined the information on lack of one's own or the partner's sexual desire during the last year, we constructed another combination which differentiated when the lack occurred at least fairly frequently in (1) both partners, (2) one's self, or (3) the partner, and the occurrence of the lack of desire fairly infrequently in (4) both partners, (5) either partner, and lastly, the alternative in which (6) neither partner had experienced lack of desire. The changes that occurred in the proportions of these separate groups were compared for 1992 and 1999.

Figure 4.5 Considers lack of sexual desire problematic



Analysis revealed that even though experiencing a lack of desire was more common in longer relationships, it also occurred among young people. Among older people there were fairly many of those who themselves or whose partner had not experienced any lack of sexual desire at all in the last year. Thus, age was not a factor that absolutely predicted lack of sexual desire.

A second important observation was that relationships in which neither partner felt lack of sexual desire were in the clear minority in all age groups. The proportion of couple relationships in which neither partner had experienced lack of desire made up only one-fifth of all relationships, regardless of age group. Among people under 25, however, the proportion was slightly higher, close to 30 %. Most Finns had experienced occasional lack of sexual desire in their relationships in one partner or the other.

With the exception of older people, in approximately half of all relationships one or both partners had experienced lack of sexual desire fairly infrequently at the most. For the rest of the people who reported having experienced lack of desire, it had occurred fairly frequently. In most cases, then, lack of desire occurred very infrequently. 'Fairly infrequent' lack of sexual desire among older people was less common than among people in other age groups, because in old age, it was more common to experience 'frequent' lack of desire.

In terms of fairly frequently felt lack of sexual desire, the responses of men and women supported each other in that lack of sexual desire was many times more common among women of all age groups compared with men. Before and after age 60, the difference between men and women was nearly tenfold. In all age groups, men had underestimated the lack of desire in their partners.

Mutual, frequently occurring lack of sexual desire was fairly rare before retirement age, after which approximately one-tenth of men and women reported it. Mutual lack of desire was not necessarily seen as a problem among older people, if the relationship was otherwise satisfactory.

On the basis of men's responses, lack of sexual desire in marriages was least frequent in marriages that had lasted less than five years. The highest incidence of lack of desire occurred in relationships that had lasted over 30 or 40 years. In marriages that had lasted at least 40 years, nearly one out of two respondents had experienced recurrent lack of sexual desire. On the other hand, in about one-tenth of marriages, men had never experienced any kind of problem with lack of desire, even after more than 40 years of marriage.

Women's responses offered a picture of marriage that contained somewhat less sexual desire than men's responses indicated. According to women, one-third of women in marriages that had only lasted a few years experienced frequently occurring lack of desire. This lack of desire remained at the same level when looking at marriages of differing durations, until reaching marriages that had lasted 40 years or longer, where frequent lack of sexual desire had occurred in two-thirds.

The partner's level of sexual desire was more important from the perspective of the happiness of the relationship in men's than women's assessments of that happiness. Half of the men who did not consider their relationship happy reported that their female partner experienced lack of sexual desire at least fairly frequently. Of the corresponding group of women, only one-fourth saw their male partner's lack of sexual desire as a problem in the relationship.

The results concerning the differences between men and women were rather similar, when respondents were asked to assess the touching and physical closeness in their relationship. Half of the men, who considered this kind of intimacy as lacking in the relationship, and one-fourth of women, reported recurring lack of desire on the part of their partner. For men, lack of sexual desire in their female partner, then, was connected to the lack of physical intimacy that men saw in their relationship. Women who feel a lack of sexual desire seem often also to abstain from other forms of physical intimacy. Behind this, may be other communication and relationship problems besides those connected to sex.

As would be expected, respondents were most satisfied with the frequency of intercourse when their partner experienced no lack of sexual desire at all. The proportion of satisfied respondents in this category included 72 % of the men and 71 % of the women. Only 10 % of men who had experienced lack of sexual desire in their partner fairly frequently, and 18 % of women, was satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in their relationship. Three-quarters of the women who would have preferred intercourse less frequently had felt lack of sexual desire fairly frequently during the past year.

Nearly half of the women who viewed the lack of desire in their partner as problematic had themselves also often felt lack of desire. Only one in four women in this category had experienced no lack of desire at all in herself during the last year. In other words, women who had witnessed lack of desire in their partners had often also felt that same lack of desire themselves.

Factors that explain lack of sexual desire

Lack of sexual desire is connected to other sexual problems, but also to factors outside of the sphere sexual life, including gender, type, length and happiness of the relationship, psychological symptoms, and study year.

Which were the factors, then, that statistically most significantly explained lack of sexual desire that was considered problematic in Finland in the 1990s? The answer, based in MCA analysis, is that the factors that explained one's own lack of sexual desire were: gender and current relationship type (the value of the beta-coefficient that describes the strength of the correlation is .24; lack of sexual desire was most common among married women, and men who lived separately from their partners felt the least lack of desire), problems with erection and lubrication

(.17), low level of sexual desire (actual frequency of intercourse and satisfaction with the frequency of intercourse in a couple relationship, .16), numerous psychological symptoms (.13), lack of sexual desire in the partner, considered problematic (.10), low level of happiness in the relationship (.09), a later study year (1999, .07), and advanced age (.07). The afore-mentioned factors explained 26 % of the variation in lack of sexual desire.

The connection between age and lack of desire was interesting. According to unadjusted values, older people experienced lack of sexual desire more frequently than young people. But when the effect of the other factors mentioned above was standardized, the effect of age vanished. The increased sexual and psychological problems that come with ageing do explain lack of sexual desire among older people, but ageing in itself does not.

According to unadjusted means, the longer the couple relationship, the higher the proportion of those who had suffered from lack of sexual desire. But when the effect of the other factors mentioned above was taken into account, the correlation between the long duration of a relationship and lack of sexual desire disappeared. Based on this, lack of sexual desire in a long-lasting relationship was a result of the fact that people who have been in relationships longer are older, and therefore have many sexual and psychological problems.

Psychological symptoms increased lack of sexual desire significantly. In the present study, they included insomnia, headaches, tension or anxiety, overstrain, general feeling of fatigue or weakness, dizziness, nightmares, shaking hands, and hot flashes or sweating without physical exertion. The result indicates that it is not possible to fully enjoy one's sexual life when various psychological pressures prey on one's mind.

Sexual dysfunction and sexual problems resulting from illness had a significant impact on feeling lack of sexual desire. For example, only 40 % of those whose relationships did not have erection or lubrication problems had experienced lack of sexual desire during the past year. If problems related to erection or lubrication had been present in the relationship, approximately two-thirds had experienced lack of sexual desire. When the relationship had endured both kinds of problems, four-fifths of the Finnish respondents had experienced lack of sexual desire.