



## "Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Female Sexual Dysfunction

Most women have questions or experience some concerns about their sexuality at some point in their lives. Information on sexuality can be easily accessed via books and a variety of online and social media resources. However, it is difficult at times to separate advice-touting articles from the fact that sexuality is a highly individual experience depending on an array of factors including values and attitudes, previous sexual experiences, overall physical and mental health, and the relational influences. Psychologists can assist women in their exploration of questions or concerns regarding sexuality and psychologists with the relevant training can provide evidence-based treatments for sexual dysfunction.

### Female sexual dysfunctions

#### Desire

- Lack of sexual desire
- Desire discrepancy with partner
- Aversion to sexual activity

#### Arousal

- Difficulties with physical and/or subjective sexual arousal
- Difficulties lubricating
- Difficulties sustaining arousal

#### Orgasm

- Difficulties experiencing orgasm

#### Pain

- Pain with sexual activity
- Difficulties with vaginal penetration (anxiety, muscle tension)

#### Lack of sexual satisfaction and pleasure

### How common are sexual dysfunction?

Research studies in the U.S. and Europe estimate that 1 out of 3 women live with sexual difficulties. Most of these women are very distressed about their problems with sexual function and satisfaction, and about the effects the sexual problem may have on their relationship. The most frequently reported problem is lack of interest in sex. This is followed by experiencing pain and/or anxiety with sexual activity, difficulties experiencing orgasm, difficulties with sexual arousal, and not finding sex pleasurable or satisfying.





At different stages in a woman's life, challenges can result in *temporary* sexual difficulties. For example, a pregnant woman may experience a decrease in her desire for sexual activity and experience difficulties with vaginal lubrication post-partum. A woman busy with child and/or elder care may find it difficult to feel desire for sexuality. Women who are experiencing physical or mental health problems may observe changes in their sexuality. With age, women may also observe changes but, with the exception of vaginal lubrication difficulties, the number of women who experience sexual dysfunction does not increase with age. Temporary sexual difficulties do not always result in personal or interpersonal distress and self-care and transitioning life's challenges may result in the remission of sexual problems. However, lack of accurate sex information and negative evaluations from the self or partner may result in more lasting problems and increased distress. Psychologists are well-positioned to assist women in their path to sexual well-being in concordance with the woman's psychological needs, values, and motivations.

## What causes sexual dysfunction?

Female sexual dysfunction can have one or many causes. These may include physical conditions such as illness, hormonal imbalances, or reactions to medication. Psychological factors that may be involved in the development of sexual difficulties include a history of abuse, a woman's beliefs about sexuality, the way in which she communicates about sexuality, the way she feels about how she looks, and her mood. A woman's sexuality may also be affected by her life situation, stress, tiredness, or pregnancy, and a growing family. Difficulties within her relationship with her partner can affect the couple's sexual relationship. Culture and religion also influence women's attitudes towards their sexuality.

## How can psychologists help?

Psychological treatment of sexual dysfunction usually starts with a careful assessment of the history and circumstance of sexual problems. The psychologist may also ask questions about the woman's sexual and relationship history, and her overall physical and emotional health. Treatment for sexual dysfunction can involve other health care providers such as gynecologists or pelvic floor physical therapists. Specific psychological treatments vary somewhat depending on the sexual dysfunction and the treatment orientation of the psychologist. In general, psychologists who treat sexual dysfunctions, provide a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere and provide accurate information about sexuality. They tailor treatments to particular life circumstances, needs, and overall personal values of the woman. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is the most frequently used and best established short-term psychological treatment for sexual dysfunction. In CBT, a woman works with the therapist to identify and change problematic feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that interfere with pleasurable sexual expression. This is done during weekly or bi-weekly sessions with the psychologist, and through the use of at-home exercises. Increasingly, mindfulness interventions are included in CBT interventions or used as a stand-alone intervention. Mindfulness has been shown to be particularly effective with sexual interest and arousal difficulties, problems of pain and anxiety with intercourse, and health-related sexual problems (e.g., cancer).



## How do I obtain help from a psychologist for a sexual concern?

Talking about private, sexual feelings is not an easy, but essential first step! Many women suffer in silence with their problems for a long time. As a result, problems can worsen and distress increases. She may question her love for her partner, and her ability to sustain the relationship. If she is single, she may question her ability to start a new relationship. It is important to take the time to attend to one's sexual health and seek advice, the earlier the better. Women seeking sex therapy will be surprised how facilitative psychologists can be in talking about sexuality in a comfortable and safe manner – and just talking about one's questions, concerns, and distress are a good step in the right direction. It may be beneficial for a partner to participate in sex therapy. However, if not possible, it is still possible for her to benefit from sex therapy. Not all psychologists are trained to offer psychological treatment of sexual dysfunctions. When contacting a psychologist for a first appointment, it is important to ask about their professional expertise and experience.

## Where do I go for more information?

Here are some examples of websites and books that provide more information about sexuality and female sexual dysfunctions:

- <http://www.sieccan.org>  
SIECCAN is the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada, a national non-profit educational organization established in 1964 to foster public and professional education about human sexuality.
- <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/eng/>  
This site provides sex education and health information administered by The Society of Obstetrics & Gynaecologists of Canada.
- <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/>  
formerly Planned Parenthood Canada; progressive, pro-choice charitable organization committed to advancing and upholding sexual and reproductive health and rights in Canada and globally.
- <https://pflagcanada.ca/resources/>  
LGBTQ2 resources
- *Better sex through mindfulness: How women can cultivate desire* by Lori Brotto (Greystone Books)  
Excellent summary of treatment approaches to women's sexual concerns with a focus on evidence-based mindfulness interventions.
- *The Guide to Getting It On* by Paul Joannides (Daerick Gross: Books)  
This is a no-nonsense complete (and entertaining) guide to all things sexual...no question will be left unanswered!
- *Come as you are: The surprising new science that will transform your sex life* by Emily Nagoski (Simon & Schuster)  
Here is a short introduction to the book: <https://scribepublications.com.au/explore/video-audio/come-as-you-are-the-surprising-new-science-that-will-transform-your-se>
- *The Vagina Bible: The vulva and the vagina--separating the myth from the medicine* by Jen Gunter (Random House Canada)



Also check out: <https://gem.cbc.ca/season/jensplaining/season-1/9064a0b9-bbd2-4129-8998-a30cc97ebbb2>

- Mating in captivity: *Unlocking erotic intelligence* by Esther Perel (Harper Paperbacks)  
More information: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4eN7PS9mi8\\_4EYxy6VpFw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4eN7PS9mi8_4EYxy6VpFw)

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/ptassociations/>.

You can also find **Canadian providers of sex therapy** on the following website: <https://sstarnet.org/find-a-therapist/?s2-s=canada>

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Revised: October 2019

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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