


# The Myth of Sexual Experience

Why Sexually Inexperienced Dating Couples Actually Go On to Have Stronger Marriages



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# The Myth of Sexual Experience

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### Executive Summary

#### Several recent studies challenge the widely held belief that sexual experience during the dating years benefits future marriage

Many young adults and their parents regard sex prior to marriage as part of testing romantic relationship compatibility and as essential to determining if one's dating relationship has the **"sexual chemistry"** needed to proceed toward deeper levels of commitment. The conventional wisdom of the modern dating culture is that individuals should **"gain sexual experience"** before marriage in order to sample their options and eventually select a spouse better suited to their preferences. Also, many believe that young people need to experiment sexually so that they are **"ready to settle down and get married"** when the time comes. A series of recent studies using several different national datasets, however, find that these beliefs are in fact myths, that having multiple sex partners before marriage leads to lower quality relationships and higher divorce rates in future marriages. In fact, the number of sex partners a person has prior to marriage is one of the strongest predictors of divorce in social science research.

#### Sexually inexperienced couples go on to have the strongest marriages

In a new national study of married adults across the United States, we found a consistently negative relationship between the number of sexual partners a person has while dating and later measures of flourishing in marriage. Specifically, we found that for every outcome we analyzed there was an incremental decrease in marital flourishing for each additional sex partner respondents had before they were married. For example, with relationship satisfaction we found that for every additional sex partner reported, the probability of being highly satisfied with one's marriage decreased by almost 4%. Relationship stability showed an even larger change, with spouses' having a 6.5% decrease in the likelihood of reporting their marriage is highly stable for each new sex partner. For sexual satisfaction, each additional sex partner resulted in a 4% decrease in the probability of being in a marriage with high levels of sexual satisfaction.

#### Having multiple sexual partners before marriage has a particularly strong association with lower marital stability and higher rates of divorce

Similar to other studies, we found that sexual experience prior to marriage is correlated with lower stability in marriage and a greater likelihood of divorce. Specifically, this study found that men and women who have only had sex with their spouse have a nearly 45% chance of reporting a very high level of relationship stability in their marriage, whereas only 25% of married individuals with 5 to 9 lifetime sex partners and only 14% of married individuals with 10 or more lifetime sex partners report a similarly high level of relationship stability.

## **Today's sexual dating culture is putting nearly half of the population at significantly higher risk for instability in their future marriage**

Nearly 50% of women and men in the United States enter marriage with 5 or more previous sex partners and, therefore, fall into one of the sexual experience groups that have significantly lower marital stability than married individuals who have only had sex with their spouse. These findings line up with a 2018 study using the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), in which Dr. Nicholas Wolfinger also documented that women who wait until they are married to have sex have only a 5% chance of divorce in the first five years of marriage, whereas women who report they have had two or more sex partners prior to marriage have between a 25% to 35% chance of divorce within the same time period. Given that numerous studies have shown that marital stability is linked to several aspects of adult and child well-being, these patterns may also be triggering the loss of other benefits as well.

## **Spouses who have only had sex with their current spouse have the highest levels of sexual satisfaction and emotional connection in their marriages**

Nearly 1 in 5 married men and women who have only had sex with their spouse report that they are "very satisfied" with multiple aspects of their sexual relationship in their marriage. In comparison, only 1 in 10 married men and women who are "highly sexually experienced" (meaning they have 10 or more sexual partners before marriage) report similar levels of sexual satisfaction. Also, nearly 80% of married individuals who were sexually inexperienced before marriage report the highest level of emotional closeness in their marriage, which is more than 20% higher than individuals who have had multiple sex partners.

## **Risk levels are the same whether sexual experience happens inside or outside of committed relationships**

Research on sexual ethics in dating often assume that there is a meaningful distinction between sexual partners inside of a committed dating relationship (for example within an exclusive dating relationship or being engaged to marry) versus casual sex partners in hook-up or one-night-stand type interactions. Our study was able to analyze both types of sexual partners separately and we found that whether a person's sexual partners were committed partners or casual sex partners did not change the negative effect premarital sexual experience had on future marriage outcomes. Simply put, it appears that it does not matter if a person's sexual experience before marriage is gained in a series of committed relationships or in a series of casual sexual hook-ups. Both types of sexual experiences appear to have a cumulative negative impact on later marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and marital stability.

## **It is possible to overcome past sexual decisions and change future marriage outcomes**

This study also provides hope for individuals and couples who may regret their previous sexual decision making in dating and would like to change the trajectory of their marriage outcomes. It appears that the risks of sexual experimentation before marriage can be overcome when one adopts beliefs and behaviors that foster enduring marriages. It should be noted that even about 10% to 15% of sexually experienced individuals reported that they are in a flourishing marriage. While more research is needed to confirm this explanation, it is highly likely that these individuals changed their mindset and behaviors about sexual intimacy to create such strong marriage relationships. This change likely included approaching marriage with enduring commitment, adopting a spouse-centered approach to love and sex, and embracing fidelity by avoiding alternative seeking behaviors after marriage.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
Modern Dating Trends	
The Sexual Chemistry Hypothesis	
The Sexual Experience Hypothesis	
The Ready to Settle Down Hypothesis	
Previous Studies on Sexual Experience Before Marriage	
<b>Methods</b>	<b>9</b>
The National Couples and Pornography Survey	
Measuring Sexual Experience Before Marriage	
Controlling for Other Factors	
<b>Results</b>	<b>11</b>
Trends of Sexual Experience in the Dating Years	
Sexual Experience in Dating and Later Marital Quality	
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>21</b>
The Myth of Sexual Chemistry	
The Myth of Sexual Experience	
The Myth of Settling Down	
The Possibility of Charting a New Path	

# Introduction

Casual attitudes toward sexual relationships frequently characterize the contemporary dating culture. For many young adults, single life in American culture has become synonymous with sexual experimentation in both committed romantic dating relationships and casual sexual hook-ups.<sup>1</sup> However, most single adults in the United States today still desire to one day have a successful, lifelong marriage.

Are these patterns of pursuing sexual experience in dating during the single years compatible with the desire to later have a loving and lasting marriage? Does having multiple sexual partners in dating help you make a better choice when it comes time to select a spouse? Does “true love wait” for the lasting relationship or should you “test drive” relationships before saying I do?

These are important questions to answer in the context of contemporary dating where many young adults gain considerable amounts of sexual experience prior to getting married. They are also important questions to answer given the inherent benefits of life-long stable marriage. Numerous studies have shown that getting married and staying married is linked to several aspects of individual health and well-being, such as better financial status,<sup>2</sup> improved physical health,<sup>3</sup> and enhanced mental health.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if sexual experimentation before marriage decreases marital quality and increases the likelihood of divorce, it may also cause people to miss out on these other benefits of marriage as well.

## Modern Dating Trends

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a steady rise in the age of first marriage in the United States. The median age at first marriage is now 28 years old for women and 30 years old for men in the United States, however marriage age varies across regions of the country.<sup>5</sup> This delay in marriage has considerably extended the period of single

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adulthood in many people’s lives and increased the amount of time in which many individuals are navigating dating and romantic relationships outside of marriage. However, as a leading team of researchers recently noted, the changes we are seeing in marriage timing “do not appear to reflect a lack of interest in marriage or family formation among young people.” In fact, in their recent analysis of the 2017-2019 National Survey of Family Growth, they found that 95% of teens ages 15 to 19 still expect to get married and 87% plan to have children someday.<sup>6</sup>

While most young adults still plan to eventually marry, previous research tells us that most of them also desire to have multiple sex partners before they get married. In fact, recent studies show that most college students would like to have multiple sex partners each year.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, college men, on average, desire to have 10 sexual partners before getting married, while college women, on average, report that they would like to have 4 sex partners before they marry.<sup>8</sup> Recent data from the National Survey of Family Growth shows that the majority of young adults have in fact followed through with this desire, reporting multiple sex partners by the end of their young adult years.<sup>9</sup>

Previous studies also indicate that within committed dating relationships the pace of sexual initiation is very quick for many couples and only a small proportion of couples wait until marriage before initiating sexual relations. Approximately half of young adult dating couples (50%) become sexually active within the first month of dating and another 25% initiate sex within 1 to 3 months after beginning to date.<sup>10</sup> Outside of committed relationships, many singles also participate in a “hook-up” culture made up of one-time sex partners or “friends-with-benefits” who become sex partners without any deeper commitment as a couple. The cumulative impact of these modern dating trends is that the majority of individuals in the United States who marry enter their marriages having had multiple sexual partners while dating. Recently, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States reported that among men and women ages 25 to 49 the typical number of lifetime sex partners is about 4 sex partners for women and about 6 sex partners for men. Only about 1 in 5 women (18%) and 1 in 10 men (11%) reported that they had had only 1 lifetime sex partner, whereas nearly a third of women (29%) and a quarter of men (22%) reported 2 to 4 sex partners, and another third of women (29%) and quarter of men (26%) reported between 5 and 9 lifetime sex partners. Nearly 1 in 4 of women (25%) and 4 in 10 men (41%) reported 10 or more lifetime sex partners.<sup>11</sup>

## Does Sexual Experience in Dating Impact Marriage?

The modern dating culture in the United States is deeply influenced by three widely held beliefs about sexual experience prior to marriage.<sup>12</sup> Let’s explore these beliefs further and then look at what previous research tells us about whether or not these beliefs hold up to scientific scrutiny.

### The Sexual Chemistry Hypothesis

The first widely held belief about premarital sexual experience can be called the **Sexual Chemistry Hypothesis**. For many young adults and their parents, sex in dating is regarded

as an important part of testing relationship compatibility and determining if the relationship should proceed toward deeper levels of commitment. Finding a relationship with strong “sexual chemistry” is seen as an essential characteristic in a romantic relationship, particularly one that could lead to marriage. From this perspective, couples who do not test their sexual chemistry prior to becoming exclusive and getting married are seen as being at risk for entering into a relationship that will not satisfy them in the future – thus increasing their risk of future marital distress and failure.

Young adults who embrace the sexual chemistry hypothesis in their approach to dating are more likely to eventually have more sex partners during their dating years. This happens since sex often occurs before the future trajectory of a dating relationship is established, causing them to acquire a series of sexual partners as they move in and out of romantic relationships.

### The Sexual Experience Hypothesis

The second widely held belief in modern dating can be called the **Sexual Experience Hypothesis**. This is the belief that it is actually beneficial to intentionally have sex with multiple partners in dating as this will allow you to “sample the options” and make a more informed decision about a marriage partner later when the time comes. The prevailing perspective is that romantic involvement during young adulthood provides an opportunity for individuals to explore their sexuality in the context of their feelings of love for and perceptions of being loved by their partner. Like many other aspects of life when it comes to gaining experience, more is assumed to be better. Gaining this sexual experience in the context of multiple relationships is assumed to help people make better evaluations of current and future partners and be better able to communicate sexual desires and needs.



## The Ready to Settle Down Hypothesis

A third common belief among young adults and their parents is one that can be called the **Ready to Settle Down Hypothesis**. Many individuals now believe that experimentation with casual sex is a useful, and perhaps even needed, part of young adult development where a young person gets out all of his or her promiscuous and impulsive sexual desires before they are ready to “**settle down and getting married.**” The thought process is that if young people are able to get all of their casual sexual impulses out of their systems before marriage, then they will be more likely to remain faithful to their spouses later in marriage.

This positive view of premarital sexual experimentation implies a “**get it out of your system**” hypothesis that contends that having multiple sexual partners before marriage will make individuals more ready for marriage. However, traditional phrases like “sowing wild oats” imply that sexual promiscuity may actually create unrecognized problems, like a field full of weeds, that will emerge later in a committed marriage relationship. This perspective implies a “**get it into your system**” hypothesis that suggests that numerous sexual experiences might produce “wild attitudes” that separate sex from emotional intimacy in a relationship in ways that might make staying in a faithful monogamous relationship less likely in one’s future.

If these three beliefs are accurate then sexual restraint during dating and “saving sex until marriage” should be negatively correlated with later relationship outcomes for couples who decide to marry because sexually inexperienced couples will miss out on the benefits that sexual experience in dating is believed to bring to a future marriage relationship.

**“The most important takeaway is that premarital sex is a highly significant predictor of divorce in every model. This effect remains robust even with the inclusion of the full set of early-life factors relating to beliefs or values, religious practice, family characteristics, individual attributes, and parent-child relationships. The effect size is both large and stable: across models, those with premarital sexual partners have more than twice the odds of divorce as do those without” (Smith & Wolfinger, 2023).**

## Previous Studies on Sexual Experience Before Marriage

Until recently, studies on the impact of sexual experience in dating on future marriage have been limited. However, counter to the assumed logic of many modern daters, several recent studies provide evidence that having multiple sex partners before marriage inhibits healthy relationship formation and leads to higher rates of divorce. In a recent study of nearly 3,000 married individuals, researchers found that spouses who had multiple sex partners before marriage had lower levels of sex quality, communication, and relationship stability in their current marriage, even when controlling for a wide range of variables including education, religiosity and relationship length. These findings were similar for husbands and wives. No evidence was found in this or other studies that increasing the number of sex partners before marriage benefited later marital outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

More recently, Dr. Nicholas Wolfinger and his colleagues have conducted a series of studies of sexual experience during dating and later marriage outcomes using prominent national datasets, namely the National Survey of Family Growth,<sup>14</sup> the General Social Survey,<sup>15</sup> and the National



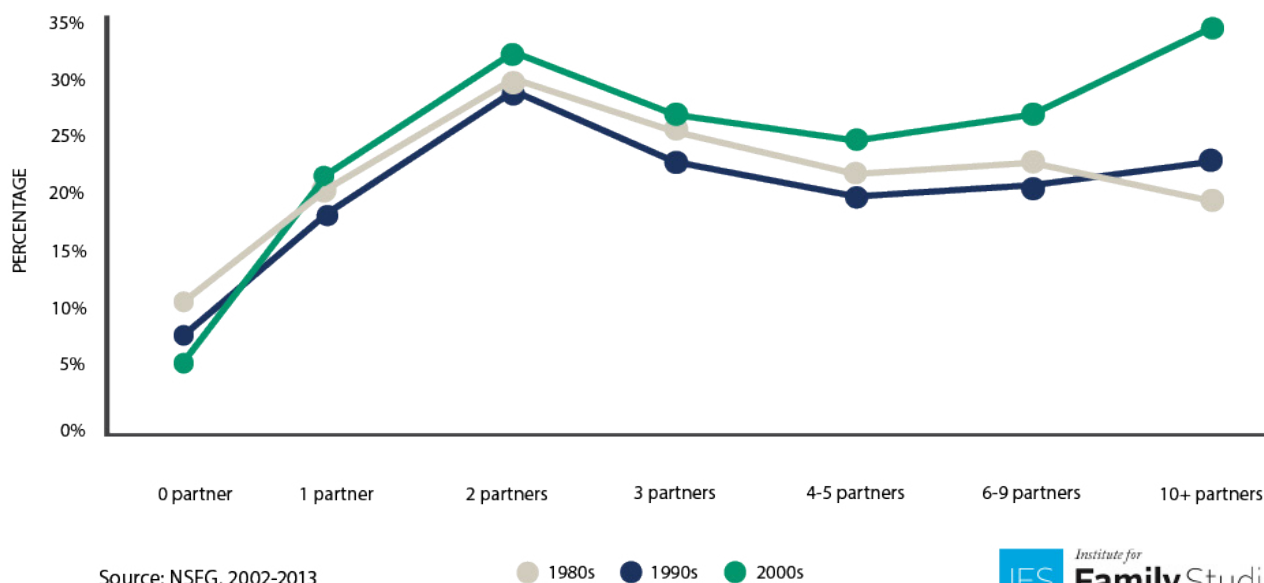
Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health.<sup>16</sup> In these studies, they have found that even as premarital sex has become more acceptable and common in modern dating, the lowest divorce rates in the first five years of marriage are found among married couples who have only had sex with each other (see *Figure 1* – reprinted from the Institute for Family Studies).<sup>17</sup> In a newly published study using longitudinal data from the national Add Health dataset, Dr. Wolfinger and his colleagues found similar results. They concluded:

*“The most important takeaway is that premarital sex is a highly significant predictor of divorce in every model. This effect remains robust even with the inclusion of the full set of early-life factors relating to beliefs or values, religious practice, family characteristics, individual attributes, and parent–child relationships. The effect size is both large and stable: across models, those with premarital sexual partners have more than twice the odds of divorce as do those without... It*

*reinforces the finding that the effect of premarital sex is robust and shows that it applies equally to men as well as women.”<sup>18</sup>*

This research team has also pointed out in their studies that they do not find support for the notion that these differences can be explained as being simply due to selection effects. Their studies have shown that the effect of premarital sex remains highly significant after accounting for a wide range of early-life characteristics often referred to in past research, such as casual views on sex and marriage, low religiosity, or lower-quality family relationships, as well as additional factors such as child personality or parent socialization. They emphasize that their series of studies reinforce the finding that the effect of premarital sex on divorce is robust and appears to apply equally to men as well as women.

Figure 1: The Chances of Divorce After Five Years of Marriage  
by Marriage Cohort and Number of Premarital Sexual Partners



Reprint from the Institute for Family Studies – see Wolfinger, N. H. (2016). Counterintuitive Trends in the Link Between Premarital Sex and Marital Stability. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/counterintuitive-trends-in-the-link-between-premarital-sex-and-marital-stability>

## Purpose of the Current Study

This report details the findings from a new study on the impact of sexual experience before marriage on future marital outcomes. We wanted to ascertain if the trends identified by previous research still held true in the most current cohorts of married couples in the United States. We also wanted to examine the impact of sexual experience in dating on a wider range of marriage outcomes than has been done in previous studies, which have focused almost entirely on marital stability and divorce rates. In particular, we wanted to further examine how sexual patterns in dating impact the quality of the sexual relationship in later marriages.

In this research report, we summarize the findings from a new study done with *The National Couples and Pornography Study*. This study consists of 1,942 married individuals in the United States who provided detailed histories of their sexual experience

during adulthood in both committed romantic relationships and in casual sexual encounters outside of a relationship. We then examined how these sexual experience histories were associated with the quality of their current marriage relationships in the areas of relationship satisfaction, marriage stability, sexual satisfaction, and emotional closeness with one's spouse.

It should be noted, that given the fact that previous studies have documented a strong link between the number of sex partners before marriage and divorce rates in early marriage, it is likely that our study underestimates the full effect of premarital sex on marriage since our sample is comprised of couples who are still together. It is likely that the couples who struggle the most due to the effects of premarital sexual experience end their relationships early in marriage and, therefore, their relationship dynamics would not be captured in a study of intact marriages.



# Methods

## Overview of Data and Project

The data for this study were drawn from the *National Couples and Pornography Study*, which consisted of two nationally diverse samples in the United States. Data were collected independently by Qualtrics from their existing data panel during 2020.

## Sample of Married Couples Across the United States

For this report, we used the “individual dataset” from the *National Couples and Pornography Study*. This is a large sample of individuals in committed relationships who agreed to participate in an online survey about their relationship and sexuality. The sample was recruited from across the United States based on quotas for age, race, education level, and geographic region aimed at creating a demographically diverse sample. To qualify for the study, participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and currently in a committed couple relationship (seriously dating, cohabiting, or married). The final individual sample was comprised of 3,750 individuals. For this report, only participants in relationships with the opposite sex were included in analyses. We also elected in this report to only use those individuals who reported that they were married in order to focus on individuals in committed and long-term relationships.

For our sample, the average relationship length was 11 years ( $SD = 11.2$ ). The largest racial group was Caucasian (76.5%) followed by African American (10.7%), Latino (6.2%), Asian (4.7%), Other (1.0%), and Native American (0.9%). The average gross household monthly income for the sample was \$5,237 ( $SD = 2,855$ ). In terms of religious affiliation, the largest group was Christian (55.4%), followed by No Affiliation (22.1%), Other (14.2%), and Atheist or Agnostic (8.2%). The average age of men in the sample was 39 years ( $SD = 10.2$ ) and for women it was 37 years ( $SD = 10.3$ ) with a combined range from 18 to 78. For educational attainment, the largest group were those who had at least a four-

year-degree (46.6%), with those who have had some college (21.6%) or a two-year degree (13.4%) following, and another 18.4% reported they have attended college.

All participants completed an informed consent form prior to being asked any questions in the survey. As part of that informed consent, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data (including that their partner would not have any access to their responses for the partnered dataset). Following completion of the survey, participants were compensated directly by Qualtrics, at the standard rates they utilize for online panels. In order to substantiate data quality, five attention checks were inserted throughout the survey in both studies. Examples of these items were “If you are reading this question, please select ‘Somewhat important’” and “If you are reading this question please move the slider to ‘65’”. Individuals who did not pass all attention checks throughout the survey were removed from the final sample.

## Measuring Sexual Experience Before Marriage

To create our measure of sexual experience level before marriage, we included participants’ responses to two different questions that everyone in the survey was asked. First, we asked individuals to report the number of lifetime sexual intercourse partners that they have had in a committed relationship. We then asked the same question, only this time asking for the number of lifetime sexual intercourse partners outside of a committed relationship. To get the total number of sexual partners in one’s life, we added the answers to these two questions together.

The range of number of lifetime sex partners in our sample was from 0 to 390. For analysis purposes, we removed all of the people from our married sample who reported either having had no sex

partners (which likely indicated bad data or unique marital situations that eliminated the ability to have sex) and those spouses who reported over 40 sex partners. This second decision was made to reduce the influence of outliers on our analyses. The group of participants who were removed due to this decision represented a minority of the sample. When examining associations between sexual partners and relationship wellbeing, we did not want the results to be heavily based on a smaller sample of individuals who engaged in high amounts of sexual intercourse across an abnormally large range of partners. Instead, we wanted to explore differences in sexual experience levels which focused on a range of sexual partners more typical of the current dating patterns in our sample. This way, any differences found would be ones that encompass a range of sexual experience more common among today's United States adult population. Finally, we removed anyone who reported zero committed sex partners, but any number of casual sexual partners. Given that this was a sexually active married sample, anyone who fell into this category was assumed to be supplying inaccurate data. This left us with a final analytical sample of 1,942 participants.

## Controlling for Other Factors

To better understand the association between sexual experience before marriage and later marital quality we controlled for several factors that are related to both sexual decision-making and relationship quality in our analyses. For these controls, we selected three key characteristics.

**Relationship Length:** First, we controlled for how long each person had been in their current relationship. Relationship length is often related to relationship quality and related to age (obviously those who are older would be more likely to be in relationships for a longer duration). Since age is likely also related to how many sex partners one has had in life, relationship length helped us capture this as a control.

**Religiosity:** We also controlled for religiosity, which captured for each participant how frequently spirituality is an important part of life, how frequently prayer occurs, and how important religious faith is. Being highly religious is related to having both fewer sex partners and longer relationships. We wanted to ensure that any differences we found based on sexual history were not simply related to how religious the people in the sample were.

**Biological Sex:** Finally, we controlled for the biological sex of the participant in all of our analyses. Cultural expectations vary for men and women when it comes to sexual experience and the number of sexual partners, and we wanted to ensure that any differences seen were not due to difference in biological sex. We did explore whether the patterns presented in this report differed between men and women and found no evidence that biological sex was a significant moderator of any of the results.

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# Results

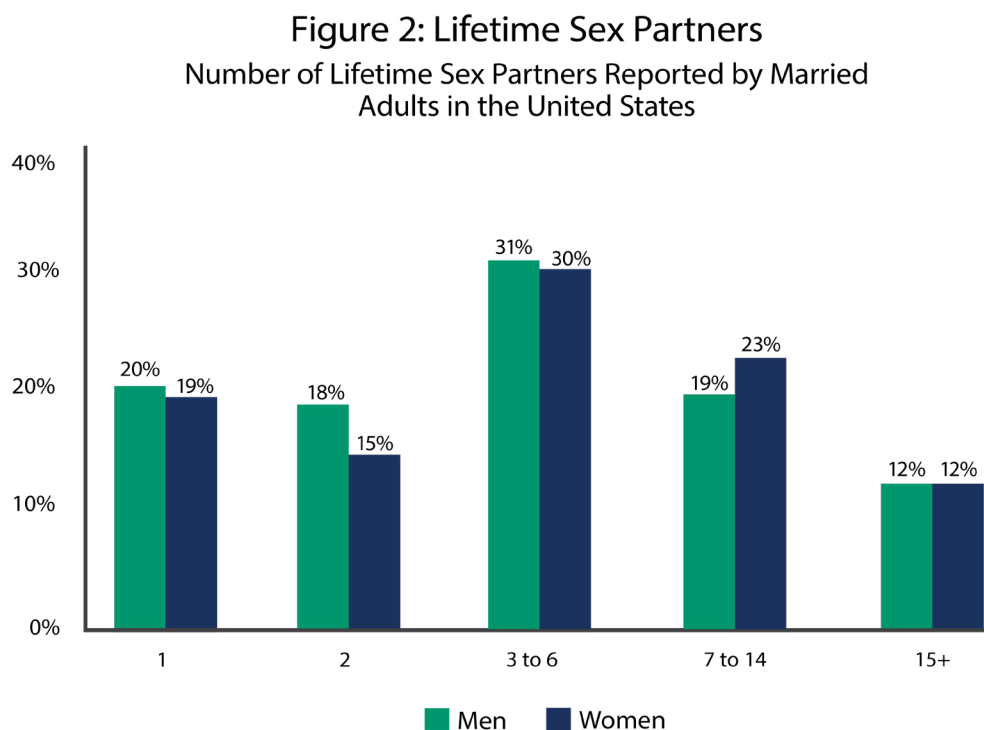
Participants in the *National Couples and Pornography Study* were asked to provide details about several aspects of their sexual history prior to marriage. Initially we structured the analyses of this study to measure the number of committed and uncommitted sexual partners separately, however, we found that patterns and outcomes related to sexual experience were generally similar regardless of the type of sexual experience being reported. Because of this, we combined these numbers into one singular assessment of the total number of lifetime sex partners prior to marriage for the analyses presented in this report.

## Trends of Sexual Experience in the Dating Years

Overall, in this study we found that in the United States today the average number of lifetime sex partners for married individuals was almost 7 (6.7). When separated by men and women, we found that men and women reported almost identical numbers in terms of average lifetime sex partners.

While we removed the majority of our outliers from the sample, we also explored the median sex partner numbers which captured the “middle” number for the entire dataset. This median number of lifetime sex partners before marriage for the entire sample was 4 total partners for both men and women, slightly less than the mean.

Figure 2 shows the distributions of sexual experience for men and women across the sample. Of note, we generally saw few differences between men and women, which is an indicator that sexual patterns in modern dating are largely similar for women and men. Overall, about 1 in 5 married adults reported that they have had just one lifetime sex partner (19% of married women and 20% of married men). Given that this was a sample of married adults, this means that in America today 1 in 5 married adults has only engaged in sexual intercourse with their spouse (although we did not assess if their sexual activity was initiated before or after marriage). In line with the average and median numbers reported



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020

above, the largest proportion of married adults reported between 3 and 6 lifetime sex partners, with a little less than a third of married adults falling within this range (30% of married women and 31% of married men). Another approximately 20% of married adults report having had between 7 and 14 lifetime sexual partners, and another 12% of both married men and women report that they have had more than 15 lifetime sex partners. The fact that 1 in 5 married men and women in the United States continue to report a single lifetime sexual partner is a noteworthy finding. First off, this finding is notable because it does highlight that not all young adults are engaging in sexual relationships

**“The fact that 1 in 5 married men and women in the United States continue to report a single lifetime sexual partner is a noteworthy finding... it highlights that not all young adults are engaging in sexual relationships in their dating years. A significant minority of young adults are waiting until marriage to have sex.”**

in their dating years. A significant minority of young adults are waiting until marriage to have sex or are at least reserving sex for a committed relationship that is moving toward marriage.

The second reason why this finding is notable is that when these trends are combined with the findings of previous studies it is clear that there is a steady generational drop in the number of individuals who wait until they find a spouse to engage in sexual activity. For example, using data from the General Social Survey, Dr. Nicholas Wolfinger reported that for the birth cohort born in the 1910s, over 70% of women and 50% of men reported only one lifetime

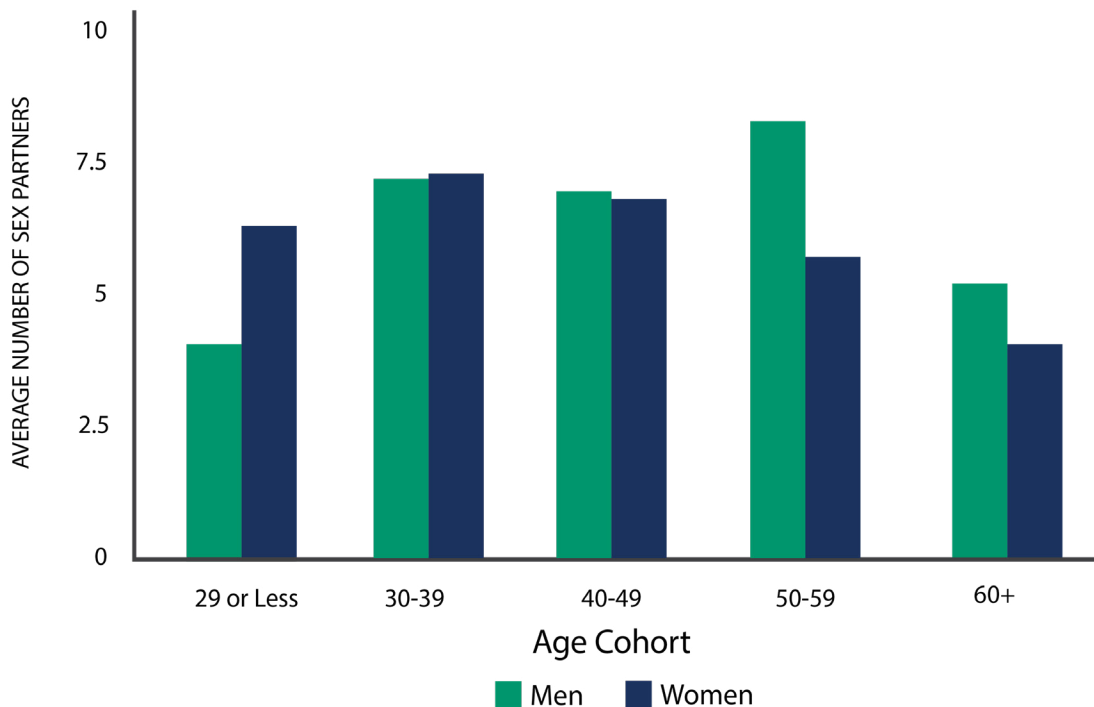
**“When these trends are combined with the findings of previous studies it is clear that there is a steady generational drop in the number of individuals who wait until they find a spouse to engage in sexual activity.”**





Figure 3: Lifetime Sex Partners by Age Cohort

Average Number of Lifetime Sex Partners Reported  
by Married Adults In the United States by Age



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020



sex partner. However, he found that more recently these numbers dropped to about 40% of men and women by the birth cohort born in the 1980s (today's adults between 33 and 43 years old).<sup>19</sup> It appears that that these numbers have continued to decline and now only about 20% to 30% of married men and women are married with only one lifetime sex partner.

*Figure 3* provides some additional insight to sexual experience patterns in the United States across age cohorts. Here, some generational cohort differences were apparent, with those over the age of 60 reporting the lowest number of sex partners. Those between the ages of 30 to 39, largely comprised of millennials, reported the largest average number of premarital sex partners and were the only group to average

more than 7 total life sex partners. However, those ages 40 to 49 reported the highest median number of life sex partners with 5 total sex partners.

### Sexual Experience in Dating and Later Marital Quality

To tackle our main research question, we began by exploring how sexual experience in dating is related to several key indicators of marital quality and flourishing. We focused on relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relationship stability, and emotional connection as our main indicators of healthy and high-quality relationships.

**“We found that across all of our analyses the number of dating sex partners went up, the relationship quality reported tended to be lower. Although the rate of decrease varies depending on the quality measure, the trend is the same across all outcomes.”**

## Overall Trends

We first explored how the number of sex partners before marriage was related in a basic way with these measures of relationship quality by exploring simple correlational associations between these factors. We found that across all our analyses, as the number of dating sex partners went up, the relationship quality reported was lower. Although the rate of decrease varies depending on the specific measure, the trend was the same across all outcomes. For example, the correlation between the number of sex partners before marriage and overall marriage satisfaction was  $-.10$ . This small but significant correlation would suggest that as the number of sex partners was reported as higher, relationship satisfaction was also likely to be reported as slightly lower.

Using the controls we mentioned in the Methods section, we next ran regression models predicting each relationship quality measure using number of sexual partners as the main predictor of interest while controlling for relationship length, biological sex, and religiosity. This helped us determine if the basic relationship between sexual experience and relationship quality was due to factors such as being religious or how long relationships had lasted. As far as relationship satisfaction goes, each additional sexual partner represented a small decrease in relationship satisfaction even when controlling for these other factors. Similar patterns also occurred in the results for relationship stability, sexual satisfaction, and emotional connection. Importantly,

each additional sex partner represented only a small decrease in the relationship quality of each measure, suggesting that sexual experience had a small, but important association with relationship flourishing. Remember, however, that these small decreases add up very quickly as individuals increase their number of sex partners. Further, results held even after controlling for a variety of demographic characteristics which suggests that these results are consistent across a wide range of individuals.

## Sexual Experience Levels and Flourishing in Marriage

While these results helped us understand the basic association between sexual experience history and later marital quality, they don't really answer the question of whether sexual experience prior to marriage predicts who is in the best and healthiest marital relationships. While these previous results suggest that more sexual partners are generally associated with worse relationship quality, we also wanted to know how sexual experience history would specifically predict flourishing in marriage – which we assessed by examining whether or not participants reported high levels of marital relationship quality across each measure. To accomplish this, new regression models were run to determine the predicted probability respondents had of being in the highest relationship quality response for each outcome in the study. For example, our relationship satisfaction measure was measured on a scale that ranged from 1 to 5. For this model, we wanted to see if sexual experience history would help us predict which spouses marked the highest category (“5”) on all the relationship satisfaction items.

For each of the marital relationship quality measures, the regression results were significant and negative. This means that for each measure, every increase in the number of sex partners represented a lower likelihood of falling into the highest indicator of relationship quality. To put these results into context, for relationship satisfaction

we found that for every additional sex partner reported, the probability of being in the highest category of relationship satisfaction decreased by almost 4%. Relationship stability showed an even larger change and decreased by 6.5% for each additional sex partner and sexual satisfaction decreased by 4% for each additional sex partner before marriage. Results for emotional connection showed the least amount of difference, with each additional sexual partner representing about a 2% decrease in the likelihood of reporting the highest levels of emotional connection.

**“For relationship satisfaction we found that for every additional sex partner reported, the probability of being in the highest category of relationship satisfaction decreased by almost 4%. Relationship stability showed an even larger change and decreased by 6.5% for each additional sex partner and sexual satisfaction decreased by 4% for each additional sex partner before marriage.”**

#### **Group Comparisons: The Inexperienced vs. The Experienced**

**Group 1: Inexperienced:** We first created a group of married individuals who we labeled as the “**Inexperienced**” when it came to sex before marriage. These are all of the people who were sexually inexperienced prior to marriage and who report having only one lifetime sex partner. These individuals represent those who have only had sex with their spouse. This group made up 19.5% of the sample (19.7% of married men, 19.4% of married women).

**Group 2: Less Experienced:** Our second group was those we labeled as “**Less Experienced**” when it came to sex before marriage. These were people with a combined number of 2, 3, or 4 lifetime sex partners. This group represented

those who have had multiple sex partners (and perhaps a hook-up or two), but who have generally restrained from engaging in a high amount of sexual activity and generally reported less sexual experience in dating than the average adult in the sample. They may be those who have refrained from sexual intimacy outside of a few long-term and committed relationships or perhaps those who had limited relationship and dating experience prior to marriage. This group also captures the small number of individuals who had been married previously and remarried, but only had sexual experience with their previous and current spouses. This group made up 33.4% of the sample (35.2% of married men, 32.7% of married women).

**Group 3: More Experienced:** Our third group was those we labeled as “**More Experienced**” as it relates to their number of sex partners before marriage. These are individuals who reported a total number of 5 to 9 lifetime sex partners. If you will remember, this was the group that captures the average person in the sample (our average in the sample was just under 7 for both men and women). This group made up 24.4% of the sample (23.2% of married men, 24.9% of married women).

#### **Group 4: Highly Experienced:**

The final group were those who reported 10 or more total lifetime sexual partners. We called this group “**Highly Experienced**” in regard to sexual experience prior to marriage. This group includes the most sexually experienced participants retained in our analyses, those in the sample who may have reported up to 40 sex partners in their life. Many in this group reported a high amount of casual sex partners (averaging 10.2 total casual partners) and likely held a more permissive sexual ethic, at least for a portion of their dating lives. This group made up 22.7% of the sample (21.9% of married men, and 23.0% of married women).

**Table 1- Lifetime Sex Partners Inside and Outside of in Committed Relationships**

Sexual Experience Group	Committed Sex Partners Sex Partners Inside of Committed Relationships	Casual Sex Partners Sex Partners Outside of Committed Relationships
Inexperienced (1)	1.0	---
Less Experienced (2-4)	1.9	0.8
More Experienced (5-9)	3.9	2.7
Highly Experienced (10+)	7.4	10.2

*Table 1* shows a breakdown of the premarital sexual behavior across the four groups. The table shows the average number of committed and casual sex partners for each group. As can be seen, while the Inexperienced group only had sex with their spouse and had no casual sexual experience with intercourse, the Less Experienced were characterized by individuals who tended to have about two sex partners within a committed partnership and one sex partner outside of a committed relationship. There was a considerable increase in both committed and casual sex partners for those in the More Experienced group, who averaged almost 4 sex partners within a committed relationship and almost 3 outside of a committed relationship. The Highly Experienced were the only group who averaged more casual sex partners (over 10 casual partners) than sex partners inside a committed relationship (over 7 committed sex partners).

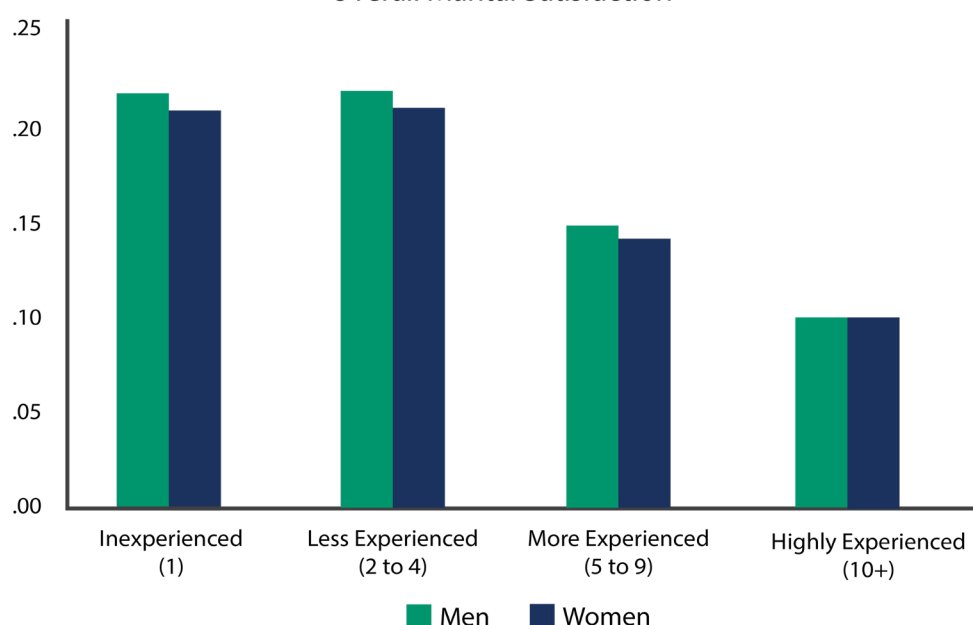
We next compared these four groups on the same relationship quality measures as were previously explored. While we did not expect that the general trend of this association would change from the previous analyses, these groupings

allowed us to explore where inflection points in these relationships might exist and examine these relationships in more detail. It also allowed us to target flourishing couples by looking at the association between sexual experience in dating with the highest levels of relationship functioning. We did this by running logistic regression models with predicted probability analyses across the four groups, controlling for the same variables as before (relationship length, biological sex, and religiosity).

### Relationship Satisfaction

We first calculated the predicted probability of married men and women reporting that they have a “very satisfied” level of relationship satisfaction in their marriage. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with six items asking participants how satisfied they were with various aspects of their relationship such as their communication, conflict resolution, and time spent together. Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from “very dissatisfied” (1) to “very satisfied” (5).

**Figure 4: Relationship Satisfaction**  
Probability of Reporting a “Very Satisfied” Level of Overall Marital Satisfaction



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020

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**“Sexually inexperienced spouses are more than twice as likely to report that they are highly satisfied with their marriages than are spouses with high levels of sexual experience before marriage.”**

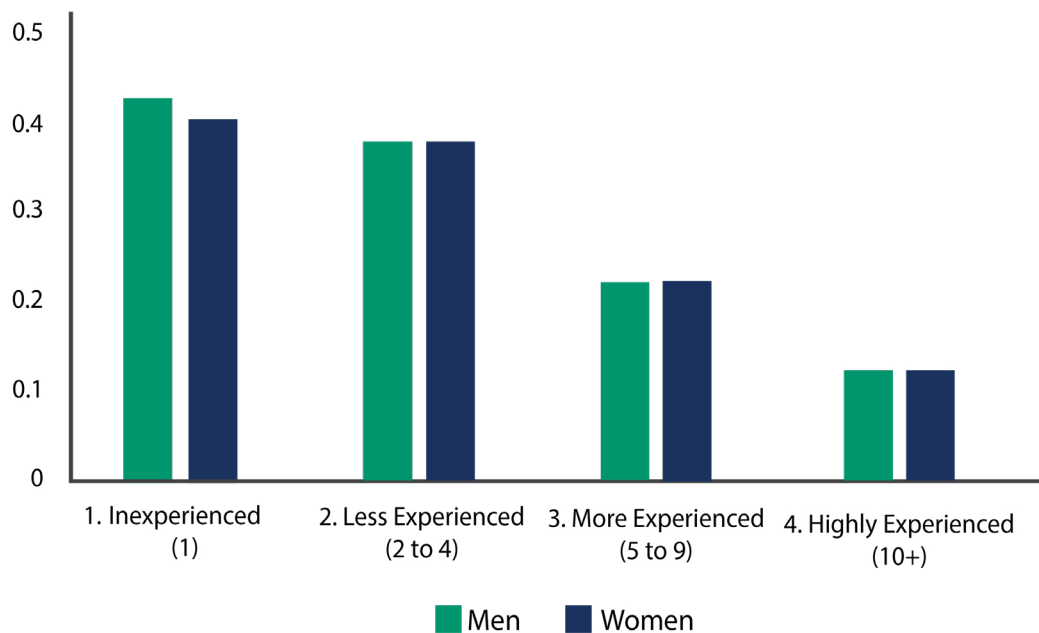
Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities of being in the highest relationship satisfaction category for each sexual experience group. As can be seen, over 20% of spouses in the Inexperienced group reported that they were “very satisfied” in all aspects of their relationship satisfaction (22% of men and 21% of women). Those in the Less Experienced group reported a similar probability of high relationship satisfaction. However, the proportion of very satisfied couples dropped at a statistically significant level among those in the More Experienced and Highly Experienced groups. While over 1 in 5 spouses in the Inexperienced group were likely to report high relationship satisfaction, only 1 in 7 of those in the More Experienced group

were likely to report the same level of satisfaction. This dropped even further for those in the Highly Experienced group, with less than 1 in 10 of spouses reporting that they are very satisfied with their marriage. Thus, sexually inexperienced spouses are more than twice as likely to report that they are highly satisfied with their marriages than are spouses with high levels of sexual experience before marriage.

### Relationship Stability

We assessed relationship stability in marriage by averaging three items, which asked respondents how often the following three things had happened in their relationship: “How often have you thought your relationship (or marriage) might be in trouble?”, “How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship (or marriage)?”, and “How often have you broken up or separated and then gotten back together?” Responses ranged from “never” (1) to “very often” (5). These items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated more stability.

**Figure 5: Relationship Stability**  
Probability of Reporting a "Very Stable" Marriage  
That is Not in Trouble of Ending



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020



Similar to previous research studies, we found that relationship stability is the marriage outcome that is most impacted by sexual experience levels before marriage. Each sexual experience group reported statistically significantly different likelihoods

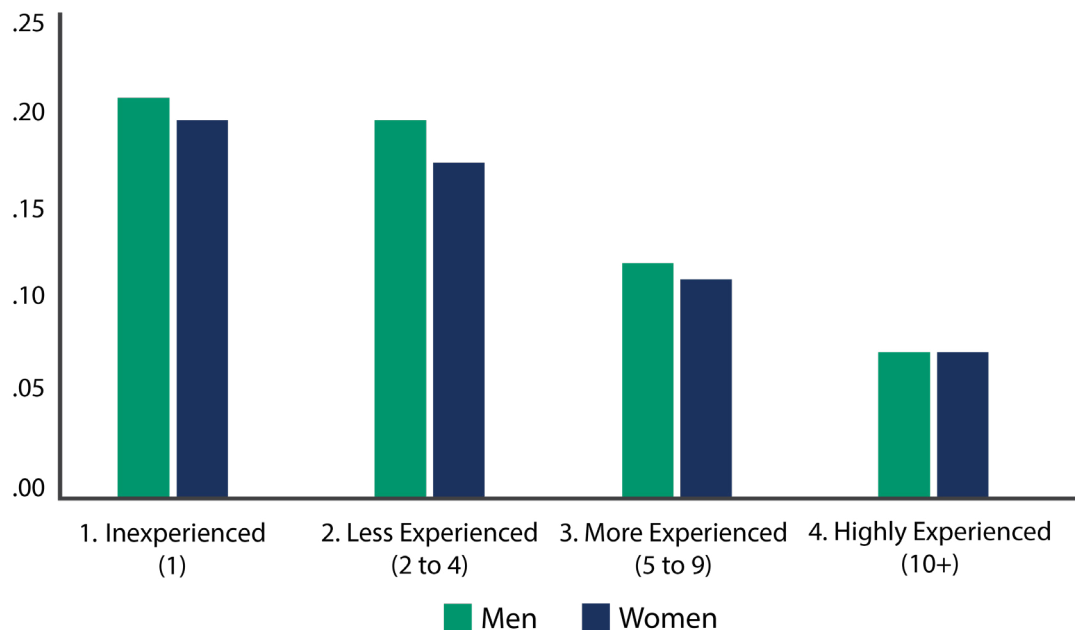
**“Relationship stability is the marriage outcome that is most impacted by sexual experience levels before marriage.... Sexually inexperienced couples are three times more likely than highly sexual experienced couples to be in a highly stable marriage.”**

of reporting high relationship stability, with that likelihood decreasing with more sexual experience. *Figure 5* shows that nearly half of the spouses in the Inexperienced group reported that their marriage is very stable and is not in

trouble of ending (43% of men and 42% of women). This decreased slightly for the Less Experienced group where only 40% reported similar levels of stability. However, the More Experienced group was only about half as likely to report high stability with only 25% of the group’s spouses reporting that their marriages are very stable. The probability of those in the Highly Experienced group dropped even further, with only 14% of both men and women reporting the highest level of stability in their marriage. Thus, sexually inexperienced couples were nearly twice as likely as more experienced couples and three times more likely than highly experienced couples to be in a highly stable marriage.



**Figure 6: Sexual Satisfaction**  
Probability of Being “Very Satisfied” With the Sexual Relationship in Your Marriage



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020



## Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction was assessed with six items asking participants how satisfied they were with various aspects of their sexual relationship in their marriage, including sexual frequency, sexual variety, and sexual pleasure. These items were rated on a 5-point scale from “very dissatisfied” (1) to “very satisfied” (5).

The results for sexual satisfaction were similar to those for relationship satisfaction, with the Inexperienced and Less Experienced groups being statistically significantly more likely to report high sexual satisfaction than those in the two higher sexual experience groups (see *Figure 6*). Those in the Inexperienced group again showed the greatest likelihood of reporting that they are “very satisfied” with all aspects of their sexual relationship, with more than 1 in 5 reporting high sexual satisfaction (20% of women and 21% of men). Spouses in the Less Experienced group were slightly less likely to report high satisfaction (18%

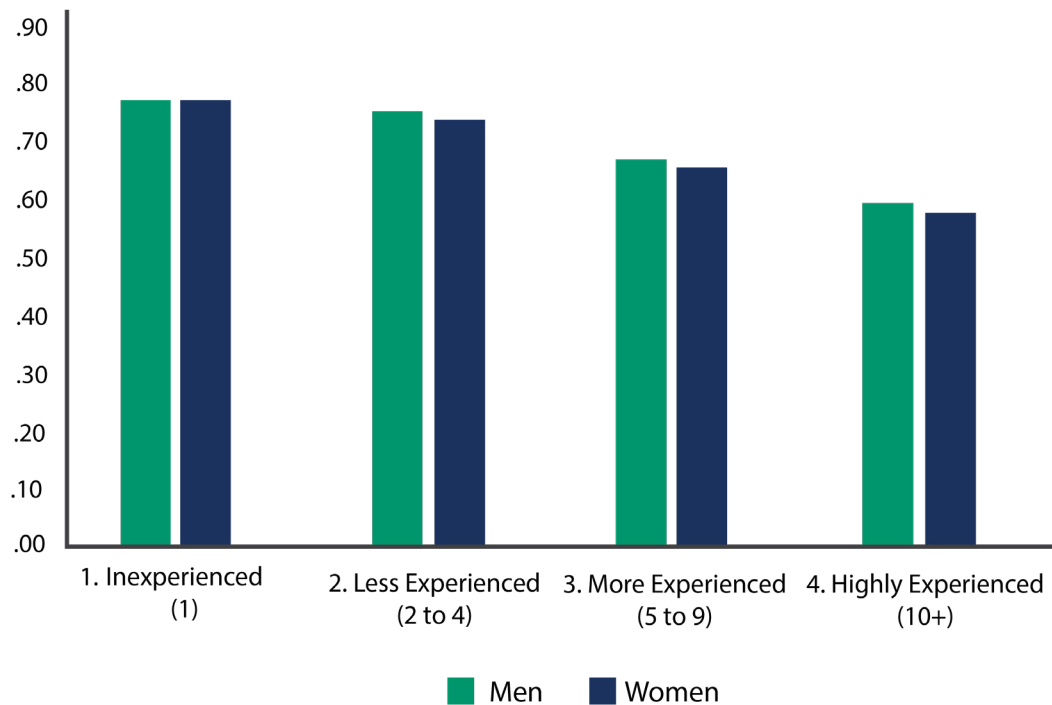
of women, 20% of men), but their levels were generally similar to those in the Inexperienced group. However, only about 1 in 10 of More Experienced spouses (11% of women and 12% of men) and 1 in 14 of Highly Experienced spouses (7% of women and 7% of men) reported that they are highly satisfied with their sex life in marriage. These findings challenge the notion that sexual experimentation in the dating years helps people “settle down” and get ready for marriage. In fact, they may be doing the exact opposite. Overall, it appears that sexual exclusivity between spouses is what makes individuals most ready for the intimacies of marriage and best prepared to create a mutually satisfying sexual relationship with their spouse that sustains a relationship through all of the stages of marriage.

## Emotional Connection

We asked respondents to rate the level of emotional connection they have with their spouse in their marriage relationship. Overall,

Figure 7: Emotional Connection

Probability of Reporting a "Very Close" Level of Emotional Connection in Your Marriage



Source: National Couples and Pornography Study, 2020



we found less significant differences in this aspect of marital flourishing than in the other outcomes we examined (see *Figure 7*). Those in the Inexperienced and Less Experienced groups were the most likely to report that they experience high levels of emotional connection with their spouse (76% to 78% of spouses). The probability of being in a marriage with high emotional connection dropped slightly for those in the More Experienced group (71% to 72%) and then dropped again for spouses in the Highly Experienced group (61% to 62%). In terms of statistical significance, those in the Highly Experienced group were significantly less likely to report high emotional connection than those in each of the other groups.

**“These findings challenge the notion that sexual experimentation in the dating years helps people “settle down” and get ready for marriage... In fact, they may be doing the exact opposite. Overall, it appears that sexual exclusivity between spouses is what makes individuals most ready for the intimacies of marriage and best prepared to create a mutually satisfying sexual relationship with their spouse that sustains a relationship through all of the stage of marriage.”**

# Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate that the number of sex partners participants had prior to getting married was negatively associated with their overall satisfaction, sexual quality, emotional connection, and relationship stability in their future marriages. These findings remained strong even when controlling for a range of variables including biological sex, religiosity, and relationship length. It appears that the negative influence of having multiple sex partners during the dating years on later marriage is consistent for both men and women and is similar across both committed and casual sexual experiences.

**“This study adds to the growing list of nationally representative studies that suggest that the logic of this argument does not hold up to scientific scrutiny. In no study to date has having sex partners before marriage been found to be associated with better results for future marriage outcomes.”**

The consistent pattern found across marriage outcomes in this study strikes at the heart of the **sexual restraint versus sexual experience debate**. Popular culture has long suggested that sexual experimentation and experience should help individuals when it comes to long-term relationship success. As illustrated before, there is some apparent logic to this suggestion. It has been assumed that the more you understand about yourself, your likes and dislikes, your preferences, and your desires, the better you should be able to distinguish good matches from poor matches. You should be able to better articulate your sexual needs and desires to a partner and have a firmer grasp of why you selected this partner over others, at least in terms of your supposed sexual chemistry. It should help you avoid the dreaded outcome of committing to a long-term

partner but then discovering after marriage, after it feels like it's too late, that you have very different tastes and expectations about sexual intimacy. Again, this line of argument has been assumed to be true by many in our current dating culture. However, using a large national sample, this study adds to the growing list of nationally representative studies that suggest that the logic of this argument does not hold up to scientific scrutiny. In no study to date has having sex partners before marriage been found to be associated with better results for future marriage outcomes. These findings also provide additional support for previous studies that have also found that having multiple premarital sex partners is associated with decreased marital quality and increased risk of divorce.<sup>21</sup>

The fact is that across every analysis we ran and with every relationship quality measure we explored, those with no sexual experience before marriage were uniformly and consistently those who were the most likely to report the best relationship quality in their marriage. Simply put, in every model we ran, more sexual experience was related to worse relationship quality. Across all four outcomes, those in the sexually inexperienced group, those who have only had sex with their current spouse were always the most likely to report high quality flourishing relationships. In other words, not only did we find no evidence that a lack of sexual experience is damaging to future marriage, rather we found plenty of evidence that it actually benefits marriages considerably.

**“Not only did we find no evidence that a lack of sexual experience is damaging to a future marriage, rather we found plenty of evidence that it actually benefits marriage considerably.”**

This pattern is striking given that it is no longer normative to save sex for marriage. Indeed, our own data suggests that the average person in the United States today has multiple sex partners prior to marriage and was mostly likely to be in the “More Experienced” group. While a notable portion of married individuals still only have sexual experience with a current spouse (about 1 in 5 in our sample), this is still the minority of individuals today. Putting these analyses together with the findings from previous studies, it appears that only a relatively small number of couples are engaging in a dating pattern of sexual restraint that gives them the highest probability of later marriage success. Conversely, even the average person in today’s dating culture is accumulating enough sexual experience to put their long-term relationship prospects at risk for poorer quality and stability down the road.

### What Explains These Patterns?

While this study sheds some light on the question of whether it is best to experiment sexually during adolescence and young adulthood, the findings of this study generate as many questions as they do answers. Primary among these is the question: Why does sexual restraint benefit marriage outcomes? Perhaps the easiest explanation is selection. Perhaps those with no premarital sexual experience represent a unique type of person that is both more likely to avoid multiple sex partners and also more likely to engage in healthy relationship behaviors later in marriage. However, previous scholars have noted that, while selection is likely playing a small role in these patterns, it is not likely the major reason driving what is being found. In his own research, Dr. Wolfinger and his colleagues noted that most studies, including their own, controlled for a wide array of potential selection factors and still found significant results.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, our own results did not change once we controlled for gender, religiosity, and relationship length. While other controls may have reduced the effects found, there appears to be no scientific

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evidence that the association between one’s sexual history in dating and later marital flourishing is primarily due to selection effects.

So, if not selection, why would these results exist? The consensus of the studies to date is that the sexual chemistry hypothesis, the sexual experience hypothesis, and the ready to settle down hypothesis are, in fact, more cultural myths than ideas rooted in empirical science. Why do so many people believe in these myths that may be actually undermining their future relationships and why do these findings seem, on the surface, to be counterintuitive? While there are likely multiple answers to this question, we believe that there are several compelling explanations that have support in research on couples and explain why these myths are problematic. These explanations point to ways that sexual exclusivity helps couples come together in healthier ways and ways that sexual exclusivity helps couples stay together after they are married.

### The Myth Sexual Chemistry

As we noted, for many young adults, the single life has become synonymous with hook-ups and sexual experimentation. Early sexual initiation is common as a desire to evaluate the potential sexual chemistry with a partner has become a primary criterion for deciding if a long-term relationship is viable. In their desire to evaluate sexual chemistry, many couples become sexually intertwined early in their relationship. The problem with these patterns is that

proper partner selection is often difficult for sexually involved couples who experience strong physical rewards with each other, as these rewards can cause them to ignore or minimize deeper incompatibilities in their relationship.

The human brain and body do not just experience pleasure during sex; they also experience strong sensations of attachment and bonding. Simply put, we are hardwired to connect. Rapid sexual initiation often creates **poorer partner selection** because intense feelings of pleasure and attachment can be confused with true intimacy and lasting love. Early sex creates a sort of “**counterfeit intimacy**” that makes two people think they are closer to each other than they really are. This can cause people to “fall in love” with, and possibly even marry, someone who is not a good choice for them in the long run.

**“Simply put, sexual restraint benefits couples because it facilitates intentional partner selection. You have a better chance of making good decisions in dating when you have not become sexually involved with your dating partner.”**

Counterfeit intimacy is created by fragmenting or separating expressions of physical intimacy from emotional intimacy and commitment. Dr. Victor L. Brown explained this phenomenon:

*“Fragmentation enables its users to counterfeit intimacy . . . If we relate to each other in fragments, at best we miss full relationships. At worst, we manipulate and exploit others for our gratification. Sexual fragmentation can be particularly harmful because it gives powerful physiological rewards which, though illusory, can temporarily persuade us to overlook the serious deficits in the overall relationship. Two people may marry for physical gratification*

*and then discover that the illusion of union collapses under the weight of intellectual, social, and spiritual incompatibilities . . . sexual fragmentation is particularly harmful because it is particularly deceptive. The intense human intimacy that should be enjoyed and symbolized by sexual union is counterfeited by sensual episodes which suggest - but cannot deliver - acceptance, understanding, and love. Such encounters mistake the end for the means.”<sup>23</sup>*

When individuals seek to explore sexual chemistry with a partner, they may inadvertently entangle themselves with a partner in ways that may increase the chances of making poor relationship decisions. Simply put, sexual restraint benefits couples because it facilitates **intentional partner selection**. You have a better chance of making good decisions in dating when you have not become sexually involved with your dating partner. Leading marriage experts Dr. Scott Stanley and Dr. Galena Rhoades have proposed a concept of dating called “**relationship inertia**.” The central idea of inertia is that some couples end up married or in long-term relationships partly because they become “**prematurely entangled**” in a sexual relationship prior to making the decision to be committed to one another. Thus, some couples are “sliders,” while others are “deciders.”<sup>24</sup> Although the authors’ development of the concept of relationship inertia stemmed primarily from their research on cohabitation, they have proposed that similar consequences are possible when couples “slide” into other couple transitions, such as sexual involvement, without deliberate choice and commitment. When individuals engage in multiple sexual relationships, they may be learning to “slide” through relationship transitions rather than make intentional decisions about whether to stay or leave the relationship.

## The Myth of Sexual Experience

On the surface, the more experience someone accumulates with any activity is assumed to increase proficiency and success. The myth of



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sexual experience assumes that as one gains sexual experience, individuals will be better able to communicate sexual needs and desires, a key element of improving relationship satisfaction and stability. Yet our results suggest the opposite. Rather than more sexual experience being linked to better outcomes and success, practicing sexual restraint in premarital relationships appears to be the pathway toward better relationships. **Inexperience** and **restraint** appear to be key ingredients in increasing the likelihood of happy and healthy relationships when it comes to sexual decision-making.

Limited sex before marriage may benefit couples because it requires partners to prioritize communication and commitment as the foundation of their attraction to each other. This gives couples a different type of foundation from couples who build their relationship on physical attraction and sexual gratification. This difference becomes particularly critical as couples naturally move past an initial period of intense attraction and excitement into a relationship more characterized by companionship and partnership. As Dr. Mark Regnerus and Dr. Jeremy Uecker, authors of *Premarital Sex in America*, explain, “couples who hit the honeymoon too early - that is, prioritize sex promptly at the outset of the relationship - often find their relationship underdeveloped when it comes to qualities that make relationships stable and spouses reliable and trustworthy.”<sup>25</sup>

Sexual restraint also allows couples to focus on and evaluate the emotional aspects of their relationship. The value of sexual restraint for committed couples moving toward marriage is best understood when couples appreciate that emotional intimacy is the true foundation of sexual intimacy in a healthy marriage. **Emotional intimacy** exists in a relationship when two people experience a sense of security, support, trust, comfort, and safety with one another. In dating, focusing on emotional intimacy is a process of coming to know each other from the inside out, not just the outside in.

By gaining a deeper understanding of emotional intimacy, dating couples can more fully appreciate the principle of **sexual symbolism**. Many of our current cultural perspectives of sexual relationships fail to account for the characteristic which most defines human sexuality – our capacity for love, intimacy, and the ability to attach profound emotional meaning to sexual experience. Ultimately, loving and lasting marriages are ones where sexual intimacy is a meaningful physical symbol of the emotional intimacy shared between the spouses. Without this, sex is just physical and lacks the meaning needed to be truly satisfying over the long term. In dating, couples who hope to marry should focus on developing a foundation of friendship and communication that will serve as the ongoing foundation for sexual intimacy in their marriage. So, while “true love waits,” it may actually also work the other way around - waiting creates true love by fostering dating experiences that are centered on emotional closeness, shared values, and effective communication.

**“Sexual restraint allows couples to focus on and evaluate the emotional and communication aspects of their relationship. In dating, focusing on emotional intimacy is a process of coming to know each other from the inside out, not just the outside in.”**



## The Myth of Settling Down

Finally, many believe that single adults should gain sexual experience during their dating years to get such impulsivity and promiscuity “out of their system.” This supposed purge of sexual impulses would assumedly help single adults be more content with monogamous commitment in their adult years and decrease the chances of them having “a wandering eye” and being unfaithful to a spouse later in marriage. Yet across all the marriage flourishing indicators explored, no association appeared stronger than the link between premarital sexual history and relationship stability. Across all analyses, having multiple sex partners before marriage was strongly associated with less relationship stability and a greater likelihood of divorce.

Why does this happen? What explains why the “ready to settle down hypothesis” is, in fact, a myth? Perhaps the easiest explanation is that rather than getting something **out of your system** with sexual experimentation before marriage, you are actually getting something **into your system** with this type of behavior. What sort of things? For starters, a person’s sexual preferences may become accustomed to novelty and the excitement of the initiation of sexual experiences with new people or partners. Successful monogamy requires spouses to develop a **person-centered love** rather than an **experience-centered attraction**. This allows married couples to maintain a sustained bond with each other that is based on their deep love, friendship, and shared life together rather than just the excitement of sexual attraction and arousal experienced in hook-ups or early-stage romantic relationships.

Also, given the consistent link found between premarital sex and increased divorce, it appears that one of the things people get into their system with premarital sex is an increased tendency to compare and evaluate their current partner against past partners or others they feel could be potential partners. This comparison mindset can lead to what

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relationship experts call “alternative seeking.” This is the process of thinking about or actively pursuing partners outside of your current relationship. This can range from seeking out new partners online or in person, or simply daydreaming about what a relationship might be like with a past partner, co-worker, or acquaintance at the gym. While we did not measure this type of alternative seeking behavior in the current study, it may be one reason why stability takes a hit for those with more sexual experience. Perhaps by engaging in multiple sexual encounters during one’s youth, what people are really learning is how to compare a current partner to previous partners, a comparison where it is easier to find fault and frustration with a current partner.

While on the surface previous sexual experiences should provide people with a chance to learn about their own preferences and be more confident in their dating and marriage decisions, it may simply be teaching people that it is okay to end relationships with people they are intimately and tightly bonded with. With each new sex partner that does not result in a long-term partnership, individuals may be learning that a new person will come along, and personal happiness and satisfaction will continue. As other couple researchers have suggested, multiple breakups and previous relationships may exert their strongest influence on current stability because partners are better and faster at moving toward

and through a breakup.<sup>26</sup> This may help them recover faster after a breakup, but it does not seem to help people stay together.

### The Possibility of Charting a New Path

Also, we believe this study also provides hope for individuals and couples who may regret their previous sexual decision making in dating and would like to change their trajectory of marriage outcomes. It appears that change is possible and that the risks of sexual experimentation before marriage can be overcome when spouses adopt more marriage-focused attitudes and behaviors.

It should be noted that even about 10% to 15% of highly sexually experienced individuals reported that they are in a flourishing marriage. While more research is needed to confirm this, it is highly likely that these individuals changed their mindset and behaviors about sexual intimacy to create such strong marriage relationships. They have likely **embraced fidelity to their spouse and adopted a more person-centered approach to love and sex.**

Overcoming one's sexual history also likely involves developing an enduring commitment to one's spouse and **avoiding any alternative seeking** with individuals outside of the marriage, a mindset that unfortunately appears to be prevalent among sexually experienced daters. So, while this and other studies make it clear that dating patterns can have a strong influence on future marriage trajectories, there is also hope that one can change the path they are on if they want to move-on from past decisions that they regret. While past behaviors can't be changed, current attitudes and behaviors can be. The key to change is likely found in being able to

successfully overcome the pitfalls in thinking that are often associated with sexual experimentation prior to marriage and develop a more commitment-based approach to one's marriage relationship.

### Conclusion

The emphasis in modern dating on the cultural notion of sexual chemistry and the assumed importance of sexual experience in dating have led many single adults to believe that sexually-focused dating will help them realize their desire for a successful lifelong marriage in their future. Or at the very least, it is believed that such behaviors during the single stage of life are disconnected from and have no bearing on one's future marriage and family life. But our results confirm findings from previous studies that show that saving sex until marriage appears to be the most developmentally helpful and less risky pathway to later marriage success. While the benefit of experience can be seen in many aspects of life, sexual inexperience may in fact be the best pathway to the marital flourishing most people aspire to in their lives.

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### Suggested Citation

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