The Impact of Communication on Sexual Response: A Summary of Findings

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Abstract

This paper examines how sexual communication impacts both sexual desire and sexual satisfaction. The purpose is to assist clinicians in understanding how these components of human sexuality interrelate so that they may use these findings to inform their clinical practice and improve outcomes for clients. Key dimensions of effective sexual communication are explored, and how those dimensions interact with experiences of sexual desire and sexual satisfaction. Consideration is given to the additional factors of relationship satisfaction and non-sexual communication and how these may mediate the relationship between sexual communication, desire, and satisfaction. The need for further research in this area outside of heterosexual and monogamous relationships is emphasized. Implications for practice highlight the importance of clinicians being able to screen for sexual communication skills in their clients, and upskill accordingly, particularly when issues of sexual desire and satisfaction are present, to enhance clinical outcomes.

Introduction

We may imagine that the *quality* of the sex we are having, and being able to *talk* about the sex we are having, go hand in hand. That is; we might presume that being able to discuss our sexual experiences, desires, likes and dislikes will naturally lead to being more satisfied with the sexual experiences we are having. Conversely, it could also be presumed that if we are having great sex, it will follow that we can consistently communicate about sexual matters with our partners more easily.

However as with most matters related to sex and sexuality, it may not be that simple. Sex itself is not a straightforward process; it encompasses many different processes, including our thoughts, attitudes and beliefs about sex, our desire for sex, our arousal response when presented with sexual stimuli, engaging in sexual activity, orgasm, and our appraisal of the sex we have just had (Metts et al., 1996). Anecdotally, it appears natural to assume that communication about sex with our sexual partners will lead to higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Generally speaking, couples who report openly communicating about their sexual needs and preferences tend to report higher levels of satisfaction in both their relationships and their sex lives (Mallory, 2022). But why? Do couples who communicate more effectively about sex tend to have better communication skills in general? Does talking about sex more frequently increase desire and does that in turn increase frequency of sex? Is the increase in desire alone enough to result in higher rates of self-reported sexual satisfaction? In attempting to answer these questions, consideration needs to be given to the widespread cultural sex-negativity that may serve to directly impede, and in some cases prohibit, discussions about sex. This sex-negative environment provides significant challenges in being able to adequately research the topic and thoroughly understand how matters of sex are discussed in relationships (Sævik & Konijnenberg, 2023), and much

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of the literature currently available contains data drawn primarily from cisgendered, heteronormative and monogamous couples.

The complex nature of both sex and human interaction, and questions such as the ones posed above, indicate that there is significant nuance to be found in the original proposition that better communication will equal better sex. Clinicians need to better understand the interplay between sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction and the quality of dyadic communication, both sexual and non-sexual, in order to better support clients with relationship and sex-related concerns. This enables the development of targeted treatment plans, focused on supporting clients and upskilling them in the right areas, in order to maximize clinical outcomes. To that end, a summary of some of the current literature has been compiled here to assist clinicians to understand how sexual communication impacts desire and sexual satisfaction and how non-sexual communication and relationship satisfaction, might mediate these findings.

Sexual Communication

Communication has long been considered a crucial ingredient when it comes to successful, functional, romantic relationships, but it presents many complex challenges for many people. When it comes to sexual relationships in particular, communication becomes arguably even more complicated because sex itself is complicated; it comprises a range of physiological, emotional and psychological effects about which the ability to communicate effectively is key (Metts et al., 1996). Assessing sexual communication skills is critical in the therapeutic space. It allows clinicians to better understand relational dynamics, address potential barriers to sexual satisfaction and intimacy, and provide more tailored and effective therapy. There are a number of individual factors at play when it comes to how we communicate about sex including family of origin, sexual scripts, religion, gender, and trauma (Rehman et al., 2011). Understanding sociocultural context is key here. For example, if an individual belongs to a culture where discussing sex-related matters is considered taboo, they may have limited language and tools available with which to navigate sexual communication confidently, and clinicians need to be able to look for this and moderate treatment approaches accordingly (Mallory et al., 2019). Mallory (2022) summarized findings from previous studies related to cultural context and sexual communication and noted that the very direct communication style that might typically be associated with effective sexual communication could in fact clash with cultural norms regarding communication, sex and relationships. It appears that how an individual appraises the effectiveness of sexual communication in their relationship differs depending on the culture within which it occurs, as results from countries with more individualistic cultures showed a stronger positive link between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction (Mallory, 2022). In addition, talking about matters of sex too directly, or too early in a relationship, has the potential to be a source of conflict rather than connection depending on the cultural context (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010).

Most research into sexual communication is conducted via self-report measures, and studies indicate that the quality of sexual communication is typically determined by a combination of how satisfied one is with the type of communication they have with their partner, the perception that they can openly discuss all aspects of the sexual relationship with that partner (Mallory et al., 2019), and the experience of emotional safety necessary for the communication of sex-related issues (Galizia et al., 2023). In addition, for sexual communication to be appraised by an individual as both satisfactory and effective, it typically has to be perceived as an interactive, balanced, dyadic process (Hatfield et al.,

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2013). Both the *content* of what is discussed – the topic and material of conversation - and the *process* by which the communication takes place – dyadic dynamics, perceptions of power and safety, and sexual attitudes – are critical factors when it comes to determining the effectiveness of the communication (Jones et al., 2017). Mallory's 2022 meta-analysis looking at the interplay between sexual communication, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction found that there are different dimensions of sexual communication such as frequency, comfort and quality that play distinct roles in influencing sexual satisfaction. There is an additional factor to consider here, which is the presence of non-verbal sexual communication. In one recent study, many participants indicated a preference to communicate non-verbally when it came to conveying pleasure, encouragement or affirmation (Lutmer & Walker, 2024).

Nevertheless, much of our sexual communication is verbal, and one way in which humans communicate verbally is through self-disclosure. Self-disclosure, although considered a one-sided communication process, makes up over one-third of all human communication (Hatfield et al., 2013). General self-disclosure typically involves sharing information about one's personal background and experiences as an indicator of intimacy, and it has been shown to be positively correlated with perceived success in relationships, including friendships, as well as being a subjectively rewarding experience that activates the same regions of the brain as other pleasurable activities (Hatfield et al., 2013). Sexual self-disclosure, which is just one aspect of sexual communication, has some qualities that set it apart from general self-disclosure, even within the same individual in the same relationship. Sexual self-disclosure involves the sharing of one's own sexual thoughts, feelings, experiences, preferences, and desires with one's partner (Hatfield et al., 2013). It is a crucial component of both effective sexual communication and the building and maintaining of an intimate connection. Because an individual's preferences likely differ in some ways from their partner's, and are likely to change over time, communication enables couples to modify their sexual behavior to potentially address any new difficulties that arise relating to sexual function or satisfaction (Mallory et al., 2019). For sexual self-disclosure to be an effective part of sexual communication both partners need to not only be willing and able to express their feelings and desires, but also to seek and accept feedback and guidance without defensiveness or judgment; this requires high levels of trust and acceptance from all parties involved (D'Augelli & D'Augelli, 1985).

Sexual Response: Defining Desire and Satisfaction

Human sexuality is multifaceted and for clinicians supporting clients with issues relating to relationships and sex, it is likely that there will be a combination of physical, emotional and relational components that require attention. The human sexual response is a complicated process that is generally considered to still not be fully understood or agreed upon, with its elements remaining difficult to define. One such element of sexual response is sexual desire.

Sexual desire, although generally considered to be multifaceted, remains hard to define as it raises questions about its origins; is it biological in nature, or relational, and can it be considered an emotional state or is it something quite different altogether (Metts et al., 1996)? It can be useful to think of desire as the sum of the forces that lean us toward and away from sexual behavior and that it is changeable over the course of the lifespan depending on many variables including age, health, gender, relationship satisfaction, the presence of sexual stimuli, lust, and relational familiarity (Levine, 2003). Levine (2003) proposes that there are three components to sexual desire that are always interacting to

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directly influence our desire: The biological *drive*, which has a physiological basis, *motivation*, referring to the psychological component of desire influenced by interpersonal, social and mental contexts, and *wish*, stemming from our values, cultural context, and sexual scripts (Levine, 2003). Desire can be experienced in many ways – daydream, fantasy, arousal, connection, love – and may be acted on or not (Metts et al., 1996). It is generally considered to be a separate process from the physiological arousal response which occurs when one is presented with sexually arousing stimuli, and desire and arousal can occur at the same time or be experienced separately. Desire may precede arousal; that is, one feels like having sex, so they engage with sexual stimuli, and therefore become aroused, otherwise known as *spontaneous* desire. However, desire can be understood to also be *responsive,* whereby someone begins to engage with sexual stimuli and experiences physiological arousal, thereby sparking sexual desire (Baxter, 2022). What is clear is that how we experience and express our desire is influenced by a number of factors and comprises several distinct processes.

Defining sexual satisfaction is no more straightforward than defining desire. It is generally considered to be subjective and, like with desire, changeable across the lifespan depending on a number of circumstances (Pascoal et al., 2013). Sexual satisfaction can be simply summarized as being how one *feels* about their sex life when they consider all the positive and negative aspects of it (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). It is considered a key component of sexual health, which the World Health Organization emphasizes as a state of well-being that is more than just the absence of disease or dysfunction and instead incorporates elements of sexual pleasure, respect, self-esteem, and self-determination (World Health Organization, 2022). It can be useful to consider sexual satisfaction as comprising both individual and interpersonal themes. *Individual* themes pertaining to sexual satisfaction include arousal, pleasure, positive feelings about the sex one is having and orgasm (Pascoal et al., 2013). *Interpersonal* themes are dyadic processes, relational in nature relating to our sexual partner such as expressions of feeling and closeness, trust, mutuality, feeling we can ask for what we want, having our desires enacted, and frequency and nature of sexual activity (Pascoal et al., 2013).

Sexual desire and sexual satisfaction can be related, but that relationship may not be straightforward. For example, people can experience periods of strong sexual desire without having partnered sex; they may not have an available partner, the relationship could be unhappy, or the sex could not be the type of sex that person wants to have. In that scenario, desire is present but sexual satisfaction is likely to be low. Conversely people can experience low or no desire, but may have sex for a number of reasons, and may still report being reasonably satisfied with their sex lives (Metts et al., 1996). This can occur because there are many different drivers to having sex – people have sex to reproduce, because they are aroused, because they are bored, for validation, to feel connected, or to repair a relationship rupture, to name a few. What is common to both desire and satisfaction is that both are related to, and impacted by, our ability to communicate satisfactorily with our sexual partners.

How Sexual Communication Impacts Desire and Satisfaction

Desire

In recent years there has been a burgeoning body of research conducted to try to better understand the elusive concept of desire (Dewitte et al., 2020; Pfaus, 2009). This is likely because problems of desire, especially desire discrepancy in long term relationships, has fast become one of the leading reasons people seek out sex therapy (Ramanathan & Redelman, 2020). Most of the studies carried out in this space have concentrated on cisgendered, heterosexual relationships, which means

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there is some understanding about reported gender differences when it comes to how communicating about sex impacts one's interest in it. Ciswomen in heterosexual relationships tend to report a positive relationship between their levels of desire and how satisfied they are with the quality of the sexual communication they are having with their partner (Mallory et al., 2019). Interestingly, even the mere act of discussing sexual desire discrepancy between partners has been shown to increase levels of desire for women (Galizia et al., 2023). More specifically, ciswomen tend to report that sexual communication increases their desire to have sex and it is possible that this can be explained by the suggestion that perhaps women are more likely to experience responsive rather than spontaneous desire (Mallory et al., 2019). Many women also attribute sexual communication as the primary vehicle through which desire discrepancy difficulties are addressed and resolved (Murray et al., 2014) and in fact couples who report high levels of satisfaction with their sexual communication are less likely to perceive issues of desire discrepancy in their relationship (Mallory et al., 2019).

Sexual communication has been found to be positively associated across all domains of sexual response, including desire (Mallory et al., 2019). It has been found to protect against loss of desire in long-term relationships (Herbenick et al., 2014). Partner variables such as feeling desired, accepted, and safe, which can be directly experienced during sexual communication, have been found to have significant impact on one's interest in sex (Mallory et al., 2019), thereby inferring that an individual's ability to effectively communicate about sex and feel satisfied with the quality of one's sexual communication with their partner will likely have a direct impact on their desire to engage in sexual activity (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Numerous studies have found that communicating about the sexual relationship in general promotes closeness and desire, and, in fact, in some studies, sexual communication was found to be a necessary component of achieving desire in a long-term relationship (Galizia et al., 2023; Mallory et al., 2019.). Being able to speak openly about sexual wishes or problems has also been found to enhance desire, likely because it improves the *quality* of subsequent sexual interactions (Byers, 2011) as well as leads to feeling seen and heard (Mallory, 2022). In addition, it has been shown that a loss of interest in sex in a long-term relationship can be directly correlated with how easy the individual appraises it to communicate with their partner about sexual matters (Mallory et al., 2019). This makes sense when you consider that for people to desire sex with their partner, they need to *like* the sex they are having or at least have some other motivation to have it, such as reproduction. So, it would seem to follow that we are more likely to have the type of sex we want if we can communicate about it, and ask for it. But it is useful to understand exactly *how* this type of communication might impact one's sexual satisfaction.

Sexual Satisfaction

Being able to communicate openly with one's partner about sex has been overwhelmingly shown to enhance sexual satisfaction in a number of ways (Rehman et al., 2011). Both sexual communication in general, and sexual self-disclosure specifically, have been shown to each be uniquely related to sexual satisfaction both in terms of quality and frequency (Galizia et al., 2023; MacNeil & Byers, 1997). How the individual appraises the quality of that communication is key, and in fact sexual communication that is deemed indirect, or avoidant, has been found to be associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Heterosexual couples in long-term relationships also report that sexual communication allows for adjustments to be made to the sexual rhythm of their relationship, thus increasing satisfaction (Galizia et al., 2023). Interestingly, it has been shown that individuals who tend to sexually self-disclose more are more likely to make positive

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evaluations about their own sexual communication ability and report feeling satisfied with the quality of their sexual communication with their partner (Byers & Demmons, 1999). The relationship between issues of sexual communication and issues of sexual satisfaction appears to be bi-directional, as couples with sexual dysfunction difficulties and/or lower levels of satisfaction with their sex lives tend to be more likely to report challenges with sexual communication (Mallory et al., 2019). Being able to openly express sexual preferences or to communicate issues or concerns with a partner is associated with greater levels of sexual satisfaction (Byers 2011), whereas poorer sexual communication quality has been found to be associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Overwhelmingly it has been found that sexual communication, and in particular sexual self-disclosure, are positively associated with sexual satisfaction because the sharing and hearing of sexual desires and preferences allows couples to maximize sexual rewards and minimize sexual costs, increasing the likelihood of each person having their sexual desires fulfilled (Mallory et al., 2019).

One specific aspect of sexual satisfaction is the quality and frequency of orgasm. Experiencing orgasm has consistently been shown to be one of the most significant predictors of self-reported sexual satisfaction in ciswomen, but within heterosexual relationships is often a source of poor communication (Haning et al., 2007). Some studies show that men tend to overestimate how often their partners achieve orgasm, indicating a lack of effective communication – or perhaps even the presence of dishonest communication – among many couples (Jones et al., 2017). Women are far more likely to associate sexual communication with the expectation that they will orgasm, as they see it as an opportunity to communicate what arouses them and increases the likelihood of orgasm being achieved (Mallory et al., 2019). They are also more likely to report experiencing higher rates of orgasm frequency in direct proportion to greater amounts of effective sexual communication (Jones et al., 2017). In addition to these findings there is also evidence to suggest a correlation between erectile difficulties and reported poor sexual communication both before and during treatment (Mallory et al., 2019). Taken together, it appears that this is consistent evidence that regular and effective sexual communication between partners has the potential to elicit more frequent and satisfying orgasms, thus increasing sexual satisfaction.

Relatively little research has been conducted involving non-heterosexual populations and their experience of sexual satisfaction. However, it has been found that many of the core elements that contribute to sexual satisfaction remain relatively stable regardless of gender or relationship organization – including sexual communication (Holland, 2021). Holmberg & Blair (2009) found that in same-sex relationships, both men and women reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction and better communication about sexual needs compared to those in mixed-sex relationships. The study highlighted that same-sex couples often adopt more egalitarian roles, which can help to facilitate open discussions and mutual understanding, as a possibly contributing factor to these findings. Additionally, the research noted that preferences for specific sexual activities varied more within the same-sex groups, perhaps suggesting a broader range of sexual expression and exploration.

The implications for the relationship between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction from these findings are significant. The bidirectional relationship noted in the Mallory et al. (2019) study raises the question of causality; might it be that sexual difficulties present challenges for the individuals involved to communicate, or, could it be that those couples who struggle to speak openly about their sex lives are more likely to develop sexual difficulties? Regardless, it appears that just as

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sexual communication has been identified as a protective factor for desire in long term relationships (Herbenick et al., 2014), it can also protect sexual satisfaction. Galizia et al. (2023) explain this by suggesting that couples who report poor sexual communication may hide issues of dissatisfaction. Based on these findings, it is critical that clinicians assess how effectively and openly their clients are communicating about sex in their relationships, and screening for any difficulties or unhelpful communication patterns that may be present.

How Does Non-Sexual Communication and Relationship Satisfaction Mediate These Findings?

While we have considered the relationship between sexual communication, sexual desire and sexual satisfaction, it is useful to consider how general (non-sexual) communication and overall relationship satisfaction may also interact here, and whether they contribute uniquely to sex. Studies typically show a strong relationship between relationship satisfaction and communication in general (Montesi et al., 2010). When it comes to the nuances of communication, Zimmer (1983) found that couples who were dissatisfied with the state of their relationship were more likely to exhibit avoidance, indirect communication, higher rates of perceived partner rejection and, interestingly, lower rates of self-acceptance. However, most interestingly when difficulties of sexual function and sexual satisfaction exist, effective general communication does *not* appear to generate any meaningful improvement (MacNeil & Byers, 1997). Further, overall relationship satisfaction does appear to be an important moderator for the link between sexual communication and sexual functioning, particularly as the relationship progresses in longevity (Mallory et al., 2019).

However, recent research indicates that sexual communication is more closely related to sexual satisfaction than relationship satisfaction (Mallory, 2022). There is evidence to suggest that sexual communication is uniquely and significantly critical to achieving high rates of sexual satisfaction, far beyond that of satisfactory general communication, and in fact satisfactory sexual communication has the potential to enhance overall relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2010). This is an intriguing proposition. It is possible that this can be explained by the level of vulnerability and connectedness that is required to be able to communicate openly about sex-related matters even in the most satisfying and trusting of relationships, as well as the likelihood that sexual communication can result in improvements in sexual exchanges between partners (Montesi et al., 2010). When considered in this way, it may be that sexual communication enhances satisfaction with the relationship overall *through* the positive impact on sexual desire and satisfaction for each partner involved (Montesi et al., 2010).

Within heterosexual couples, MacNeil and Byers (2005) found that in general, men are more likely to sexually self-disclose across the lifespan of a relationship. Interestingly, they also found that open sexual communication at the start of the relationship was more important in terms of relationship satisfaction for men but by contrast, sexual communication became more important to women's relationship satisfaction after the relationship passed the twelve-month mark. This may be because in the early stages of a relationship, sexual domains are more important to men in developing closeness and assessing overall relationship satisfaction, and sexual communication may be instrumental in achieving this, whereas women may appraise relationship satisfaction and its future potential through feelings of intimacy, trust and emotional closeness.

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Limitations of the findings

There are a number of limitations to note in the available research. One is the lack of longitudinal studies. It would be useful to see how the domains of communication, sexual response and relationship satisfaction evolve and change in their interrelatedness over the course of the relationship lifespan in order to better support individuals and maximize treatment gains. For example, while many couples experience a decline in sex over many years of a relationship, it is not yet fully understood whether this represents a decline in desire, the *expression* of that desire, both, or something else entirely (Metts et al., 1996).

It is critical to further understand these complexities not just across the relationship timeline, but also through the lens of relationships that fall outside of the traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationship model that much of the current research is drawn from. Recent Australian data indicates that over 20% of young people identify with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (Power et al., 2022). Data around consensually non-monogamous couples is still very limited but best estimates are that between 1.5%-4% of couples engage in non-monogamy and notably, about 10% of adults report being interested in exploring this type of relationship structure (Fairbrother et al., 2019). There is little research available that explores how sexual communication impacts desire and sexual satisfaction across different relationship configurations, but of the research that is available, there are findings that suggest some differences. It appears that the *type* of relationship configuration can play an important role, with people who engage in swinging reporting higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those in both monogamous and polyamorous relationships (Conley et al., 2018). Additionally in a study of cisgender gay men, Gusakova et al. (2020) found that monogamous couples tend to regard their communication about sexual boundaries and agreements more positively than non-monogamous couples. Future research should explore the core components of sexual communication satisfaction and desire that might be stable across all orientations and relationship structures, incorporating insights from both quantitative and qualitative studies, and including groups that have been traditionally excluded. This would be particularly beneficial when it comes to gender diverse and transgender populations, where research is especially limited, though there are some notable exceptions such as Shepler et al. (2018). The LGBTQIA+ community face a number of unique challenges, including internalized homophobia, biphobia and societal stigma, the impact of which is not clearly understood when it comes to sexual desire and satisfaction (Holland, 2021). It is certain that clinicians will be increasingly supporting individuals with sex-related issues within a range of orientations and relationship structures, and the research is urgently needed so that they know how to best target treatment in this space to maximize outcomes for clients.

More could be learned about the nuance of what constitutes effective sexual communication through the use of observational studies, as most of the research thus far is self-report. Researchers would be wise to consider a range of creative methodologies to better understand the rich complexity of sexual communication and desire, including how these are elicited and perceived nonverbally between sexual partners (Mallory et al., 2019). Further to that, the nuances of sexual feelings and behavior, and how partnered communication impacts those, would be of great benefit in assisting clinicians to further support people with sex-related issues. This includes feelings of sexual shame, guilt and excitation, and the specifics of sexual behavior such as frequency, engagement in taboo or kink-based behavior, or

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engaging in extradyadic relations (Metts et al., 1996). Many of the studies relied on participants that were predominantly Caucasian, and located in North America; it would be valuable to observe what happens to sexual communication across a more culturally and ethnically diverse population. As noted earlier, the culture in many countries around the world is largely sex-negative; it is indeed important to observe sexual communication in more sex-positive environments, and see what could be learned.

Conclusion

The findings summarized here represent an opportunity for clinicians who support individuals with sex-related issues to take the time to thoroughly understand and assess the quality of sexual communication. Sexual communication is a strong resource for relational and sexual well-being in a relationship (Mallory, 2022) and given the unique contribution of sexual communication on both desire and sexual satisfaction, it is recommended that clinicians concentrate on upskilling their clients to be able to communicate effectively in this way, particularly when it comes to making and receiving sexual self-disclosures (MacNeil & Byers, 1997), and building capacity for comfort in these conversations (Mallory, 2022). Clinicians need to be skilled themselves at identifying this need, as couples can excel at general relationship communication but might be communicating ineffectively when it comes to sex (Jones et al., 2017). Clinicians themselves need to be trained and skilled in this area but, perhaps most importantly, be able to navigate the subject with comfort, warmth and ease; any perceived discomfort or awkwardness on the part of the clinician could be unintentionally harming, rather than helping, their client. When supporting clients where desire discrepancy or changes in desire is a presenting concern, (a complex and multifaceted issue) clinicians should explore relational dynamics such as communication, particularly sexual communication, when considering their case conceptualization (Galizia et al., 2023). When it comes to desire, it would serve clinicians well to consider the different components – drive, motivation, and wish – and what contexts may be contributing uniquely to each of these that may also be impacting communication.

It is clear that there is a complex, multi-directional relationship between communication, sexual response and intimate relationships. Each of these elements alone are complex mechanisms, and they only increase in complexity when we seek to understand their interrelatedness. What *is* clear, when considering the findings summarized here, is that effective and satisfactory sexual communication is likely to have a positive impact on how much we desire sex, how satisfied we are with the sex we are having, and how positively we appraise our relationships with partners.

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