

Social Support and Well-being: A Quantitative Study of the Effects of Friendship on the Sexual Well-being of Older Adults

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Background: Social support has been shown to positively impact various aspects of health across the lifespan, including sexual health and well-being. While past research on sexual well-being has tended to focus on the earlier stages of the life course, notably adolescence and young adulthood, this is a largely ignored area of research past the reproductive stage of life. Current research finds that while social support, from partners, family, and friends alike, has generally positive influences on health in mid to late adulthood, these outcomes are varied in regards to sexual well-being.

Objectives: This study aims to (1) assess the role of friend support in the sexual wellbeing of older adults and (2) to explore if physical and mental health are significant mediators of this relationship.

Methods: This study uses data from Wave II of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a longitudinal, population-based study of health and social factors, aiming to understand the well-being of older, community-dwelling adults. Using binary logistic regression, a series of models were created to evaluate whether social support of friends is a significant predictor of sexual well-being in older adults and whether that relationship is reduced with the introduction of each mediator individually. Covariates included age, race, gender, education, partner status, presence of close family members, and sexual functioning.

Results: Sixty two percent of older adults are not having sex as much as they would like and 61% feel that their sex life is lacking in quality. Significant correlates of satisfaction of sex frequency include having a romantic partner (OR .209; $p < .000$), reliable friends (OR 1.366; $p = .010$) and sexual dysfunction (OR 1.257; $p < .000$). Significant correlates of quality of sex life included gender (OR .636; $p = .001$), education (OR 1.136, $p = .037$), and sexual dysfunction (OR 1.355; $p = .000$). Neither mental health nor physical health status were significant mediators of the dependent variables.

Conclusion: Similar to findings related to sexual well-being and familial support and reliance (Wait and Das 2010), this study showed that having reliable friends actually decreased the likelihood of satisfaction with sex frequency, one important aspect of sexual well-being. While this relationship may be due to friendship being a proxy for romantic relationships, more research is needed to ascertain the cause of this relationship.