

Our study aimed to explore the experiences of individuals with sexual performance anxiety, and strategies that they use to cope with it.


Research Article

## Under Pressure: Men's and Women's Sexual Performance Anxiety in the Sexual Interactions of Adult Couples

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*Scroll to see  
what we found!*



Sexual performance anxiety refers to an individual's concerns surrounding their ability to satisfy their partner sexually. It affects approximately 9% to 25% of men and 6% to 16% of women.

**BUT**

...Most research on sexual performance anxiety is about men, and there is little research about how it affects relationship dynamics.



# we wanted to know:

1

What are the experiences of people with sexual performance anxiety?

2

How do individuals cope when they are experiencing sexual performance anxiety?

3

How does sexual performance anxiety affect relationship and sexual dynamics, such as sexual distress, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction?

**Study 1 = 51  
participants**

**Study 2 = 228  
couples**

We recruited participants for two different studies.



We asked participants in Study 1 to answer **open ended questions** about their **cognitive** (thoughts, thinking, reasoning) and **affective** (moods, feelings, attitudes) experiences. In Study 2, participants were given a survey about their **sexual satisfaction, distress and relationship satisfaction.**

# we found that...

The most common responses about sexual performance anxiety were:

**Feelings of inadequacy:** examples included feeling unattractive or not sexually skilled.

**Physiological low arousal:** examples included anxious thoughts during sex about their physiological performance during sex.

**Distraction:** responses included racing thoughts about other responsibilities during sex.



Common coping strategies used by participants:

**Approach Strategies:** strategies that are used to enhance or create positive outcomes in one's relationship.

**Avoidance Strategies:** strategies that are used to avoid negative outcomes in the relationship.

# we also found that...

In individuals that reported higher levels of sexual performance anxiety, the individual and their partner reported:

- higher levels of **sexual distress**
- lower levels of **sexual satisfaction**
- lower levels of **relationship satisfaction**



# so, what does all of this mean?

- Our findings confirm that sexual performance anxiety can impact sexual and romantic relationships.
- Sexual scripts may contribute to sexual performance anxiety: men are socialized to always be ready for sex (maintaining **physiological arousal** throughout sex, such as an erection), while women are socialized to be valued in terms of their **physical appearance**.
- Sexual performance anxiety may detract from partners' experience during sex, which may explain **lowered levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction in couples**.

Future studies should examine treatment options for those coping with sexual performance anxiety.

Therapists and clinicians could target individual's **beliefs about sexual function and common sexual scripts** within couples. This could help foster positive new sexual behaviours.



## This is a summary of our published article:

Amanda Bockaj, Megan D. Muise, Charlene F. Belu,  
Natalie O. Rosen & Lucia F. O'Sullivan (07 Jun 2024):

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Blog post and infographic by Alice Bourne