



Assessing the Role of Relationship Conflict in Sexual Dysfunction

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Relationship conflict has long been thought to cause, maintain, and influence the therapeutic outcome of sexual problems in the absence of a physical cause. The results of conflict can influence partners' relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction can influence sexual satisfaction. General relationship deficiencies, such as unresolved conflict, undermine the mutual acceptance that is important to healthy sexual functioning. The purpose of this article is to summarize some of the basic empirical findings of studies of conflict patterns in relationships and their role in sex dysfunction and to suggest a model for assessing relationship conflict as a feature of sexual dysfunction. Results from several studies indicate that couples with sexual problems may have conflict-management issues and employ distinct conflict-resolution styles compared to satisfied couples. Dysfunctional conflict resolution may be a cause or result of some sexual problems, whereas constructive interaction concerning conflict can add to emotional and sexual intimacy in a couple's relationship. These patterns warrant systematic attention in assessment and intervention in sex therapy.

The presence of unresolved conflict in couples' relationships has long been thought to cause or maintain sexual dysfunctions as well as influence the outcome of therapeutic interventions for sexual problems. However, empirical studies of the causes of sexual dysfunction are rare. Most published reports are clinical observations and uncontrolled studies. Nevertheless, multiple clinical observations suggest a strong association between relationship conflict and sexual dysfunction (Hartman, 1980a, 1980b; Heiman,

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