



Improving the Sexual Health of College Students: The Importance of Communication in College Students' Steady and Casual Relationships



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INTRODUCTION

- Sexually active college students engage in behaviors that put them at increased risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Communication within relationships can improve sexual health outcomes, including contraceptive use.
- Type of sexual partner (steady or casual) may also influence individuals' motivation for sexual communication.
- The purpose of this study was to (1) understand college students' motivations for sexual communication and (2) determine whether the motivation to acquire or disclose relationship threatening information (RTI) is associated with relationship dynamics such as trust.

METHOD

- Participants were 60 college students (out of 85) who were in a sexual relationship :
 - 55% women
 - 81% White
 - mean age = 19
 - 95% heterosexual
- The participants who were in a relationship reported having a steady only (n = 31), casual only (n = 14), or both steady and casual (n = 15) sexual partner(s).
- Procedures: Participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses and completed computer-based surveys that assessed relationship-specific communication and partner trust.

RESULTS

- Participants with casual partners wanted to acquire more RTI than those with both steady and casual partners, $t(20) = 2.86, p < .01$. (Fig. 1)
- No differences were found for acquiring RTI among those with steady and both steady and casual partners, $p = .11$. (Fig. 1)
- No differences were found for disclosing RTI among those with steady or both partner types or casual and both partner types ($ps \geq .20$). (Fig. 2)
- Participants reported greater trust (predictability, dependability, and faith) if they had a steady partner vs. a casual partner, $ps \leq .01$. (Fig. 3)
- Participants wanted to acquire more RTI when their steady partner was dependable ($r = 0.29, p = .05$) and were willing to disclose information when they had faith in their casual partner ($r = 0.43, p = .02$).

CONCLUSIONS

- Findings suggest very different motivations for communication in steady or casual relationships.
- Talking about RTI is difficult, but a barrier that must be overcome in order to prevent STI's and unintended pregnancy.
- Future research is needed to enhance communication within steady and casual relationships.

