Apr 20th, 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

Attachment and couple sexual functioning

Kathryn Z. Devis  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Melissa A. Louder  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Kara L. Thompson  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Katherine M. Hertlein  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas, katherine.hertlein@unlv.edu*

Repository Citation

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Kathryn Z. Devis, B.S.
Melissa A. Louder, B.S.
Kara L. Thompson, B.S.
Katherine M. Hertlein, Ph.D.
Department of Marriage and Family Therapy
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

Within the last several years, there has been a surge in the publications that focus on attachment within the couple relationships, including how it pertains to infidelity treatment. Despite the interest in couple relationships and attachment, however, a limited amount of literature focuses on how varying styles of attachment manifest in a couple’s level of sexual functioning. This study is a response to the need to explore the literature and related gaps in literature.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this presentation is to provide clinical implications, based on the literature, on how individual attachment styles might impact sexual functioning in couple relationships.

BACKGROUND ON ATTACHMENT

Bowlby developed a theory of attachment based on observations of the behavior of young children who were separated from their primary caregiver for various lengths of time. This innate attachment system is formed in childhood and is based on the quality of relationships with primary caregivers. The emotional attachments result in lifelong patterns of relating to others.

Attachment Styles:

- Secure Attachment: Secure children have easy and warm interactions with their caregiver and have an interest in examining and exploring their surroundings. They use their caregiver as a secure base to regulate distress and anxiety. They may become upset when their caregiver leaves the room, but are relieved and seek proximity when the caregiver returns.

- Anxious Attachment: Anxious children are wary and distressed, and need frequent contact with their caregiver. Anxious children demonstrate inconsistency between wanting to be near their caregiver and showing resistance when separated from their caregiver. Anxious children are hypersensitive to threats and hypervigilant regarding the availability of their caregivers.

- Avoidant Attachment: Avoidant children are disinterested in the caregiver’s whereabouts. Caregivers of avoidant children respond consistently, but negatively. Avoidant children show little or no fuss when the caregiver leaves and may actively turn away when the caregiver returns. They also tend to maintain emotional distance from their caregiver by not communicating their distress and physical distance by avoiding them.