

What is Sexual Wellbeing?

There are many working definitions of sexual wellbeing:

- According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual wellbeing is defined as a balance of emotional, physical, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality.¹
- According to sociologist Edward Laumann, sexual wellbeing is defined as “the cognitive and emotional evaluation of an individual’s sexuality,” which includes feelings of happiness, fulfillment, peace, and life satisfaction.²
- According to the World Association of Sexual Health and the Montevideo Consensus on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, sexual wellbeing is an essential factor to attaining sexual health.³
- The Montevideo Consensus also defines sexual wellbeing as connected with the possibility of pleasurable, intimate and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.⁴
- The Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing defines self-determination, consent, safety, autonomy, privacy, confidence and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations as key determinants to pleasure and sexual wellbeing.⁵

Sexual Wellbeing is Grounded in Rights

- The World Association of Sexual Health Declaration of Sexual Rights grounds sexual wellbeing within sexual rights, and recognizes the state of wellbeing attributed to sexuality as a part of one’s right to the highest attainable standard of health.⁶
- The Montevideo Consensus establishes human rights as a basis to achieve and maintain sexual wellbeing.⁷
- The Consensus confirms that “all people have the right to a safe and full sexual life,” as well as the right to take free, informed, voluntary, and responsible decisions about their sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity.⁸

Why is Sexual Wellbeing Important?

- Throughout the life-course, most people have non-procreative sex for pleasure, including those past the age of reproductive capacity.^{9,10,11}
- Sexual wellbeing and development occurs and changes throughout one’s life, and plays a critical role in one’s physical and psychosocial health.^{12,13}

- The benefits of sexual wellbeing on psychosocial health include, but are not limited to:
 - Overall happiness and stress reduction.¹⁴
 - The sustainability of healthy relationships.¹⁵
 - Reduced propensity towards violence.¹⁶
- There are linkages between pleasurable sexual activity and physical health benefits for women. These physical health benefits include, but are not limited to:
 - Reduced risk of fatal coronary events such as stroke.¹⁷
 - Common adult-onset cardiovascular and endocrine diseases, i.e., coronary heart disease¹⁸
 - Breast cancer^{19,20}
 - Type-2 diabetes prevention²¹
 - Chronic pain relief ²²
 - HIV prevention²³

Facilitators to Sexual Wellbeing

Patient-provider communication

- Studies show that communication between health care providers and patients improves the sexual wellbeing of women.^{24,25}
- This positive approach to sexuality in health care is found to lead to an array of benefits that reduce health risk factors among adolescents, including gender inequality, sexual violence, shame, fear, insecurity, discrimination, and stigma.²⁶
- WHO recommends “opportunistic” sexual health counseling that addresses sexuality and related personal or psychological problems without reinforcing fear or shame to promote sexual wellbeing as an essential component of patient encounters.²⁷

Taking a life-course approach

- It is necessary to include all ages in conversations about sexual activity and wellbeing in order to ensure access to sexual health services.²⁸
- Due to the conflation of women’s health with reproductive health, older women (above the age 50) face exclusion from sexual health facilities and services, despite continuing to be sexually active and at risk of HIV and gender-based violence.²⁹
- To prevent exclusion, sexual health services require a life-course approach to negate misconceptions about age and sexual wellbeing, and distinguish sexual activity from reproductive capacity.³⁰

- ¹ World Health Organization (WHO), Defining sexual health: report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva (2006), available at http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf (last visited Mar 1, 2018).
- ² Edward O. Laumann et al., *A cross-national study of subjective sexual well-being among older women and men: findings from the Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors*, 35 Arch Sex Behav. (2006); Katarina Oberg et al., *On sexual well-being in sexually abused Swedish women: Epidemiological aspects*, 17 SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP THERAPY (2010).
- ³ World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), Declaration of Sexual Rights (2014), available at http://www.worldsexology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/declaration_of_sexual_rights_sep03_2014.pdf; Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, August 12–15, 2013, Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Available at https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/21860/S20131039_en.pdf?sequence=15&isAllowed=y
- ⁴ Montevideo Consensus, *supra* note 3.
- ⁵ Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing, Sexual Pleasure Training Tool-Kit (2018), available at http://www.gab-shw.org/media/1038/gab_sexualpleasuretrainingtoolkit_final_webversion_withhyperlinks_updatejune2018.pdf
- ⁶ World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), Declaration of Sexual Rights (2014), available at http://www.worldsexology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/declaration_of_sexual_rights_sep03_2014.pdf
- ⁷ Montevideo Consensus, *supra* note 3.
- ⁸ *Id.*
- ⁹ The World Health Organization (WHO) defines life-course as an approach that takes into account health at all stages of an individual's life, recognizing that all stages of a person's life are intricately intertwined with each other. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. *The life-course approach: from theory to practice. Case stories from two small countries in Europe* (2018) Available at http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/374359/life-course-iceland-malta-eng.pdf
- ¹⁰ Laumann, *supra* note 2.
- ¹¹ Edward O. Laumann et al., *Sexuality: Measures of Partnerships, Practices, Attitudes, and Problems in the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Study*, 64 THE JOURNALS OF GERONTOLOGY. SERIES B, PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (2009). Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2763521/>
- ¹² Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) The Health Benefits of Sexual Expression White Paper (2007) available at https://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/3413/9611/7801/Benefits_Sex_07_07.pdf
- ¹³ Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing, Sexual Pleasure Training Tool-Kit (2018), available at http://www.gab-shw.org/media/1038/gab_sexualpleasuretrainingtoolkit_final_webversion_withhyperlinks_updatejune2018.pdf; World Health Organization (WHO), Defining sexual health: report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva (2006), http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf (last visited Mar 1, 2018).
- ¹⁴ Laumann, *supra* note 2.
- ¹⁵ Helen E. Fisher et al., *Defining the brain systems of lust, romantic attraction, and attachment*, 31 ARCHIVES OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR 413 (2002)
- ¹⁶ James W. Prescott, *Body Pleasure and the Origins of Violence*, 31 Bull At Sci. (1975); James W. Prescott, *Prevention or Therapy and the Politics of Trust: Inspiring a New Human Agenda* 3 PSYCHOTHERAPY AND POLITICS INTERNATIONAL 194–211 (2005)
- ¹⁷ Ebrahim et al., *Sexual Intercourse and Risk of Ischaemic Stroke and Coronary Heart Disease: The Caerphilly Study* 56 JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH 99–102 (2002).
- ¹⁸ Stuart Brody, *Slimness is Associated with Greater Intercourse and Lesser Masturbation Frequency*, 30 JOURNAL OF SEX & MARITAL THERAPY 251–261 (2004); Kathryn Rexrode, *Abdominal Adiposity and Coronary Heart Disease in Women*, 280 THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION 1843–8 (1998).
- ¹⁹ G. C. Murrell, *The potential for oxytocin (OT) to prevent breast cancer: a hypothesis*, 35 BREAST CANCER RESEARCH AND TREATMENT. 225–229 (1995).
- ²⁰ Adam Hinzey et al., *Breast cancer and social environment: getting by with a little help from our friends*, 18 BREAST CANCER RESEARCH AND TREATMENT. 54 (2016).
- ²¹ Manju R. Mamtani & Hemant R. Kulkarni, *Predictive Performance of Anthropometric Indexes of Central Obesity for the Risk of Type 2 Diabetes*, 36 ARCHIVES OF MEDICAL RESEARCH 581–589 (2005).
- ²² PPFA, *supra* note 12, citing H.S. Kaplan, *Desire: Why and How It Changes*, REDBOOK, 1984.
- ²³ World Health Organization (WHO), *WHO Report: Developing sexual health programmes - A framework for action* (2010) available at http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/70501/WHO_RHR_HRP_10.22_eng.pdf?sequence=1
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- ²⁵ Mary S. Neumann et al., *Effectiveness of the VOICES/VOCES sexually transmitted disease/human immunodeficiency virus prevention intervention when administered by health department staff: does it work in the “real world”?* 38 SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (2011).
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- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*