

A Psychological Consideration of Sexual Activity Impact upon Sporting Performance: an Overview

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Abstract

The question of sexual activity prior to an event is a popular subject amongst athletes. No genuine answer to date has been established about the influence of sexual activity on athletic performance. The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding sexual activity effect on sporting performance from psychological perspective. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration. Due to cultural and ethical consideration, there was no empirical study found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out overseas. Overall, it was found there were scarcity and diversity of the opinions in the literature. So, the implications of the study will help sport psychologists, coaches, and academicians have a deep insight into sexual activity impact upon sporting performance. Finally, it is suggested academicians and practitioners seize the opportunity to study the subject which is still at an embryonic stage.

Keywords: Sexual activity; Sporting performance; Psychological perspective; Iran

Introduction

Sex and sports are two of the most popular themes. In sports culture, competition has always been a way for men to express their "masculinity". This is reminiscent of mating in the wild, when two males compete physically for the right to copulate with a female. The winner was thought to be the most physically fit. Today, many men still believe that consistent sexual expression is important in maintaining their masculinity. Sex furthermore, is a natural human behavior that can serve a variety of social and physiological functions ranging from reward to reproduction, and as such, is major practice in the western world because of its beneficial and pleasure-full outcomes.

In truth, sex is not a very demanding exercise. In general, sexual intercourse expends only twenty-five to fifty calories, about the energy it takes to walk up two flights of stairs. Even the most aggressive of love makers expends only 250 calories per hour, or four calories per minute.

The question of sex the night prior to an event is a popular subject amongst athletes. No genuine answer to date has been established about the influence of sexual activity on athletic performance. Yet the majority of young male athletes nonetheless report practicing abstinence before an event, believing that sexual activity can impair sport performance [3].

Many reasons exist for adhering to sexual abstinence before competition, such as increased fatigue during competition, decreased focus and aggression levels; however most arguments are anecdotal and testimonial in nature. Nevertheless, the amount of tangible evidence on the influence of sexual activity on athletic performance is scarce. The purpose of the study was to answer the following questions:

Does sexual activity affect sporting performance?

What psychological implications does sexual activity have for sporting performance?

Methodology

The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding sexual activity effect on sporting performance from psychological perspective. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration. Due to cultural and ethical consideration, there was no empirical study found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out overseas.

Findings

Psychological Impact of Sexual Activity

Much of the research that is publicized about the impact of sexual activity on emotional health focuses on the potential hazards of sex, such as abuse and sexual dysfunction. There is a growing body of research, however, demonstrating that sexual expression may have health benefits for improving quality of life and self-esteem and for reducing stress, depression, and suicide as follows:

- A 2002 analysis of the sex practices of adults in mid-life found that sexual satisfaction was a strong predictor in reports of higher quality of life. Additionally, current sexual activity levels were associated with previous experience. Those who had frequent and enjoyable sex during midlife reported more active and satisfying sex lives during later maturity. The analysis suggests that sexual activity may be an indicator of current and future quality of life.
- A study of more than 4,000 U.S. women examined mood, sexuality, and the menstrual cycle. Strong associations between sexual interest and sense of wellbeing were found. Researchers found that sexual desire increased dramatically during periods of increased well-being and that women who did not report changes in their sense of well-being reported little change in sexual desire.
- Regarding people with disabilities, a 1998 study of 77 adult amputees analyzed factors contributing to their quality of life, including marital status, amputation-related pain, and sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction was directly associated with higher levels of quality of life regardless of marital status.

The only examined factor that displayed stronger correlation with quality of life was pain associated with amputation.

Researchers also found that the negative impact on sexual activity caused by an amputation was a stronger predictor of depression than the pain relating to the amputation.

- Although a causal relationship has yet to be demonstrated, a U.S. survey of nearly 3,500 women and men showed that personal happiness is associated with the frequency of sexual activity and orgasm, especially among women .

- A Canadian study examined the correlation between sexuality and mental health. A computerized anonymous questionnaire was administered to 75 men aged 18.27.

Information was gathered on sexual orientation and sex practices, and models were implemented to measure mental health, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Researchers found that celibacy was correlated with high scores on depression and suicidality indexes for self-identified homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual men. The men most at risk for recent suicidal behavior and depression were celibate, self-identified homosexuals. The researchers suggest that the increased risk of suicidal and depressive behaviors for these men was related to societal and internalized homophobia as well as the stage in the coming out process. Researchers suggest that sexual activity and acceptance of sexual identity may promote greater levels of mental health.

Sexual activity and orgasm have been shown to reduce stress.

One study of young married women found that positive sexual experiences with a partner may increase self-esteem. Additionally, accepting and embracing one`s sexuality and desires may also enhance self-esteem. A correlation was also found between masturbation and self-esteem .women who reported masturbating scored higher on the self-esteem index than women who did not report masturbating. These findings were supported by earlier research that suggested that women who masturbate have a more positive body image and less sexual anxiety.

Sexual Activity Impact on sporting Performance

Boone and Gilmore [1995] looked at the effects of sexual activity on the haemodynamic and metabolic response to treadmill exercise in 11 sedentary men that did and did not partake in sexual intercourse. They found that VO₂, O₂ pulse, double product, heart rate, systolic blood pressure and RER remained unaffected by coitus [11]. Furthermore, Johnson (1966) found that sexual activity did not affect grip strength in healthy men. Aerobic capacity however, is not sufficient to determine the effect of sexual activity on athletic performance. Many other variables overlooked by the aforementioned study play an important role in predicting athletic execution.

Although we do not know much about the effect of sexual activity on athleticism, we do however know about the effects of exercise on sexual activity. In a study by Meston and Gorzalka [1996], 36 women underwent 2 viewing sessions of a neutral film followed by an erotic film. In one of the session, participants engaged in high intensity cycling before the viewings. When the women engaged in exercise, they experienced increased pubic and vaginal blood flow during the erotic film regardless of whether they were sexually active or were experiencing some form of sexual desire impairment. Their findings suggested that sympathetic activation plays a significant role in the physiology of the female sexual arousal by mediating pubic vasodilation .

Other studies have reported an increase in sexual activity and pleasure following exercise regimens, some of which have been used explicitly in the treatment of hypoactive sexual arousal and desire disorders. Furthermore, Fraumann [1982] found a positive correlation between exercise time and sexual behavior, desire and intercourse frequency in 2 participant pools totalling 222 men and women, who completed a questionnaire regarding their physical and sexual habits.

Further, one very interesting study concluded regular sexual activity may boost levels of testosterone! A 2004 study found that ninety-seven men who were successfully treated for erectile dysfunction and began to engage in regular sexual activity experienced marked gains in testosterone levels. Other studies in healthy men and women support this physiological response. Finally, examining this response from a different perspective, there is strong evidence that after three months without sex, which is not so uncommon for some athletes, testosterone dramatically drops to levels close to children's levels. It appears that abstinence does not exactly "boost" testosterone and aggression.

Sexual activities immediately before sports competitions have been widely addressed and discussed by athletes and experts in this area but their attitudes towards this topic are diverse.

However, sexual activity is a part of everyday life of most people, i.e. athletes. Similar study was conducted with the American footballers and baseball players showing that American football players restrain from having sexual intercourses before the match, contrary to the baseball players. On the other hand, it turned out that athletes are generally speaking more sexually active than non-athletes [14]. It was also revealed that team sports athletes were more prone to pre-marital sexual intercourse and thus more frequent sexual partners exchange while individual sports athletes were more conservative in this respect. Tracing back the past it is well known that Mohamed Ali avoided sexual activities 6 weeks prior to boxing matches [14], and even today a lot of coaches forbid athletes any sexual activities. However, a footballer player George Best claims that he had had sexual intercourses even during a half time. According to the research of Booneho & Gilomora (1995), published in the Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness, sexual intercourse should not exert negative influence on sports performance. Following their findings during a sexual intercourse body burns no more than 4 calories per minute, thus totalling 25 calories for the average sexual intercourse. However, a lack of sexual intercourse can result in diminished and disturbed sleeping and consequently psychological anxiety and exhaustion.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding sexual activity effect on sporting performance from psychological perspective. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration.

In general, scientists dismiss the idea that sex the night before competition has a tiring effect on the athlete or that it could weaken the athlete's muscles. In fact, many purported benefits have been claimed.

Also, sports psychologists say the relaxation associated with sex can also help deal with the stress of competition, and many athletes suggest it "takes the edge off." Trainers who study peak athletic performance say that relaxation is especially crucial in sports that require fine muscle coordination and helps their athletes focus on the task at hand.

Due to cultural and ethical consideration, there was no empirical study found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out overseas. Overall, it was found there were scarcity and diversity of the opinions in the literature .So, the implications of the study will help sport psychologists, coaches, and academicians have a deep insight into sexual activity impact upon sporting performance. Finally, it is suggested academicians and practitioners seize the opportunity to study the subject which is still at an embryonic stage.

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