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Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale

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The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale assesses the dispositional need for varied, novel, and complex sexual experiences and the willingness to take personal physical and social risks for the sake of enhancing sexual sensations. Sexual sensation seeking is therefore a behaviorally specified derivative of the personality disposition sensation seeking, which in turn is derived from the trait known as extraversion (Zuckerman, 1994). Sexual sensation seeking is behaviorally defined as a dimension of sensation seeking and should not be considered an alternative or replacement for the sensation-seeking construct. The item content of the Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale is sex-specific and does not confound substance use or other conceptual factors with sexual risk taking. The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale was designed as a psychometric assessment of sexual adventurism or sexual risk taking in adolescents and adults. The scale has been used primarily in research with adults on their risks for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

Description

The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale was originally derived from the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1994), with items redefined for sexual relevance. A three-step process was used to develop the original scale. The first step involved carefully examining the item content of Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking Scale and selecting items that demonstrated the highest loadings on the factors from Zuckerman’s original factor analysis (e.g., thrill and adventure seeking, disinhibition, boredom susceptibility). The second step involved conducting focus groups with adults on the appropriateness of the item content and framing of items for sexual content. For example, we revised the item “I like wild and uninhibited parties” to “I like wild and uninhibited sexual encounters.” The final step involved clarifying content and refining wording of the original scale items with additional focus groups of gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women. Items were refined following community feedback and were placed on 4-point scales, 1 = Not at all Like Me, 2 = Slightly Like Me, 3 = Mainly Like Me, 4 = Very Much Like Me. Following initial scale development research (Kalichman et al., 1994), the items were further refined with original items that tapped sexually coercive behavior replaced with items reflecting sexual adventurism. The final scale consists of 10 items developed for use with men and women and has shown utility with adolescents and adults of all ages.

Response Mode, Timing, and Scoring

The 10-item Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale requires less than 5 minutes to self-administer or interview administer. The scale does not have formally developed subscales. Scoring involves summing the items or taking the mean response (sum of items/10). There are no reverse-scored items.

Reliability

The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency across several relevant diverse populations, including male (α = .83) and female (α = .81) college students (Gaither & Sellbom, 2003), community samples of men and women (α’s = .79–.83; Hendershot, Stoner, George, & Norris, 2007; Maisto et al., 2004), sexually transmitted disease clinic patients in South Africa (α = .71; Kalichman, Simbayi, Jooste, Vermaak, & Cain, 2008), gay and bisexual men (α’s range from .75 to .79; Kalichman et al., 1994; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995), and HIV-positive men (α = .83; O’Leary, Fisher, Purcell, Spikes, & Gomez, 2007). Item-to-total correlations range from .25 to .79, with no single item substantially reducing or improving the internal consistency when deleted from the total scale. The scale has also demonstrated acceptable time stability over 2 weeks (r = .69; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995) and 3 months (r = .78; Kalichman et al., 1994).

Validity

The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale has demonstrated evidence for its construct validity. Kalichman et al. (1994) found that among gay and bisexual men the scale correlated with rates of unprotected intercourse (r = .32), numbers of sexual partners (r = .38), and alcohol use in sexual contexts (r = .23). Kalichman and Rompa (1995) found the scale correlated with numbers of sex partners in men (r = .22) and women (r = .39). Gaither and Sellbom (2003) reported that the scale correlated with number of one-night-stand sexual encounters for men (r = .31) and women (r = .40), an association also reported by Hendershot et al. (2007). Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale scores also correlate significantly

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with the perceived pleasure of an array of sexual activities, whereas the scale is inversely associated with sexual risk reduction practices, including condom use (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995). A similar pattern of associations between sexual sensation seeking and a variety of sexual practices was found in a sample of adolescents in Spain (Gutiérrez-Martínez, Bermúdez, Teva, & Buela-Casal, 2007). Hart et al. (2003) found that gay and bisexual men who practice anal sex as both the receptive and the insertive partner score higher on the scale than men who practice either receptive or insertive anal sex. Evidence for the scale’s discriminant validity was demonstrated by Berg (2008), who found that the Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale was the single best discriminating factor between gay and bisexual men who practice unprotected sex with limited concern about becoming HIV infected and men who do not.

Other Information

The Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale is in the public domain and available for open use. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant R01-MH71164 supported preparation of this chapter.

References


Exhibit

**Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale**

A number of statements that some people have used to describe themselves are given below. Read each statement and then circle the number to show how well you believe the statement describes you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all Like Me</th>
<th>Slightly Like Me</th>
<th>Mainly Like Me</th>
<th>Very Much Like Me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I like wild “uninhibited” sexual encounters.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The physical sensations are the most important thing about having sex.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My sexual partners probably think I am a “risk taker.”</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When it comes to sex, physical attraction is more important to me than how well I know the person.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I enjoy the company of sensual people.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I enjoy watching “X-rated” videos.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am interested in trying out new sexual experiences.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel like exploring my sexuality.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I like to have new and exciting sexual experiences and sensations.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I enjoy the sensations of intercourse without a condom.</td>
<td>I 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>