

WHAT IMPACTS COVID-19 HAS HAD ON RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY in 2020

Osmo Kontula
Research Professor
Population Research Institute
Family Federation of Finland
Helsinki, Finland



Introduction

- In 2020 Covid-19 had a major impact on social lives of all inhabitants around the world. In Finland, a large proportion of the working population moved to work remotely at home. It changed the interaction with their partner, if they had a one. It caused very often impacts on their interaction and on sexual desire.
- Positive and negative impacts can be studied and understood by conducting a qualitative study where people can present and describe how Covid era in practise impacted their social and sexual life.

Method and sample

- In the summer of 2020, 3,690 people, 2897 women and 715 men responded to the online survey that I prepared. The survey was published on the website of Helsingin Sanomat that is a leading newspaper in Finland. Respondents were selected evenly of all age groups.
- Survey had a total of 25 questions, 10 of which were open-ended.
- In this extensive qualitative text data I conducted a thematic analysis.

Wordings of key open-ended questions

- There was one general question of specific fears and concerns in covid era.
 - Has the coronavirus epidemic raised some particular fears or concerns in your mind? If yes, tell me about them in your own words.
- In addition to this question there were questions if the quality and interaction of the relationship had changed in some way, and if sexual life or desire changed in some way during the coronavirus epidemic?
 - If you are living in a relationship, has the quality and interaction of your relationship changed in some way as a result of the coronavirus epidemic? If yes, tell me in what way.
 - Has your sexual life or sexual desire changed in some way during the coronavirus epidemic? If yes, tell me how.

The most common fears and concerns because of covid:

- Generally: The economy in Finland and in the world and negative impacts on the society.
- Fears of one's own or loved one's death.
- Concerns of the health of loved ones.
- Fear of the negative effects of continuous loneliness.
- Fear if the covid epidemic will never end.
- Fear of the negative impacts on mental health issues.
- Concerns for relationships in general – what happens to them and whether other people can be hugged anymore.

Social impacts on relationships

- The COVID-19 era in 2020 had almost as often either positive or negative effects on relationships.
 - Most often positive impacts have been the result of the possibility of spending more time together in a relationship thanks to the coronavirus and remote work.
 - There has been more leisure time thanks to less time spent on travelling to the workplace.
 - Increased time spent together, and increased leisure time together had been seen to have improved the relationship and increased opportunities for everyday affection.
 - On the other hand, being together all the time had felt too stressful when there was no chance to be alone. The partner had been found annoying, and disputes had escalated.

Positive impacts on relationship

- Quality of relationship was improved, partners get along well, had cozy time together, more time for discussions, increased affection, cuddling, felt comfortable together, lived life to the fullest in a moment, felt responsibility of each other, common routines worked well.
 - “Improved our relationship tremendously. We've had more time together, enjoyed being together. I wish it was always like this. We've been outdoors, talking and having hobbies together. The best time of our lives!”
 - “We haven't been together this much in our entire twenty-year marriage!.. Now it's just the two of us working remotely at home. Experience has strengthened our marriage and I have really congratulated myself on the good choice I made back in the day.”
 - “Our relationship has been strengthened by the awareness that even in exceptional circumstances and with close cooperation, the other person's face does not get bored or argue. Our sex life has improved now. When we have more time for each other, and there's no power and no time spent on anything extra.”

Negative impacts on relationship

- Most importantly continuous togetherness has been hard and mentally burdensome. The presence of the other person irritates when you can't be alone. Emotions throw away, unexpected fights and controversies arise. The partner seems boring.
 - “Constant togetherness tests nerves in a whole new way. Someone else's behavior annoys a lot more than before when you can't catch your breath at work or meet friends (we're both working remotely at home). We've both annoyed each other so much.”
 - “Often the other one gets annoyed, even if he doesn't say anything, probably because we're together all the time.”
- There were constant disputes about the seriousness of the covid situation and the need for related restrictions. Partner did not want to listen of risks anymore. Because of this there had been even discusses of divorce.
 - “The biggest challenge has been my and the spouse's completely opposite attitude to the restrictions. We've had more fights than ever. He wants to live a perfectly normal life. At worst, the situation has driven us to consider whether our values are too different for a relationship. I think my husband is selfish, he thinks I'm hysterical.”

Negative impacts on relationship

- The partner's traits and behavior had become irritating. People had been left without the mental support of a partner. It was hard to meet other people. People had expected more time of their own/alone.
 - “The walls have sometimes fallen on top when we are continuously together and there have been so many disputes.”
 - “It's a strain to be with a man all the time. You can't ask your own friends to come over because the family is always home.”
- Because of Covid it has been difficult to organize time for meetings. One can be at risk group and hence there was the ban on appointments. Sometimes people had to break the ban. Sometimes partner was in abroad and was not allowed to travel for the joint meeting.
- Many missed the time together. The children were present all the time and the atmosphere was tense.
- Many were afraid that their relationship was ending. There was a threat of a relationship breakup.

Impacts of covid era on sex life

- The COVID-19 era in 2020 had twice more often negative than positive effects on sexual desire and sexual activities in this qualitative data.
- Some had sexual desires and sex more often than before because they had more time that they could spend together with their partner.
- More and more people's sexual desire had decreased due to various concerns and often sex had stopped even altogether.

The positive impacts of covid era on sex life

- Some had desires and sex more often in Covid era because they had more time that they could spend together.
 - “This was thanks to teleworking, reduced stress, not feeling tired, feeling relaxed, and the possibility of having sex during the day.”
 - “We talk more, there is more intimacy, cuddling and sex, we are even more tightly a me-spirited team and we enjoy each other's company.”
 - “My sexual life has been activated. I'll have more time for my new girlfriend when my hobbies and other expenses have been cancelled.”
- The spouse felt closer and there was more cohesion with him/her. The spouse seemed more desirable.
 - “The need for intimacy has increased clearly and there has been more calmness in sexual intercourse. There is more room for mutual enjoyment, much more joy and variety.”

The positive impacts of covid era on sex life

- There was more sexual desire because people wanted comfort and intimacy in a crisis. They could desire more because they had more free time and had been allowed to rest. It inspired them to engage in sexual experimentation, or masturbation.
 - “Sex with a man was very nice. There hasn't been an epidemic in mind. Perhaps the lifestyles have been accentuated, so the two beautiful bodies have encountered...”
 - “There has been more sex, but we can't go all the way when the basic condition is tired/exhausted.”
 - “I've masturbated almost manically.”

Negative impacts of covid era on sex life

- More people had a decrease in their sexual desire or sexual activities due to various concerns and pressures, because they had no partner, and sex had often been stopped altogether.
 - There were a number of reasons why there was a decrease in sexual desire or sexual desire stopped altogether: Concerns, stress, anxiety, fears, unwillingness to take risks, fatigue, working pressures, no time to desire, not power enough.
 - It was not considered a good idea to desire sex and to be intimate in this Covid situation/era. Some say that the idea of a partner was disgusted, and the sex felt repulsive. It would require too much to have (even) sex (after all this).
 - “I'd like to have sex the usual way, my boyfriend can't do it right now. He is very distressed, and the only intimacy is resting on his lap. I'm trying to understand him, too, but I still feel frustrated.”
 - If people did not have a partner, they often had stopped to look for it because of covid era or they could not meet their previous lover.
 - “On the other side of Finland, I have a lovely secret love that I'm crazy about. We haven't been able to meet for over two months and have missed him so much...”

Negative impacts of covid era on sex life

- Sex has decreased often because children were constantly at home. Children went to bed very late and after that people no longer had the energy to have sex. There was no good time for sex.
 - “When the children are constantly at home, the previous luxury of having sex with the spouse during one-on-one working days has stopped. Sex now only takes time for evenings when you are often too tired.”
 - The touch has stopped and the sex because the kids have been home a lot and that always means the end of sex in us. The spouse insists on an empty apartment so that nothing should be heard...
 - “Sex is the last strain it would take to do this. That's where the little night's sleep would go. Kids wake up many times a night.”
 - “You can't take a child into care for grandparents, so the sex has been miserable for the last 3 months. Sexual life is on ice.”

Negative impact on sex life with partner

- There was a number of stories as sex has decreased because children were constantly at home.
 - “We parents of young children now have no chance of a one-on-one time when the whole family is home all the time. Kids can't go anywhere with grandparents or friends. Children stay up late and wake up early, so the parents' very own time has not been and is not in sight for months due to coronavirus restrictions.”
 - “You couldn't have sex at all the whole time the schools were closed. When the holidays start in a week, the mandatory celibacy begins again. You can't hire a babysitter, and grandparents can't take children. You can't spend the night at a hotel or send kids to sleep over anywhere. So, the epidemic has completely destroyed intimate relations.”
 - “The constant tinkering and movement of the family's teenagers at home in the evenings (next to our parents' bedroom so-being common spaces) and, of course, our own stress about both the re-depression and the coronavirus have taken away their sex drive and there has been no sex during this time.”

Negative impacts of covid era on sex life

- The constant presence of a partner had reduced the willingness towards the partner. The other one annoyed him/herself, there was nothing new about him/her, he/she didn't cause anymore longing, it felt like they were a sister and a brother. There had been more disputes in a relationship.
 - “In covid era there was less visual stimulation (outfits, make up) that would inspire sexual desire.”
 - “Passions have subsided when we're just home all the time. I've noticed that willingness requires life outside the home, distance. Otherwise, we'll be together like a sister and brother...”
 - “There's less sex. You don't want to light up when you see someone all the time. When one is always at home, masturbating is also difficult. That's whether you're amused by someone else, and I don't think you feel like that either.”
 - “Many had been afraid even to kiss with their partners because of covid.”

Conclusions and recommendations

- It is necessary to develop advisory services how to use positively the common or joint time in the relationships.
- Parents need enough time to stay on their own without children being always present.
- There is also a need to develop the ability to detect and to see the partner as desired, even if he/she is constantly present at home.
- There is a need to find opportunities for one's own time and to stay also separate in a relationship.