

Sexuality and predisposition to altered states of consciousness

In 1974, Tellegen and Atkinson proposed that ‘absorption’ is a core personality trait that consists of the degree to which one becomes so attentionally absorbed in sensations and imagination that there is an alteration of the sense of self into something that can be called a transient, endogenous, altered state of consciousness (an absorbed state). Previous studies found that personality proneness to absorption facilitates mystical experiences and solving problems through daydreaming. Previous research also revealed that the greater the intensity of absorbed states during sexual relations, the greater the sexual responsiveness (more so in women than in men). Congruently, characteristics more common in persons predisposed to absorption have been variously related to indices of sexual responsiveness; for example, links were reported between hypnotic susceptibility and female ability to attain coital orgasm, vividness of imagination and sexual excitability in both sexes, synesthesias during sex and greater female desire.

Our study aimed at testing if predisposition to absorption correlates with sexual desire and frequency in a sample of 261 Portuguese (167 women and 94 men). As a measure of trait absorption, we used the ‘self-forgetfulness’ subscale of the Self-transcendence dimension in Cloninger’s Temperament and Character Inventory – Revised. Participants also reported the number of days in the past month they desired to engage in penile-vaginal intercourse, noncoital sex, and masturbation, as well as the number of days they actually did engage in those sexual activities in that period.

We found that, in women, self-forgetfulness correlated with greater desire for intercourse and noncoital sex. In men, self-forgetfulness correlated with greater actual frequency of intercourse and noncoital sex.

As an explanation for the findings, we discussed that, due to their focused attention, persons with greater tendency for absorption might be more empathic and attentive to romantic cues, as well as more fascinated by the physical presence of partners or potential partners. Absorption can also make sexual and romantic fantasies to become more vivid. All this likely facilitates female desire and male sexual frequency.

More than one hundred years ago, William James, a pioneer of modern psychology, noted in his seminal book ‘Varieties of Religious Experience’ that “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation”. Absorbed states appear to be a rather common doorway into states of consciousness that are commonly disregarded, but might have

their adaptive role not only by increasing creativity and openness to mysticism, but also by enhancing sexual responsiveness, at least if psychological inhibitions are not present.

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Publication

[Self-transcendence, sexual desire, and sexual frequency.](#)

Costa RM, Pestana J, Costa D

J Sex Marital Ther. 2017 Apr 3