

Sexual Well-being and its Correlates in Individuals with Mood Disorders

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BACKGROUND

Depression is associated with decreased libido, while the opposite is true for (hypo)mania, and some medications have side effects on sex life. A link between sexual orientation and depression has also been reported. Surprisingly, not many studies have explored sexual wellbeing and orientation in individuals with mood disorders.

PURPOSE

Aims: (1) Examine whether sexual wellbeing, quality of life, degree of sexuality, and mood symptoms are correlated and (2) explore differences in satisfaction with sex life, sexual orientation, sexual attraction, and sexual contact in individuals with self-reported mood disorders.

METHODS

Participants

- Respondents (n = 365) with self-reported Major Depression (MD) or Mania/Bipolar Disorder (BD) ranging from ages 18 to 81 (M = 41.39, SD = 12.74).
- Respondents were primarily female (81.1%) and white (89.2%), with 59.5% reporting they were currently in a relationship.
- 48.6% of the sample reported being attracted to the opposite sex, 37.9% to both sexes, 8.3% to neither sex, and 5.2% to the same sex.

Measures

- **Sell Assessment of Sexual Orientation (SASO; Sell, 1996):** a 12 item self-report measure assessing various aspects of an individual's sexual attraction and behavior. Responses were coded into four general orientation categories: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual.
- **Current state** was assessed using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001), Altman Self-Rating Mania Scale (ARSMS; Altman, et al., 1997), and the Hypomania Check List-16 (HCL-16; Forty et al., 2010).
- **Quality of life** was assessed using the Quality of Life in Bipolar Disorder (QoL.BD; Michalak et al., 2010) and the Satisfaction with Your Sex Life (SWSL; Neto, 2012), a 5 item scale in which individuals rate various aspects of their sex lives on a scale from 1, strongly agree to 5, strongly disagree.

Procedures

- Participants were recruited from the MoodNetwork platform (moodnetwork.org) hosted by the Department of Psychiatry at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, MA. Questionnaires were completed offsite, in one sitting.

RESULTS

- 55.9% (n = 203) reported having BD and 44.1% (n = 162) having MDD.
- *Correlation between quality of life, satisfaction with sex life, sexual orientation and symptoms are shown in Table 1. Despite some significant associations, only two represent medium to large associations. Satisfaction with sex life showed an unexpected pattern of correlation.*
- Individuals with BD were less satisfied with their sex life and reported, in general, more sexual attraction to either sex. Patients with MDD tended to be classified more often as 'asexual' based on their answers (Table 2).

Table 1: Correlations between Sexual Health related Measures and clinical variables

	SWSL	QoL BD	S-Hetero	S-Homo	PHQ-9	ASRM	HCL-16
Satisfaction with Sex Life (SWSL)	1						
Quality of Life (QoL BD)	-.20**	1					
Self-rated degree of Heterosexuality (S-Hetero)	.11*	.07	1				
Self-rated degree of Homosexuality (S-Homo)	-.01	.01	-.52**	1			
Depression (PHQ-9)	.18**	-.77**	-.06	-.01	1		
Mania (ASRM)	-.12*	-.24**	-.11*	.02	.14**	1	
Hypomania Check List - 16 (HCL-16)	-.19**	.06	-.04	.03	-.05	-.19**	1

Notes. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: Group comparisons in Sexual Health related Measures in Major Depression and Bipolar Disorder

	Major Depression (n = 162)	Bipolar Disorder (n = 203)	
Satisfaction with Sex Life¹	5.36 (1.52)	4.93 (1.87)	p < .05
Sexual Orientation			p < .10
Heterosexual	77 (49.4%)	92 (47.9%)	
Homosexual	9 (5.8%)	9 (4.7%)	
Bisexual	51 (32.7%)	50 (47.7%)	
Asexual	19 (12.2%)	10 (5.2%)	
Sexual Attraction²			
Opposite Sex	2.56 (1.06)	3.09 (1.00)	p < .001
Same Sex	1.74 (1.05)	1.93 (1.14)	p < .10
Both Sexes	1.66 (1.04)	1.94 (1.21)	p < .05
Sexual Contact³			
... with a Man	34 (23.7%)	47 (23.7%)	n.s.
... with a Woman	4 (2.5%)	6 (3.0%)	p < .10

Notes. ¹SWSL is a mean of 5 items with 7 being least satisfied with sex life ²Sexual attraction scored from 1, "not at all sexually attracted" to 4, "very sexually attracted". ³Sexual contact on average more than once a week (not all frequency cells shown).

DISCUSSION

Our first analyses indicate that satisfaction with sex life shows a complex pattern of associations in this sample, and sexual orientation is not a major correlate of quality of life and mood in patients with MDD or BD.

Limitations: All data was self-reported, and there was no healthy control group.

While we found some significant associations, they seemed to be small overall. In order to explore sexual well-being in mood disorders, it will be essential to focus more on behavioral aspects and their emotional appraisal (e.g., frequency of sexual contacts, pleasure ratings).

CONTACT & KEY REFERENCES

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