

## Intimacy and Belonging: The Association between Sexual Activity and Depression among Older Adults

**St. Paul, Minn.** - Kathryn Ganong, a 2010 Macalester alumnae and graduate student at Boston College, and Macalester Sociology Prof. Erik Larson have discovered sexual activity that typically incorporates other forms of physical intimacy has a robust association with lower depression for both women and men. In spite of popular perceptions that sex might matter more for men, they found no significant difference in this association between men and women. They recently published their findings in the journal *Society and Mental Health*.

Despite claims in popular, practitioner, and academic circles that sex has beneficial effects on older adults' sense of belonging and self-worth, there had been little systematic research examining whether sexual activity had a positive association with mental health.

"We found a scarcity of previous rigorous studies that examined sexual activity and mental health, particularly among older adults," said Larson. "We thought it was an important omission and one that needed further study."

Larson and Ganong analyzed data from a nationally representative survey (the National Social Health, Life, and Aging Project) of adults aged 57 to 85 and discovered sexual activity alone without intimacy did not decrease levels of depression. Additionally, they found that other factors that could influence an association between sexual activity and depression—such as physical and sexual health, perceptions of partner support, and general relationship qualities—could not account for the association. However, they did find that other forms of physical affection (such as kissing and caressing) had to accompany sexual activity for the association to hold.

For their findings, Larson and Ganong also considered gender dynamics that could affect the association between sexual activity and depression and estimated separate models for women and men.

"Among both women and men, depression was lower if they were physically affectionate and sexually intimate with each other," said Ganong. "But their depression remained about the same if they had sexual relations without intimacy."

The researchers hypothesize that sexual activity associates with lower depression among older adults because sex can be a form of intimacy and a meaningful social activity that provides an uplifting sense of belonging and fosters the development of perceptions of support.

"The public tends not to consider how sexual activity might associate with older adults' mental health," said Larson. "Nonetheless, these findings imply that gendered patterns and transitions in older adults' sexual behavior may associate with changes in mental health."

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Read Ganong and Larson's full article here: <http://www.asanet.org/images/journals/docs/pdf>

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