

# An Inside Look at Sexual Fantasies

What do your sexual fantasies say about you, and your relationships?

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It should come as no surprise that research shows we spend much of our inner lives involved in daydreaming. Given how central sexual fantasies are to fiction (can you say *Fifty Shades of Grey*?) it might surprise you to learn that very little of this research focuses on sexual fantasies. This may change in the wake of a fascinating investigation by Israeli psychologist Gurit E. Birnbaum and collaborators published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Birnbaum and her team decided to delve into the sexual fantasies of a sample of 48 cohabitating couples to find out how their sexual fantasies related to their feelings about each other but, more importantly, to their personalities regarding relationships in general. These personality qualities, called **attachment styles**, **reflect the mental models we have of ourselves in relation to other people.**



**Attachment style theory says that as an infant, you start to develop these mental models on the basis of the way your caregivers treat you.** If you feel safe and cared for, you will carry forward into adult relationships a “secure” attachment style. However, **if you feel that your caregiver may abandon you, you can become “anxiously” attached and as an**

**adult, so fearful that you can’t count on anyone in a close relationship, that you seem needy and dependent. Alternatively, you may also develop an “avoidant” attachment style if your fear about being abandoned leads you to stay away from close relationships altogether.**

**When it comes to sex, Birnbaum and her collaborators proposed that:**

- a) Anxiously attached people would use sex to meet their needs to feel safe and secure. For anxiously attached people, sex may serve to meet their needs for emotional intimacy. If they feel the relationship is threatened, they use sex as a way to calm their fears.**
- b) People who are avoidantly attached separate sex from intimacy. They are more likely to have casual sex, to regard sex as a way to bolster their self-esteem, and distance themselves emotionally during sexual encounters.**

Data were collected from the couples in Birnbaum et al.'s study over a three-week period. Each day, the participants reported which of 19 specific relationship-enhancing and relationship-damaging behaviors that they and their partners experienced. Relationship-enhancing behaviors included such examples as "I told my partner I loved him/her—My partner told me he/she loved me". The relationship-damaging behaviors included, for example, "My partner criticized me—I criticized my partner." To obtain information on sexual fantasies, the researchers asked participants to write about each sexual fantasy as soon as it came to mind including "the specific scene, series of events, the figures, wishes, sensations, feelings, and thoughts that were experienced by you and the other figures in your fantasy." Participants also completed a 36-item questionnaire assessing their attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Across the three-week period of the study, participants on average reported that they fantasized on 13 of the days (59%). Men and women reported equal amounts of fantasizing, with two-thirds fantasizing about their partner. Men reported less of a tendency to fantasize about their partner (50%) compared to women (83%). However, the content of their fantasies did differ.

Six categories of sexual fantasies emerged, which were grouped into expressions of attachment anxiety or avoidance. **The three types of anxiety-related fantasies were**

- a) a desire for intimacy,**
- b) the self as humiliated and helpless, and**

c) others as affectionate and pleasing toward them.

The three types of avoidance-related fantasies were

- a) a desire to escape from reality,
- b) the self as aggressive and alienated, and
- c) others as aggressive and alienated.

The findings supported the prediction by the investigators that people's attachment styles would relate to the nature of their sexual fantasies. **People high in anxious attachment were more likely to have sexual fantasies reflecting emotional intimacy, being comforted and supported, and having affection expressed toward them. The participants high in avoidant attachment had sexual fantasies with themes of aggression and emotional distancing.**

The connections between attachment style and sexual fantasy themes became even stronger on days that the couples reported a high percentage of negative interactions. **The anxiously attached fantasized more about being held and nurtured when they felt that the security of their relationship was threatened. Arguments and problems seemed to lead the avoidantly attached, conversely, to have more fantasies in which they were aggressive and alienated from their sexual partner.**

**Anxiously attached people, then, are more likely to equate sex with love, especially when they feel that things aren't going well with their partner. In their fantasies, they see themselves as being humiliated and helpless at the hands of a powerful partner.**

**Avoidantly attached people do just the opposite. On bad days, their fantasies take the form of escapism, hostility, and emotional detachment. In their minds, if not in their behavior, they were the ones most likely to walk out on their partner on days when they weren't getting along well.**

As the authors acknowledge, this was a correlational study, and we have no way of knowing what causes what. Also, the authors didn't measure actual sexual desire, which could also

affect the findings. Finally, the authors didn't ask participants to indicate whether or not they told their partners about their fantasies or whether they acted them out.

**To sum up**, this fascinating study suggests 4 ways you can apply the findings to your own life by asking yourself these questions:



**1. What is your own attachment style and that of your partner?** You can ask yourself the very questions that psychologists ask to evaluate attachment style.

- Do you feel safe and secure in your relationships in general?

- How needy do or did you feel when single?

If you think you are anxiously attached:

- Can you go without having your partner with you without feeling despondent?

Alternatively, if you think you might be avoidantly attached, ask yourself:

- Do you have difficulty letting your guard down with your partner?

- Do you run away when things get emotionally rocky?

**2. How do you see yourself in your own sexual fantasies?** The Birnbaum study showed that people who fantasize about being helpless and humiliated tend to be anxiously attached. When they're having relationship problems, they're even more likely to imagine themselves in this way.

The avoidantly attached fantasize about being in control, and do so even more when they're having problems with their partner. The study didn't define one "ideal" type of sexual fantasy as that would be a tough judgment call to make. However, the study does suggest that relationship stress may drive people to see themselves in ways that are perhaps less than emotionally beneficial.

**3. Do you use sex as a way to be loved?** The partners in this study were, by definition, already in a long-term relationship. However, as the authors pointed out, anxiously attached people not in a committed relationship may find themselves using sex as a way to meet their emotional needs. They are more likely to be hurt by getting involved in relationships that they think are emotionally close but that their partners are using only for sexual purposes.

**4. Do you use your sexual fantasies as a way to avoid intimacy?** The avoidantly attached run out emotionally in their fantasies on days that their relationship is stressed. Using sexual fantasies as an escape hatch may keep you from experiencing true emotional closeness.

Sexual fantasies can certainly have their entertaining moments. As it turns out, they may also be key to understanding yourself and your inner needs for intimacy.