

Is Our Sex Crazy Culture Making Us Mentally Unhealthy?

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A new study released in November, 2013 from The Ohio State University suggests that poor mental health and casual sex feed off each other in teens and young adults, with each one contributing to the other over time. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the study included about 10,000 people who were surveyed about their romantic relationship experiences across time, as well as depressive symptoms and thoughts of suicide. Adolescents from 80 high schools and 52 middle schools were interviewed when they were in grades 7 through 12 and again when they were aged 18 to 26.

“Several studies have found a link between poor mental health and casual sex, but the nature of that association has been unclear,” said Sara Sandberg-Thoma, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

Reading the study, I wondered about our cultural double standard that its OK for men to have casual sex but its not OK for women. Well, the study actually showed that the effect on mental health from casual sex is the same for men as for women. The researchers also found that teens who have depressive symptoms were more likely than others to engage in casual sex as young adults. In addition, those who engaged in casual sex were more likely to later seriously consider suicide. In fact, each additional casual sex relationship increased the odds of suicidal thoughts by 18 percent.

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In his book, Holy Sex! A Catholic Guide to Toe-Curling, Mind-Blowing, Infallible Loving, Dr. Gregory Popcak writes “the brain is wired to view sex as a sign of intimacy and unity. In fact, the brain responds to break-ups the same way it responds to physical pain. When two people make love, their brains begin to think of the other as part of each self. The lovers literally become wired together. When they break-up, the brain responds to the social wound as if the lovers experienced a physical wound; a broken arm or a broken leg. Now imagine intentionally setting yourself up to get physically wounded again and again. You would call that person “mentally ill” right? Well, that’s what casual sex is—setting your brain up to be wounded again and again. And setting oneself up to get hurt again and again—especially in the name of fun—is a depressing thought.”

In some religious circles they refer to the bonding of a man and woman through sex as a “soul tie”. God designed that bond as a blessing but casual sexual encounters lead to “soul ties” that are detrimental to our well being.

So even if you can't accept the teachings of religious leaders on the subject, now we have this study with an impression number of respondents that may convince you to re-evaluate your position on the issue from a scientific perspective. At the very least, it turns out that mom was right when she impressed upon you the importance of purity. It turns out that there are good reasons to keep sexual intimacy within the boundaries of a committed relationship. As the researchers explain "There's always been a question about which one is the cause and which is the effect. This study provides evidence that poor mental health can lead to casual sex, but also that casual sex leads to additional declines in mental health. Overall, 29 percent of the 10,000 respondents reported engaging in any casual sexual relationship. These were defined as any relationship in which the participant reported he or she was "only having sex with partner" as opposed to dating. This included 33 percent of men and 24 percent of women." The results do point to a possible "cyclical pattern" in which poor mental health leads to casual sex, which leads to further declines in mental health, Sandberg-Thoma said.

"The goal should be to identify adolescents struggling with poor mental health so that we can intervene early before they engage in casual sexual relationships," she said. Kamp Dush said casual sexual relationships may hurt the ability of young adults to develop committed relationships at an important time in their development. "Young adulthood is a time when people begin to learn how to develop long-term, satisfying and intimate relationships," she said.

As I have observed women struggle to find meaningful relationships during my almost 30 years in the mental health field, I believe that engaging in casual sex has denied many the opportunity to find a fulfilling, life enriching relationship. A subject for another article is the emotional pain and guilt resulting from abortion which is often the outcome of casual sex.

Bonnie Harken, Founder and CEO, Crossroads Programs for Women, has been in the mental health field since 1987. Look for up coming programs at Crossroads Programs for Women in Pekin, where you can begin your journey of finding renewal, hope, joy, direction and passion.