This Pleasure Principle Boosts Condom Use and Fights HIV and STIs

As sexually transmitted infections spike, the WHO finds that safer-sex efforts are more effective when they mention pleasure.

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Breaking news: Sex can be pleasurable! Not exactly shocking, right? Yet this fact of life is often overlooked in messages promoting sexual health and condom use. It's a missed opportunity because, as a new global report has found: "Programs which better reflect the reasons people have sex, including for pleasure, see better health outcomes."

With rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continuing to spike and new cases of HIV in the United States holding steady at slightly over 30,000 annually, it's important to understand what makes a safer-sex campaign effective.

To that end, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the nongovernmental group the Pleasure Project conducted a review and meta-analysis of safer-sex programs and campaigns from the past 15 years. The findings were published in PLOS One.

"Sexual health education and services have traditionally promoted safer-sex practices by focusing on risk reduction and preventing disease, without acknowledging how safer sex can also promote intimacy, pleasure, consent and well-being," Lianne Gonsalves, MSPH, a coauthor of the paper and a WHO epidemiologist, told The New York Times in an article on the report. Programs that focus on positive aspects of sex such as pleasure and intimacy, Gonsalves said, see better outcomes.

Here's how the report authors sum up their findings:

> Our meta-analysis provides evidence about the positive impact of pleasure-incorporating interventions on condom use which has direct implications for reductions in HIV and STIs. Qualitatively, we find evidence that pleasure can have positive effects across different informational and knowledge-based attitudes as well. Future work is needed to further elucidate the impacts of pleasure within SRHR [sexual reproductive health and rights] and across different outcomes and populations. Taking all the available evidence into account, we recommend that agencies responsible for sexual and reproductive health consider incorporating sexual pleasure considerations within their programming.

Sexual health advocates tell the Times that many people continue to resist the idea—indeed, the truth—that people also have sex for pleasure, not just to reproduce. This is perhaps a result of the fact that globally, many people wrongly believe sexual pleasure to be a concept imposed by Western cultures on other countries.

Nonetheless, pleasure-centered safer-sex messages are finally starting to take hold. For example, the International Planned Parenthood Federation has endorsed the Pleasure Principles, guidelines that highlight pleasure as an aspect of sexual health.

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