



The mediating roles of fear of intimacy and sexual communication in the relationship between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction among young men¹

<https://doi.org/10.34766/4cw73675>

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Abstract: Sexual satisfaction is an important indicator of sexual health and relationship functioning, yet young men who have difficulties recognizing and expressing emotions may experience lower satisfaction in their intimate lives. The present study addressed the research problem of whether and how alexithymia relates to sexual satisfaction in young heterosexual men by testing fear of intimacy and sexual communication as sequential mechanisms. In an online cross-sectional survey, 153 men aged 18–30 years who were in a romantic relationship (≥ 6 months) completed measures of alexithymia (TAS-20), fear of intimacy (FIS), sexual communication self-efficacy (SCSES), and sexual satisfaction (SSS). It was hypothesized that higher alexithymia would be associated with greater fear of intimacy, which would be linked to lower sexual communication, and in turn to lower sexual satisfaction. Serial mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 6, bootstrapping) supported the hypothesized pathway: alexithymia was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction through increased fear of intimacy and reduced sexual communication. The direct association between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction was attenuated after accounting for the mediators. The model explained 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction. These findings suggest that intimacy-related avoidance and difficulties in sexual communication may explain why alexithymia undermines sexual satisfaction, highlighting potential targets for prevention and couple-focused interventions. **Keywords:** Alexithymia, Fear of intimacy, Sexual communication, Sexual satisfaction.

Introduction

Sexual satisfaction constitutes a key dimension of human sexuality and is defined as “an affective response resulting from a subjective evaluation of the positive and negative aspects associated with one’s sexual relationship” (Lawrance & Byers, 1995, p. 268). It is widely recognized as one of the primary indicators of sexual health (Flynn et al., 2016), and lower levels of sexual satisfaction have been consistently linked to poorer psychological functioning (Carcedo et al., 2020), an increased risk of adverse health outcomes (Dekker et al., 2020), and reduced stability of long-term romantic relationships (Connidis, 2007/2013). Given its broad significance, a growing body of research has focused on psychological and relational factors that differentiate levels of sexual satisfaction.

One such factor is alexithymia, which has repeatedly been identified as an important predictor of diminished sexual and relational well-being.

Alexithymia – literally “no words for emotions” – is a multidimensional construct encompassing difficulties in identifying feelings (DIF), difficulties in describing feelings (DDF), and an externally oriented thinking style (EOT) (Swart et al., 2009). It is often conceptualized as a relatively stable trait associated with difficulties in distinguishing emotional from physiological arousal, as well as problems in expressing emotional states (Duquette, 2020). These deficits negatively affect interpersonal functioning by hindering the formation and maintenance of close, emotionally satisfying relationships (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). A sub-

¹ Article in Polish language: https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_nowi.pdf

stantial body of literature indicates that alexithymia is associated with multiple adverse outcomes in the domain of intimate life: individuals with higher levels of alexithymia report greater sexual distress (Ribeiro & Pereira, 2023), lower sexual satisfaction (Sharyati, 2010), and lower relationship satisfaction (Frenn et al., 2022). Berenguer et al. (2019) demonstrated that elevated alexithymia in women is associated with dyspareunia, reduced arousal, orgasmic difficulties, and overall dissatisfaction with sexual life. Alexithymia has also been linked to hypoactive sexual desire disorder (Carvalho & Nobre, 2010).

Intimacy represents a fundamental component of satisfying sexual relationships, as it involves the willingness to share emotions, thoughts, and experiences with a close partner, thereby fostering emotional security, trust, and mutual understanding (Birnie-Porter & Lydon, 2013; Giovazolias & Paschalidi, 2022). Fear of intimacy – understood as difficulty disclosing one’s emotions and thoughts to another person – disrupts this process and is associated with poorer relationship quality and lower sexual satisfaction (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). It may manifest as reluctance to disclose personal information, avoidance of emotional conversations, or discomfort in situations of physical closeness, all of which impede the development of emotional bonding (Vangelisti & Beck, 2007). Numerous studies have demonstrated a direct association between alexithymia and fear of intimacy (Sullivan et al., 2015; Besharat et al., 2014). Among individuals with high levels of alexithymia, these difficulties may be further exacerbated by reduced mentalization capacities and ineffective interpersonal emotion regulation, which additionally constrain the ability to maintain closeness (Durmaz & Baykan, 2020; Nowicki, 2025a; Pérusse et al., 2012). Lyvers et al. (2022) showed that fear of intimacy largely accounts for the association between alexithymia and lower relationship satisfaction, as heightened fear leads to emotional avoidance, reduced engagement, and greater interpersonal distance, thereby weakening both intimacy and relational satisfaction. Research also points to strong links between alexithymia and insecure attachment styles (Montebarocci et al., 2004), which promote self-protective strategies at the expense of closeness and intensify fear of intimacy (Jinyao et al., 2012;

Ścigala et al., 2021). These patterns are often rooted in adverse childhood experiences – such as emotional neglect or inconsistent caregiving – that hinder the development of secure attachment and foster negative expectations toward intimate relationships (Taylor & Bagby, 2004). In adulthood, this translates into difficulties with emotional sharing and trust-building, ultimately reducing relationship satisfaction and sexual well-being (Pietromonaco et al., 2013).

Sexual communication constitutes another key determinant of sexual and relational well-being. It encompasses verbal and nonverbal ways of expressing needs, desires, boundaries, and concerns related to sexuality within a romantic relationship (Liberacka-Dwojak & Wilkość-Dębczyńska, 2024; Mallory et al., 2019). Open and clear communication facilitates mutual understanding, helps align expectations, and reduces the risk of misunderstandings (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Mallory, 2022). Although the direct association between alexithymia and sexual communication has not been extensively examined, available evidence suggests that individuals high in alexithymia use fewer positive and more negative communication behaviors (Pérusse et al., 2012). They tend to be less expressive, experience discomfort when disclosing emotions, and show difficulties processing emotion-related language (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). Zdankiewicz-Ścigala et al. (2024) found that alexithymia is associated with reduced use of emotionally laden words, and that this relationship is mediated by fear of intimacy. Communication deficits also undermine overall relationship satisfaction (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013), and similar mechanisms within sexual communication have been shown to diminish sexual satisfaction (Nowicki, 2025b). It is therefore plausible that poorer sexual communication mediates the association between alexithymia and lower sexual satisfaction.

The aim of the present study was to test a serial mediation model in which alexithymia influences sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication among young men. Individuals with elevated levels of alexithymia often experience difficulties engaging in emotionally meaningful interactions and exhibit heightened fear of intimacy, which may hinder open discussion of issues related to romantic relationships. These difficulties may, in turn,

reduce the quality of sexual communication, a key determinant of sexual satisfaction. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that alexithymia would predict higher levels of fear of intimacy, which would subsequently be associated with poorer sexual communication, ultimately leading to lower sexual satisfaction.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 153 young heterosexual men participated in the study. Participants were recruited through online platforms and university notice boards to ensure a diverse sample in terms of relationship experiences and demographic backgrounds. The age range of participants was 18 to 30 years ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 4.6$), reflecting a young adult population that is typically in the developmental stage of establishing intimate relationships. All participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship lasting at least six months to ensure that they had sufficient experience in close and sexual relationships for the study measures to be applicable.

Participants were required to complete a series of self-report questionnaires assessing alexithymia, fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction. The surveys were administered online using a secure data collection platform, which allowed participants to complete the measures anonymously and at their convenience. Prior to participating, individuals were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. They then provided informed consent electronically before proceeding to the questionnaires.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Parker et al., 1993)

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) is a widely used self-report measure assessing difficulties in recognizing, describing, and cognitively processing

emotions. The instrument comprises 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), producing total scores ranging from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater alexithymia. The TAS-20 includes three subscales: Difficulties in Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulties in Describing Feelings (DDF), and Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties and has been validated across various cultural contexts. The Polish adaptation by Ścigala et al. (2020) showed good reliability and validity.

1.2.2. Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS; Descutner & Thelen, 1991)

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) assesses reluctance and discomfort related to forming emotionally close and intimate relationships. It measures the degree to which individuals experience difficulties in sharing personal thoughts and emotions, both within existing romantic relationships and when considering the development of new intimate connections. The FIS consists of 35 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The Polish adaptation was prepared by Roszak and Falis (2014).

1.2.3. Sexual Communication Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2016)

The Sexual Communication Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES) is a 20-item instrument evaluating individuals' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively about sexual topics within intimate relationships. The measure encompasses five domains: contraceptive communication, negative sexual messages, positive sexual messages, sexual history, and condom negotiation. Although originally developed for adolescents, the SCSES has been successfully validated and applied in adult populations. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 4 (*very confident*), with higher scores indicating greater sexual communication self-efficacy. The Polish adaptation was developed by Liberacka-Dwojak and Wilkość-Dębczyńska (2024).

1.2.4. Sexual Satisfaction Scale (SSS; Meston & Trapnell, 2005)

The Sexual Satisfaction Scale (SSS) is a comprehensive 30-item measure assessing multiple dimensions of sexual satisfaction. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting greater sexual satisfaction. The instrument measures five domains: (1) Contentment, referring to emotional fulfillment and pleasure derived from sexual activity; (2) Communication, assessing the ability to discuss sexual needs and preferences; (3) Compatibility, reflecting perceived sexual harmony within the relationship; (4) Relational Concern, capturing the influence of relationship dynamics on sexual satisfaction; and (5) Personal Distress, indicating anxiety or dissatisfaction related to sexual experiences. The Polish version was adapted by Janowski and Czyżykowska (2013) and has been validated for both men and women.

2. Data analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) and the PROCESS macro. The analytic procedure proceeded in several stages. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) were calculated to evaluate the distributional characteristics of each variable. Pearson correlation coefficients were then computed to examine bivariate associations among alexithymia, fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction.

To provide a clearer picture of alexithymia severity in the sample and enable group-based comparisons, participants were classified into quantile-based

alexithymia groups using TAS-20 total scores: the bottom 25% (low alexithymia), the middle 50% (average alexithymia), and the top 25% (high alexithymia). Group differences in fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction were examined using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA). When the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated (Levene’s test), Welch’s ANOVA was used and Games–Howell post hoc comparisons were conducted; otherwise, standard ANOVA with Tukey HSD post hoc tests was applied. Effect sizes were reported as eta squared (η^2).

Next, a serial mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS Model 6 to test the hypothesized indirect effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication. The total indirect effect was computed using the standard formula: . The significance of indirect pathways was assessed using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, and 95% bias-corrected accelerated confidence intervals (BCa CIs) were generated to determine whether effects differed significantly from zero.

2.1. Description of correlations

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the associations among the study variables. As shown in Table 1, alexithymia was negatively correlated with both sexual communication and sexual satisfaction, and positively correlated with fear of intimacy. Fear of intimacy was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction and sexual communication. In contrast, sexual communication was positively correlated with sexual satisfaction, indicating that effective sexual communication plays a key role in enhancing sexual satisfaction within intimate relationships.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Skewness, Kurtosis, and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables for Males

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>sk</i>	<i>k</i>
1. Alexithymia	62.32	9.21	-				0.28	-0.42
2. Fear of Intimacy	48.43	7.45	0.38***	-			0.11	-0.65
3. Sexual Communication	29.12	8.02	-0.26***	-0.20**	-		-0.33	-0.18
4. Sexual Satisfaction	43.56	11.13	-0.21***	-0.27***	0.23**	-	-0.14	-0.47

Note: M mean, SD standard deviation, SK skewness, K kurtosis *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2. Means of Study Variables by Quantile-Based Alexithymia Group and One-Way ANOVA Results

Outcome	Low (n = 38) M (SD)	Average (n = 77) M (SD)	High (n = 38) M (SD)	Test	df	F	p	η^2	Post hoc
Fear of intimacy	44.9 (6.9)	48.3 (7.2)	52.0 (7.6)	ANOVA	2, 150	12.10	< .001	.14	Tukey: High > Avg > Low
Sexual communication	33.4 (7.6)	29.4 (7.9)	25.7 (8.1)	ANOVA	2, 150	10.06	< .001	.12	Tukey: Low > Avg > High
Sexual satisfaction	49.2 (10.6)	43.8 (11.0)	39.6 (11.5)	Welch	2, 73.4	9.21	< .001	.11	GH: Low > High; Low > Avg

Note: Welch ANOVA and Games-Howell (GH) post hoc tests are used when homogeneity of variances is violated; otherwise, standard ANOVA with Tukey HSD is reported. η^2 = eta squared.

2.2. Exploratory group comparisons across alexithymia severity

To facilitate interpretable group comparisons with balanced group sizes, participants were divided into quantile-based alexithymia groups using TAS-20 total scores: the bottom 25% (low; n = 38), the middle 50% (average; n = 77), and the top 25% (high; n = 38). Group descriptives are shown in Table 2.

One-way ANOVAs were then conducted to compare these groups on fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction (Table 3). For fear of intimacy, the group effect was significant, $F(2, 150) = 12.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$, with Tukey post hoc tests indicating a graded increase (high > average > low). For sexual communication, the ANOVA was also significant, $F(2, 150) = 10.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$; Tukey tests showed lower communication in the high alexithymia group compared with the average and low groups. For sexual satisfaction, heterogeneity of variances was assumed; therefore, Welch's ANOVA was used and was significant, $F(2, 73.4) = 9.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$. Games-Howell comparisons indicated that the low alexithymia group reported higher sexual satisfaction than both the average and high groups.

2.3. Serial Mediation Model explaining male sexual satisfaction

The serial mediation model examined the association between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction among males, with fear of intimacy and sexual communi-

cation serving as mediators. The overall model was significant, $F(3, 147) = 35.20, p < .001$, explaining 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction ($R^2 = .38$).

Alexithymia demonstrated a significant total effect on sexual satisfaction ($c = -0.45, SE = 0.08, t = -5.63, p < .001$). The direct effect of alexithymia on fear of intimacy was also significant ($a_1 = 0.50, SE = 0.06, t = 8.33, p < .001$). Fear of intimacy, in turn, had a significant negative effect on sexual communication ($d_{21} = -0.60, SE = 0.07, t = -8.57, p < .001$). Alexithymia also showed a negative association with sexual communication ($a_2 = -0.15, SE = 0.07, t = -2.14, p = .034$). In the final equation, fear of intimacy was negatively

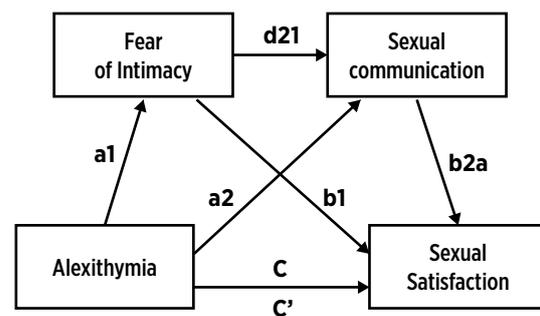


Figure 1. Theoretical model of serial mediating roles of Fear of Intimacy and Sexual Communication in relationship between Alexithymia and Sexual Satisfaction

(c) A direct effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction. (a1, b1) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Fear of Intimacy. (a2, b2) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Sexual Communication. (a1, d21, b2) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Fear of Intimacy and Sexual Communication. (c') A direct effect of the Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, taking account of the impact of both mediators.

Table 3 Regression coefficients for the serial mediation model

Outcome variable	Predictor	Path	B	SE	t	p
Fear of intimacy (M1)	Alexithymia (X)	a1	0.50	0.06	8.33	< .001
Sexual communication (M2)	Alexithymia (X)	a2	-0.15	0.07	-2.14	.034
Sexual communication (M2)	Fear of intimacy (M1)	d21	-0.60	0.07	-8.57	< .001
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Fear of intimacy (M1)	b1	-0.20	0.08	-2.50	.014
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Sexual communication (M2)	b2	0.55	0.05	11.00	< .001
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Alexithymia (X)	c'	-0.05	0.06	-0.72	.41

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (B). N = 153. The overall model was significant, $F(3, 147) = 35.20, p < .001$, explaining 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction ($R^2 = .38$).

associated with sexual satisfaction ($b_1 = -0.20, SE = 0.08, t = -2.50, p = .014$), whereas sexual communication positively predicted sexual satisfaction ($b_2 = 0.55, SE = 0.05, t = 11.00, p < .001$). When both mediators were included, the direct effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction became non-significant ($c' = -0.05, SE = 0.06, t = -0.72, p = .41$), indicating full mediation.

The indirect effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication was statistically significant (point estimate = $-0.24, 95\% BCa CI [-0.26, -0.22]$). The specific indirect effect via fear of intimacy alone ($a_1 \cdot b_1$) and via sexual communication alone ($a_2 \cdot b_2$) were also tested, alongside the total indirect effect, and are typically summarized in a table of indirect effects with bootstrap SEs and BCa confidence intervals.

3. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to verify a serial mediation model designed to identify the mechanisms through which alexithymia may contribute to reduced sexual satisfaction, with particular emphasis on fear of intimacy and sexual communication as sequential mediators. Consistent with previous empirical findings (Sharyati et al., 2010), alexithymia was found to be negatively associated with sexual satisfaction, supporting the assumption that difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions may adversely affect outcomes related to sexual functioning. Prior

research also suggests that alexithymia lowers sexual satisfaction by limiting the capacity to experience sexual fantasies and by attenuating the emotional depth of sexual experiences (Scimeca et al., 2013). The findings of the present study extend this literature by demonstrating that this association is fully accounted for by two co-occurring interpersonal processes, which together clarify how and why alexithymia may undermine sexual well-being.

Intimacy is also significantly associated with sexual satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2013), whereas its deficit is linked to an increased risk of sexual dysfunction (Bumby et al., 1997) and reduced sexual activity between partners (Reis & Grenyer, 2004). The first mediator, fear of intimacy, significantly explained the relationship between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction. Fear of intimacy refers to reluctance or discomfort associated with sharing personal emotions and thoughts with a close partner (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often exhibit emotional avoidance, a limited capacity for emotional expression, and relational patterns consistent with insecure attachment styles (Montebarocci et al., 2004; Hesse & Floyd, 2008). These characteristics constrain the development of emotional closeness, which constitutes a fundamental foundation of relationship quality. Emotional distance may, in turn, hinder the creation of a safe and trust-based environment conducive to satisfying sexual interactions. Moreover, fear of intimacy may also be associated with discomfort experienced during physical contact. This suggests

that not only psychological and emotional closeness, but also physical touch itself, may be perceived as uncomfortable by individuals with high levels of alexithymia. Consequently, these difficulties may limit the experience of mutual pleasure and a sense of connection during sexual encounters.

The study further identified sexual communication as a second key mechanism linking alexithymia to sexual satisfaction. Sexual communication represents a behavioral component of relational functioning and is essential for fostering mutual understanding and coordinating sexual expectations. Drawing on the theoretical framework proposed by MacNeil and Byers (2005), the influence of sexual communication on sexual satisfaction can be conceptualized through two pathways: instrumental and expressive. In general, alexithymia is associated with less adaptive communication patterns – such as reduced expressiveness and heightened interpersonal withdrawal (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013) – which appear to extend into the sexual domain and constrain individuals' ability to articulate needs, preferences, and boundaries. From an instrumental perspective, these difficulties may impede discussions of sexual concerns and the negotiation of mutually satisfying arrangements. From an expressive perspective, they may weaken emotional closeness and reciprocal self-disclosure, both of which are necessary for establishing a sense of safety and interpersonal synchrony in intimate relationships. As a result, communication barriers may prevent couples from achieving sexual compatibility and from responding effectively to sexual difficulties, ultimately leading to reduced sexual satisfaction.

Importantly, the serial mediation pattern observed in the male sample suggests that the effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction operates entirely through intimacy-related processes. This finding supports the notion that, among men, emotional difficulties may be more likely to manifest as relational withdrawal, which subsequently impairs communication and sexual functioning. Although some previous studies have emphasized the role of intimacy particularly in women's sexual relationships (Berenguer et al., 2019; Czyżowska et al., 2019), the present findings indicate that intimacy and communication are equally crucial for men's sexual well-being. In other words, men

with high levels of alexithymia experience greater discomfort related to both physical and psychological intimacy, which contributes to difficulties in communicating sexual needs and concerns and, consequently, leads to lower reported sexual satisfaction.

Practical Implications

The present findings carry important implications for clinical practice and work with couples, as they indicate that fear of intimacy may constitute a central barrier to satisfaction in romantic relationships and may form a key mechanism through which alexithymia is associated with diminished relational and sexual well-being. Accordingly, interventions aimed at enhancing emotional awareness and developing skills related to recognizing and expressing emotions may indirectly improve sexual satisfaction, for example by reducing avoidance of closeness and strengthening the quality of communication within the relationship.

When working with individuals exhibiting alexithymic traits, clinicians should consider not only intrapsychic difficulties in emotion regulation, but also interpersonal patterns of withdrawal and avoidance that hinder the formation of secure bonds. Because coping with negative emotions is particularly challenging for individuals with alexithymia, a useful therapeutic focus may also involve enhancing the capacity to understand and interpret the emotional states of others. Improvements in this area may facilitate perspective-taking, promote more effective coping with interpersonal conflicts and emotionally challenging situations, and ultimately strengthen social bonds, interpersonal functioning, and relationship quality.

Although alexithymia is often conceptualized as a relatively stable trait, evidence from clinical research suggests that certain components – particularly those related to emotional awareness – may be amenable to change through interventions grounded in cognitive-behavioral approaches (Thorberg et al., 2016). Fear of intimacy likewise represents a modifiable mechanism and may constitute an important therapeutic target for individuals seeking help for

relationship difficulties (Stanton et al., 2017), especially when accompanied by discomfort with emotional disclosure and closeness. Relationship-focused approaches, such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), which emphasize emotional expression, attachment-related fears, and the development of secure relational bonds (Johnson, 2019), appear particularly promising. In addition, communica-

tion-oriented interventions – including components of sex therapy that promote open dialogue about needs, desires, and boundaries – may improve functioning in couples experiencing intimacy-related difficulties. Strengthening partners' capacity for clear, responsive, and emotionally attuned communication may thus represent a key pathway to enhancing both relationship quality and sexual satisfaction.

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