

Fantasies and human sexuality

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What are sexual fantasies? Sexual fantasies are defined as, "any erotic or sexually arousing mental imagery that a person has while awake. It can be an elaborate story, or it can be a fleeting thought of some sexual activity"⁶

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There's a huge range of personal taste in sexual fantasy, just as there is in everything else. But many people feel uncomfortable with their own fantasies, fearing they're somehow weird if they're turned on by things that are unacceptable to others. But fantasies are simply somewhere we can act out things we might never do in real life, such as having sex in a public place or with a particular person. And sometimes they turn us on precisely because they're not real.³

Data show that frequent fantasizers are having more than their share of fun in bed. They have sex more often, engage in a wider variety of erotic activities, have more partners, and masturbate more often than infrequent fantasizers, Leitenberg and Henning report in *Psychological Bulletin*¹³.

Types of Fantasies. There are three primary types of fantasies outside of the normal, everyday scenarios of common partners and bedroom scenes⁶:

- The first scenario deals with "forbidden imagery", imagery includes unusual partners such as strangers and relatives and unusual positions, places.
- The second scenario is of "sexual irresistibility" This deals with sheer animal magnetism, seductiveness, and multiple partners.
- The third scenario involves "dominance and submission" fantasies. These include power fantasies such as rape, bondage, etc.

Benefits of fantasy³.

- Sex resides in the brain, and an active imagination means that your desire is heightened and your arousal is much quicker and ready for action before anything physical has actually happened³.
- Adds spice and novelty to a long-standing sexual relationship. This can be particularly helpful if your partner is not as sexually adventurous as you are.
- If experimenting in bed is embarrassing, fantasy offers an opportunity to give your imagination free rein and to play out roles.
- It can block out negative thoughts. If you find during sexual encounters your mind wanders to unhelpful

images or thoughts, fantasy can help you to refocus on your sexual pleasure.

Married, single, men, women, all fantasize with strangers

Fantasising about other people³ Some people worry that fantasising about someone other than their partner is disloyalty, an act of betrayal, that reveals either a hidden desire to be unfaithful or the fact that they are no longer turned on by their partner alone. The fact is that many people fantasize with strangers and there is also evidence that those who fantasize the most are in happy, loving, trusting relationships³.

A potential reason for this was proposed by Wilson (1997) and deals with the theory of evolution. Since women have far fewer eggs than men do sperm, women want to make their fantasies of quality, while men of quantity. This idea leads to the suggestion that women would be more inclined to have sexual fantasies of those who are genetically fit, or of higher power/authority. This also suggests that men would be more inclined to have sexual fantasies of group sex or with multiple partners⁶.

Nevertheless, and despite possible evolutionary reasons, women are more constrained by cultural pressures that frown upon female sexuality, and would make women not to think about sex outside of a committed relationship, lest they be labeled a "slut"¹³.

Studies tend to back these theories, nevertheless, women do have highly sexual fantasies and do fantasize about strangers:

- **Marital status.** Being single or paired does not inhibit fantasising about third parties: virtually identical responses were given by couples living together (86.6%) and singles (86.5%)¹ about having fantasies with someone other than their current partner.
- **Men and Women.** The response given by men and women was identical for both groups indicating that men and women alike fantasize about strangers: married (males = 98%, females = 78%) and singles (males = 98%, females = 81%).
- **Transcultural.** This is true across different cultures^{21 & 22}, for instance a survey in Spain, revealed that 'sex with someone that you know is not exciting (45% of women) but quite exciting (42% of men), also Spanish men consider that having sex with more than one person at a time is more exciting than Spanish women⁸.

45% of the Canadians surveyed¹⁶ fantasized that their partner was someone else (48% of men, 43% of women), and those who do not engage in fantasy play are much more likely to pretend that their partner is someone else without their knowledge.

- **Amount of sexual partners.** The amount of partners that one has had also influences your fantasies, but differently depending on your gender: "... women are more likely to fantasize about someone other than their current partner if they have had more sex partners in the past, whereas the likelihood of fantasizing about someone else is relatively high for men regardless of number of prior sexual partners"¹, in other words: men tend to fantasize more about strangers than women, and the women who do, are those who have had more sex partners.
- **Strangers, who are they?** The breakdown of these strangers or *extradyadic* (someone who is not your current partner) who are fantasized with, is the following:

Fantasies with a stranger...	Men	Women
Involving a former partner	22%	34%
Involving someone who has never been a partner	78%	66%

This shows that over two thirds of these strangers are someone who has never been involved with them, in other words a stranger.

British surveys also reveal a similar pattern: 37.9% of men and 26.8% of women fantasize about sex with a stranger; and 40% of both men and women fantasized about sex with a celebrity⁴.

- **Meeting the stranger.** Women are less keen on meeting people through the internet for uncomplicated sex, it only features in 8.8% of their fantasies compared to 27.9% for men.⁷.

Who do people fantasize with?

Having noted that people have fantasies with strangers, we must look into what types of strangers excite them in their erotic fantasies. Men and women choose differently:

Women.

A UK survey showed that: Women fantasize with: Firemen (47%), soldiers (28%), businessmen (27%) (proving that money and power are potent aphrodisiac), doctors (26%), and footballers (20%), pilots (25.5%) and policemen (25.1%). Gardeners beat builders for the top tradesman fantasy with 18.2%. The bottom of the list is politicians (1.7%) and milkmen, only in 0.8 % of women's dreams^{4 & 7}.

French women chose: Firemen (47%), and was the choice of 63% of the women under the age of 35. Television celebrities (9%), soccer player (8%), and in the last place, plumbers (4%)¹⁴.

So Firemen are the coolest choice for women in both countries.

Men.

British men's fantasy favorites are nurses (53.9%), maids (44.2%) and air hostesses (39.6%), businesswomen (24%). Their least favorite fantasy babes are traffic wardens (6.5%). Teachers are top on male student's fantasies (66.7%).^{7 & 4}.

French¹⁴ men choose for their fantasies, nurses (31%), masseuses (28%), air hostesses (19%); female television celebrities (8%) and policewomen (7%).

Nurses are the coolest choice for men in both countries.

Differences between fantasies of men and women

There are several web sites^{16 & 19} that list "Top Ten fantasies" for men and women, but they differ significantly in the popularity of the fantasies and also in the types of fantasies involve, we will only refer to scientific studies in this article.

There are differences between men and women in the content and type of fantasies that they have:

- **Group sex.** Male fantasies more often involve simultaneous sex with two or more partners (in the US, a third of men had these fantasies, twice the number of women), men are also more likely to switch partners in mid-fantasy².

In the UK Men prefer threesomes (55%) versus women (31%)⁴. Similar to the data from France, where half the men¹⁴ men fantasize with a threesome (FMF) but only 11% of French women fantasize with a MFM threesome¹⁵.

- **Domination.** Both sexes imagine either overpowering or being forced to submit to another's wishes. Men are more likely to have domination fantasies, while women tend to see themselves submitting (13% of women but only 4% of men said that their favorite fantasy was being forced to have sex)².
- **Variety.** Men have a greater variety of fantasies. Asked to check off all those they had experienced in the past three months (on a list of 55), male collegians indicated 26 of them. Women listed only 14².
- **Frequency.** Unsurprisingly men fantasize more often than women, 46.9% of males fantasize at least once a day and this figure falls to 21.3% among women⁷.
- **Same sex.** British women fantasized more about them (23.5%) compared to men (5.3%)⁴. But the US figures show 86% of men and 69% of women having homosexual fantasies⁶.

These conclusions are shown in the following table, with the main *themes* of fantasies indicating the differences between male and female fantasies.

Category - Theme ⁶	Men	Women
daily fantasies (times/day)	7.2	4.5
Group sex (UK survey)	42%	10%
Sex with strangers	33%	25%
Sex with famous persons	16%	17%
Sex with strangers	10%	19%
Homosexuality	86%	69%
Fantasized during masturbation	81%	43%
Focus on visual imagery during fantasising	19	57
Focus on feelings or emotions		

Another analysis¹², delves in these differences and gives us some additional details; the following table lists self-reported fantasies and again it clearly shows that the typical fantasies of men and women were quite different:

Category - Theme ¹²	Men	Women
Group sex	31%	15%
Voyeuristic/fetishistic	18%	7%
Steady partner incorporated	14%	21%
Identified people (other than partner)	8%	8%
Setting romantic/exotic	4%	15%
Rape/force	4%	13%
Sado-masochism	7%	7%
None	5%	12%
Everything	3%	0%
No answer	21%	19%

The table columns total more than 100 because categories are not mutually exclusive.

Analysis of the Table.

Top male fantasy. The most common element in male fantasies (31%) was group sex or sex with two other women (for example: 'being tied to a bed with six or more naked women licking, kissing and fellating me'. The equivalent figure for women was only 15%¹².

Second male fantasy. Fantasies that are visual or voyeuristic, referring to clothing such as black stockings and suspenders, sexy underwear, leather, or nurses' uniforms. Also including visual emphasis (details of anatomy, reference to the age or race of the partner, and description of the

sexual activity that was engaged in). Women on the other hand very occasionally refer to anonymous physical characteristics such as the size of the man's penis, the hairiness of his chest or his ethnic origins.

Top female fantasy. Fantasies that included husband or current loved partner (21% - versus only 14% for men).

Second female fantasy. Was reference to exotic, romantic settings (islands, beaches, forests, fields, flowers, waterfalls, moonlight, space and heaven (15% - versus only 4% for men)¹². This is also true for Spanish women are more turned on than men by words, images and romantic themes (movies and stories)⁸.

Domination fantasies. Another common female element was that of rape or force (13% versus 4% of males who would like to be raped by women), but force from a loved or already desired person.

None of this means, of course, that real-world rape victims "really want it". Women may find submission fantasies very sexually arousing, but they definitively know that they do not want to be raped in the real world. Fantasies allow them to control all aspects of the submission / dominance scenario. There is no brutality, the fantasies involve attractive men who become wild due to the woman's overwhelming beauty. So these fantasies also involve the "sexual irresistibility" mentioned at the beginning of this article, they reflect the need to be desired¹³.

Lack of sexual fantasies.¹² More than twice as many women as men (12% compared with 5%) stated that they had no sexual fantasies (or won't admit to it). It is probable that these fantasy-free people are getting a vicarious non-sexual fix from other sources (movies, for example). Or else they simply aren't paying attention to their own thoughts¹³.

More detailed list of fantasies. A large sample (size 19.000) shows the percentage of UK and US adults who have fantasized about different themes:¹¹

What do people fantasize about ¹¹	
Fantasy	%
Sex with regular partner	58%
Sex with someone else's partner	41%
Sex with a work colleague	39%
Sex with a stranger	37%
Romantic scenes	37%
Sex with two or more women	35%
Playing a submissive or passive role during sex	33%
Sex with a friend	32%
Playing a dominant or aggressive role during sex	29%
Sex with someone of same sex	25%
Being tied up	25%
Sex with a friend's partner	23%
Tying someone up	23%
An orgy	20%
Being watched during sex	19%
Sex with two or more men	18%
Sex with a man and a woman at the same time	15%
Stripping off in public	5%
Sex with a sister	1%
Sex with a brother	1%
Sex with animals	3%

The table columns total more than 100 because categories are not mutually exclusive.

Other interesting information on fantasies.

- **When do people fantasize?** In Spain, where 70.6% of men and 47.8% of women fantasize, during intercourse, the percentage drops to 45.5% (men) and 36.7% (women)⁸, somewhat lower than the figures for the US, where 71% of men, and 72% of women fantasize during sex⁸, revealing perhaps a more conservative society.

- **Active and Passive.** If fantasies are classified into those that are 'active' (taking the initiative in some sexual activity) and those that are 'passive' (having something done to oneself) it becomes clear that men are much more likely to have active fantasies overall.¹², the study actually found that significantly more females than males fantasized themselves as recipients of sexual activity from fantasized sexual objects, while males fantasized the sexual object as recipients of sexual activity. Marginal tendencies toward reversal of this gender pattern occurred in the 'Masturbatory' condition for males, and in the 'Daydream' sexual fantasy condition for females¹⁷.

This may be changing, a book²⁰ revealed "that in recent years women's fantasies have relied more on active, assertive women giving pleasure, as compared to the fantasies containing more passive women receiving pleasure (as) indicated by prior research"

- **Frustration or fulfillment?** Another striking difference between the fantasy life of men and women concerned their connections with sexual satisfaction. Generally speaking, those men who reported a great deal of sex fantasy had no partners or were in some sense sexually unfulfilled. Women who engaged in a great deal of fantasy were usually also having an active and satisfying sex life with a loved partner. Thus it seems that men's fantasies often signify sexual frustration, while women's fantasies are awakened or liberated by sexual activity¹².
- **Age.** Sexual fantasies seem to decline with age and possibly experience. The greatest age difference seen was in group sex. In men, group sex fantasies peak at the ages of 28-37 and sharply decrease after that point. In women, there is a slow decrease in group sex fantasies throughout the age span, but a larger dive after the 38-47 year bracket⁶.
- **Cheating and Fantasies.** In an article featured in the Los Angeles Times (2003) it is noted that sexual fantasies are almost always the trigger that leads to an affair. This may cause some concern considering that over 20% of Americans and 10% of Canadians have marital affairs. Also noted was that women had affairs more often in their first five years of marriage, while men are more apt to have affairs at two peaks in their lifetimes: the first five years and after 20 years. It is not currently known whether more sexual fantasies occur during these years, but affairs have been tied to rebellion against marriage vows⁶.

Guilt.

A poll⁶ featured in the New York Times indicated that "48% of respondents did not think it was 'okay' to fantasize about having sex with someone else even if they were faithful to their partner".

Nearly one in four people feel strong guilt about their fantasies. Even a well educated college-aged group, shows guilt prevalence: 22% of the women and 8% of men admitted to repressing their fantastic desires⁶. This holds true for Canadians¹⁶, where 12% of men and 15% of women are disturbed by their fantasies.

Such guilt exacts a heavy toll. Those who fret over their fantasies have sex less often and enjoy it less, even though the content of their fantasies is no different from those of the guilt-free¹³, this was shown by studies^{7, 5 & 8} that explored how guilt feelings about having sexual fantasies during intercourse affected people:

- Those who felt guilty (both in US and in Spain) reported having significantly fewer sexual fantasies during intercourse than those who felt the least guilty. They also reported higher levels of sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction.
- The high-guilt group believed that sexual fantasies during intercourse were significantly more abnormal, immoral, uncommon, socially unacceptable, and harmful to themselves, their partner, and their relationship regardless of whether their partner knew that such fantasies occurred^{7&8}.

Guilt, gender and age. In the UK, men are more comfortable with their fantasies than women, 73.6% of men feel fine about fantasising compared to 68.2% of women. Age wise, the 16-24 year olds are the most likely to feel very guilty about their fantasies (4.5% compared to national average of 1.9%)⁷.

Greater frequency of sexual fantasy among women has been found to be associated with greater sexual satisfaction as well as with lower levels of sexual guilt. Being a private activity, and therefore others are unaware of it, women feel free to explore their sexuality without fearing being discovered. Also, it seems that women with lower sexual guilt are more likely to be more open to sexual experiences⁵.

Revealing and discussing your fantasies.

- **Silence.** Freud in 1908, declared that "a happy person never fantasizes, only a dissatisfied one" this led people to consider themselves as not normal⁶.

Therefore, the tendency has been to suppress revealing sexual fantasies in general and even more so those close to you, such as your partner. So most people, despite being happy to fantasize, keep their thoughts to themselves.

The older we get the more secretive we become, yet, this is not true for people who are married or in long term relationships, who tend to be more open⁷.

- **Being open about your fantasies.**

Silence, as mentioned, is a problem, it not only fosters guilt, but if partners can not be open about their sexual fantasies and desires, they don't share a large part of their inner selves. Sharing on the other hand may help them to fulfill each others fantasies and enhance sexual happiness.

Fantasising together. Recognizing that fantasies play an important role in keeping a couples' sex lives fresh a large amount of couples engage in fantasy play together: (29%) in the UK⁷; 46% of Canadian¹⁶ men and (49%) women.

Talking about fantasies. According to a survey⁹ 51 % (men and women alike) say they talk with their partner about their fantasies in order to enhance their sex lives.

Women are more likely to share their fantasies (35.5%) than men (32.2%)⁷, and couples in long term relationships are more likely to share their fantasies with their partners (38.2%)⁷. Younger people tend to talk more about their fantasies as shown in the following table:⁹

Those that discuss fantasies	
Age group	Do discuss

18 to 29	71%
30 to 39	55%
40 to 49	49%
50 to 64	37%
over 65	22%

- **Acting out fantasies.** In the case of women, who want to make their exploratory fantasies real, they seem to have no difficulty in translating their fantasy into actual behavior.

The correlation between fantasy and activity is very high for women, but men are not so lucky; those who fantasize about having a lot of different partners are no more successful with women than those men who are less variety-orientated in their fantasies. The reason is simply "supply and demand" in the sexual market-place works in such a way that for women who wishes to enact her fantasies, many men will gladly help, so she can do so as soon as it is desired, but not so for men¹⁷.

- **Happier sex life.** Sexual fantasies play an important role in the happiness of your sexual lives. Discussing sexual fantasies does lend itself to excitement: 44% of couples who talk about their fantasies call their sex lives Very Exciting, while only 28% of those who don't talk consider their sex lives in the same way⁹.

People who discuss their fantasies with their partner are also 10 points more apt to enjoy sex a great deal, and also 6 points more apt to be very satisfied with their sex life, but are not more likely to be satisfied with their marriage or committed relationship⁹.

Caution about sharing fantasies.

Although, as mentioned above, sharing fantasies can be liberating: some couples find that sharing and acting out their fantasies has increased trust and intimacy; but it can also be risky: others have not.

Fantasies are extremely personal and there are risks involved in disclosing them, especially to someone you care for.

Before doing so, consider how you'll manage if your spouse does not like your fantasy or if you try acting it out and it just doesn't work.

Approaching your partner. If you decide to go ahead, talk to them first about the general theme of the fantasy, and approach with caution - remind them it is only a fantasy, reassure them that you still find them sexually attractive and tell them they don't have to do anything they're uncomfortable about.

For some people, making fantasy a reality works and they'll wonder why they were so worried about trying it in the first place or there's the possibility it might not live up to your expectations.

So do whatever you feel is right for you and your partner. Making sexual fantasies a reality can be risky - never put yourself or your partner in any dangerous situations, always consider the consequences and remember to stay safe and legal^{10 & 3}.

To quote this article, please indicate the following:

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