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## Costs of Short-Term Mating for Women



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### Synonyms

Casual sex; One-night stand; Booty-calls; Hook-ups; Friends with benefits

### Definition

The term “short-term mating” typically describes a sexual relationship that is casual in nature, mostly focused on sexual pleasure, lacking commitment or longevity, and characterized by little emotional connection (Jonason 2013; Jonason and Balzarini 2016). The term “casual sex” is used as a catchall to refer to all kinds of short-term relationships, but these relationships can encompass one-night stands, booty-call relationships, hook-ups, and friends with benefits. While all of these relationships have their unique features, they share a common theme of creating a context where individuals have sex without any formal commitment.

## Introduction

Casual sex is widespread in nature, with 38% of “adults” (Twenge et al. 2015) and 75% of college students (Jonason and Balzarini 2016) engaging in some form of casual sex relationship. Historically, casual sex has been viewed as a pathology, but this might not necessarily be the case if one takes an evolutionary perspective. Casual sex may be part of the naturally occurring variation in human sexuality.

Ancestrally and today, women (and female mammals) have a heavier obligation to offspring than men (and male mammals) do, creating different costs and benefits for engaging in casual sex relationships in the sexes (Trivers 1972). This asymmetry has acted as a selection pressure shaping men and women’s sexual psychologies differently and translates into men’s greater willingness to have sex with a stranger (Clark and Hatfield 1989), to consume pornography, to pay for sex, to have lower standards in who they have sex with, to say “I love you” sooner, and to have more permissive attitudes about sex, findings that hold up cross-culturally (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Schmitt 2005) and over time (Petersen and Hyde 2010). Evolutionary-informed researchers point to the costs and benefits associated with casual sex for men and women as a way to better understand why people may engage in and avoid casual sex along with other relationships (Jonason 2013; Jonason and Balzarini 2016). Various benefits arise out of a short-term mating strategy such as

gifts, protection, assessment of own mate value, assessment of a potential partner's characteristics, assessment of sexual compatibility, or gaining superior genetic benefits from a casual sex partner (Buss 2016). Despite these benefits, there are costs and risks to women for engaging in such a strategy. In the rest of this entry, we detail some of the costs women incur by engaging in short-term mating relationships. This is not to say that they do not experience benefits, but that is beyond our scope here.

### **Social Costs of Casual Sex**

Men may be evaluated more favorably, and women are evaluated less favorably for engaging in similar sexual behaviors, an effect called the sexual double standard (Marks 2009). Typically, this double standard is framed in terms of social norms, but such a model fails to consider why those social norms exist in the first place and why women as opposed to men are saddled with the negative reputation for doing the same thing men do. Men's unfavorable evaluations may be driven by men's greater parental uncertainty, that is, their confidence that they are investing in a biological child. Men who cared more about paternity certainty fathered more offspring than those who cared less. Men are reluctant to enter a relationship with a woman when her previous relationship has ended (Busche et al. 2013) which is claimed to ensure that he will not father a biological child from her previous relationship. Men will judge women with a high number of sexual partners as less desirable for a long-term relationship (Buss 2016) as this is thought to be a signal of future fidelity. These reputational costs may translate into men being less willing to invest in offspring and in her which, overtime, acts as selection pressure against female promiscuity in so much as resulting offspring survive and reproduce less often.

Women risk reputational costs for engaging in short-term mating behavior from women as well. Women engage in intrasexual competition and

compete with other women to acquire and retain mates, for social status, and for resources to support their children (Benenson 2013). Furthermore, women engaging in short-term mating lowers the ratio of eligible men available to date (Baumeister et al. 2017). For these reasons, women view promiscuous women as threats to both dating and their relationships. Women disapprovingly evaluate other women with larger numbers of sex partners (Zaikman and Marks 2014). Even while being sexually active and viewing short-term mating as empowering, some women fear their sexual reputation and still believe casual sex is unacceptable for themselves. They will judge other women who engage in casual sex unfavorably even while engaging in the same behavior themselves (Farvid et al. 2017). As well as risking their reputational damage with other women, they forgo friendship opportunities with other women because women dislike sexually permissive women and are less inclined to be friends with sexually permissive women (Vrangalova et al. 2014). Even in cultures where short-term mating is normatively common and socially acceptable, such as Sweden, women who have a reputation for promiscuity will reputationally suffer (Buss 2016).

### **Health and Reproductive Costs of Casual Sex**

If the only costs associated with casual sex in women were social in nature, reducing those costs would be a mere function of changing social norms around sex. However, there are also health and reproductive costs associated with casual sex that women predominantly face. These include sexual violence, sexually transmitted infections, and, also, the possibility of unplanned children. Dating partners may resort to tactics such as coercion, threats, and aggression, progressing ultimately through to rape if a woman does not agree to sexual activity. Women are at a greater risk of physical and sexual assault, with college students experiencing rates up to 27% of date rape, sexual assault, and sexual aggression over

their lifetime (Rickert and Wiemann 1998). Sexual assault often results in psychological damage such as trauma, anxiety, depression, fear, guilt, and shame, which are mental health costs. Sexual assault has a reproductive success cost as it threatens women's reproductive choice. Sexual assault resulting in pregnancy dictates the choice of a father, resulting in a child that is fathered by a man whom she potentially would not have chosen and, therefore, may have inferior genes and traits than that she seeks in a partner. This man is unlikely to provide the greatest investment to her and her child. Furthermore, it may prevent a woman from finding a long-term partner willing to take on the parental role for another man's child (Buss 2016).

Methods of birth control such as condoms are required to prevent sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Contraceptives such as the birth control pill only prevent unplanned pregnancies. While contraceptives have allowed humans to separate the acts of sexual activity and reproduction, human psychological mechanisms lag our modern world and have not evolved fast enough to change our mating psychology (Buss 2016). Condom use in casual sex is low with only 47% of students (Lewis et al. 2012) and up to 55% of adults (Sanders et al. 2010) reporting use of a condom during the last casual sex act. This indicates sexual risk-taking, which may further be exacerbated by the influence of alcohol (Lewis et al. 2012; Owen et al. 2011). Sexually transmitted infections and diseases can in turn affect women's future fertility (Bowden et al. 2002). Reduced fertility affects reproductive success, meaning that women will have lower rates of children or, at the extreme, remain childless and may ultimately threaten long-term relationships (Buss 2016).

Perhaps the largest reproductive cost that women face is unintended pregnancy. In ancestral and modern societies, women face the possibility (more than men) of having an offspring with no support of a father which will face increased childhood mortality risk and potentially maternal mortality as well (Buss 2016). If a modern woman

finds herself pregnant from a casual sex encounter, she is stuck between a rock and hard place. She can have an unwanted/unplanned child and rear it as a single mother, remain in a potentially problematic relationship, or have an abortion. These come with costs that women suffer and have suffered asymmetrically more than men did. For example, women undergoing abortions have increased psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, self-judgment, guilt, and shame; experience social judgment from family, friends, and sexual partners; and are often less desirable as dating and long-term partners (Hanschmidt et al. 2016).

Alternatively, a woman may choose to keep the child and raise the child on her own. This will create hardship and stress for both her and her child as single parenting is challenging. Single parents experience financial strain, often resulting in physical illness and mental health difficulties (Stack and Meredith 2018). It is difficult for a woman to find a new long-term partner to invest in her and children from a previous relationship. Some men may not wish to invest their time and financial resources in another man's child. Both partners may face conflicts of interest over providing love and resources to each other or the stepchild. Stepparents are less emotionally invested and devote less time and resources than genetic parents. Furthermore, because the child represents a Darwinian cost to the stepparent, the risk of child abuse by stepparents is 40 times higher than biological parents (Buss and Duntley 2013).

### **Mental Health Costs of Casual Sex**

Casual sex can be a double-edged sword. Despite women's willingness to enter a short-term relationship (Schmitt 2005), some women experience postcoital psychological distress. Sex for extrinsic motives such as peer pressure, need for self-affirmation, or low self-esteem has been linked to psychological factors such as greater depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem (Vrangalova 2015). One of the benefits of casual sex is the

enjoyment, which is greater for men than women; however, women face greater risks in terms of mental health. For students with no prior depressive symptoms, casual sex has been associated with depressive symptoms over a long-term period (Owen et al. 2011).

Psychological effects can manifest in subclinical areas, for example, postcoital worries and self-esteem issues. Women regret engaging in short-term mating more than men and tend to worry more about factors such as having uncommitted sex, sex with a stranger, one-night stands, progressing relationships too fast sexually, losing virginity too early, or losing their virginity to the wrong person (Galperin et al. 2013). Adult and college student women report feeling used, rejected, embarrassed, reputational loss, self-disappointment, a loss of self-respect, and disappointment that the relationship did not progress to a long-term relationship (Campbell 2008; Lewis et al. 2012). Women who engage in casual sex experience more postcoital worry than men regarding their partner's intentions, being used for sex, and unwanted emotional attachments and experience vulnerability because they may form attachment bonds and are worried about future investment from their partner (Townsend and Wasserman 2011; Townsend et al. 2015).

Indeed, some women may only engage in some forms of casual sex to gain access to higher-quality partners (i.e., hypergamy by casual sex) for long-term relationships (Jonason and Balzarini 2016). That is, they leverage their sexual availability as a lure to entice a man into a more serious relationship. This is a risky strategy in that couples who know each other better are less likely to use condoms (Sanders et al. 2010), thereby increasing STI and pregnancy risk, but may also translate into depression and postcoital regrets that can affect mental health. Given the

postcoital effects of worry, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of rejection, this may have longer-lasting reproductive implications than typically considered. Women may experience a loss in self-perceived mate value and may, therefore, lower the quality of mates they are willing to date, mates who are likely to be less willing/able to invest and may provide lower genetic material to her offspring.

People with psychological conditions such as borderline personality disorder (BPD) are more prone to participate in casual sex, and women are dispositionally more likely to have BPD. Those with BPD are high on impulsivity, including sexual impulsivity. Individuals with BPD have higher rates of unplanned pregnancies and STIs, participate in unprotected sex, have a larger number of casual sex partners, and are more likely to have experienced rape and sexual assault (Frias et al. 2016). Women with BPD who participate in short-term mating may, therefore, be undermining their mental health.

## Conclusion

A key insight from evolutionary models of sexuality is that there are reproductive asymmetries in men and women. Men tend to benefit more and pay fewer costs for engaging in short-term mating than women do. Women, in contrast, ancestrally and today, incur more costs for engaging in short-term mating, as summarized in Table 1. We have delineated some of these costs in relation to STIs, single parenthood, child-rearing constraints, mental health effects, and reputational issues. These costs are likely to have shaped women's sexual psychology toward long-term relationships where these costs are minimized. Nevertheless, the mating landscape is still fraught with these dangers,

**Costs of Short-Term Mating for Women, Table 1** A summary of the costs of short-term mating in women

Social	Health and reproductive	Mental health
Men may be unlikely to view as desirable for a long-term partner	Physical and sexual assault	Depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, increased worries
Single parents may face dating challenges	STIs	Vulnerability
Reputational damage from other women	Possible infertility from STIs	Self-respect
Loss of female friends and support network	Unplanned pregnancy	Shame and embarrassment
Less desirable as a future dating partner if having prior terminations	Single parenthood	Trauma from sexual assault
Social judgment from friends and family regarding terminations	Physical illness from financial strain of single parenthood	Anxiety, stress, and depression from financial strain of single parenthood
	Stepparents caring for child	Distress from possible terminations

and not all women are disposed to engage in serious relationships. For those women choosing to engage in short-term mating, they are likely to face these costs in their pursuit of other short-term mating motivations like sexual gratification, testing the waters, and calibrating mate value.

**Cross-References**

► [Derogation of Promiscuity](#)

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