

THE INFLUENCE OF BASIC NEED SATISFACTION ON SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Despite two-decade long HIV prevention efforts, recent reports suggest that new HIV infections are on the rise in the United States (CDC, 2008). To combat this, many researchers believe that we must achieve a greater understanding of the motivations behind sexual risk-taking in order to develop targeted HIV-prevention interventions. This study assessed the influence of unmet basic psychological needs and psychological distress on the decision to engage in risky sexual behavior among a sample of college students. One hundred and thirty four students from a large Midwestern university were enrolled in a 6-8 week repeated measures diary study in which they reported their level of basic need satisfaction, psychological distress, and engagement in sexual activities over each week. We hypothesized that 1) low basic need satisfaction, 2) high psychological distress, and 3) the combination of low basic need satisfaction and high psychological distress would be related to higher engagement in sexual risk behavior. Lagged analyses indicated that deficits in competence and relatedness, as well as elevations in negative affect, depression, and anxiety from one week predicted involvement in various types of risky sexual behavior the following week, but so also did surpluses in autonomy and relatedness. In addition, ancillary analyses indicated that participants experienced psychological benefits one week after participating in sexually risky behavior. Implications of these findings for the creation of effective HIV prevention programming and future research in the area of sexual risk-taking are discussed.