

Libido

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Libido refers to a person's sex drive or desire for sexual activity. The desire for sex is an aspect of a person's sexuality, but varies enormously from one person to another, and it also varies depending on circumstances at a particular time. A person who has extremely frequent or a suddenly increased sex drive may be experiencing hypersexuality. Sex drive has usually biological, psychological, and social components. Biologically, levels of hormones such as testosterone are believed to affect sex drive; social factors, such as work and family, also have an impact; as do internal psychological factors, like personality and stress. There is no measure of what is a healthy level for sex. Sex drive may be affected by medical conditions, medications, lifestyle and relationship issues.

There is no necessary correlation between the desire for sex and actual sexual activity. For example, a person may have a desire for sex but not have the opportunity to act on that desire, or may on personal, moral or religious reasons refrain from acting on the urge. Psychologically, a person's urge can be repressed or sublimated. On the other hand, a person can engage in sexual activity without an actual desire for it.

The concept of libido was first introduced by Sigmund Freud as the instinct energy or force, contained in what Freud called the id. Carl Jung defined libido as the free creative or psychic energy an individual has to put toward personal development or individuation. Within the category of sexual behavior, libido would fall under the appetitive phase wherein an individual will usually undergo certain behaviors in order to gain access to a mate.

History of the concept

Sigmund Freud popularized the term and defined libido as the instinct energy or force, contained in what Freud called the id, the largely unconscious structure of the psyche. Building on the work of Karl Abraham, Freud developed the idea of a series of developmental phases in which the libido fixates on different erogenous zones--first in the oral stage (exemplified by an infant's pleasure in nursing), then in the anal stage (exemplified by a toddler's pleasure in controlling his or her bowels), then in the phallic stage, through a latency stage in which the libido is dormant, to its reemergence at puberty in the genital stage. Freud pointed out that these libidinal drives can conflict with the conventions of civilized behavior, represented in the psyche by the superego. It is this need to conform to society and control the libido that leads to tension and disturbance in the individual, prompting the use of ego defenses to dissipate the psychic energy of these unmet and mostly unconscious needs into other forms. Excessive use of ego defenses results in neurosis. A primary goal of psychoanalysis is to bring the drives of the id into consciousness, allowing them to be met directly and thus reducing the patient's reliance on ego defenses.

Freud viewed libido as passing through a series of developmental stages within the individual. Failure to adequately adapt to the demands of these different stages could result in libidinal energy

becoming 'dammed up' or fixated in these stages, producing certain pathological character traits in adulthood. Thus the psychopathologized individual for Freud was an immature individual, and the goal of psychoanalysis was to bring these fixations to conscious awareness so that the libido energy would be freed up and available for conscious use in some sort of constructive sublimation.

According to Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, the libido is identified as psychic energy. Duality (opposition) that creates the energy (or libido) of the psyche, which Jung asserts expresses itself only through symbols: "It is the energy that manifests itself in the life process and is perceived subjectively as striving and desire." (Ellenberger, 1967)

Defined more narrowly, libido also refers to an individual's urge to engage in sexual activity. In this sense, the antonym of libido is destrudo.

More recently, philosopher and psychologist James Giles has argued that human sexual desire is neither a biological instinct nor something learned or constructed by culture. According to Giles' theory of sexual desire it is an existential need based on the awareness of having a gender. Having a gender creates a sense of incompleteness. We then seek to fill this incompleteness through the baring and caressing of the desired gender.