

Results of Qualitative and Online Message Testing To Support A Sexual Health Campaign

**Conducted by Michaels Opinion Research, Inc.
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The Communications Action Group (CAG) of the National Coalition for Sexual Health (NCSH) drafted a series of messages designed to motivate individuals to take action to protect and improve their sexual health.

Specifically, these messages were designed to define and promote:

- The benefits of sexual health.
- Core action steps to achieve good sexual health.
- A simple, consumer-friendly definition of sexual health.

This report presents the findings of a qualitative exploration with the general public to examine message clarity, relevance and appeal, and to determine:

- The motivational power of six general benefit statements and 26 specific benefits of sexual health.
- Whether five draft action steps, along with supporting statements, are clear, compelling, and perceived to be important.
- The appeal of four possible definitions of sexual health.

Messages were tested with men and women, 18 years of age and older in two phases:

- The first phase involved a series of one-hour, in-depth interviews with 33 participants segmented into 10 sessions by sex, age and sexual orientation.
- The second phase of evaluation involved a national online panel of 268 men and women who scored and ranked messages for relative importance and appeal.

Both inquiries explored feedback and preferences relating to draft messaging on the benefits, action steps, and definitions of sexual health.

The assessment also explored whether there are common messages that are appealing, motivational and clear to a broad audience of the general public, regardless of age, sex, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. The testing was also designed to identify any significant differences based on these demographic characteristics.

Based on these findings, the NCSH will select, prioritize, and further modify the messages, as needed, to produce a message framework that will help coalition members deliver consistent, positive messages that are likely to motivate, enable, and persuade consumers to take action.

Testing and refinement of draft sexual health messaging was conducted in two phases: Small group discussions and a national online panel review.

Small Group Discussions

- Ten small group discussions were held in Phoenix, Arizona, on July 9 and 10, 2013, with a total of 33 individuals.
- Participants were recruited by professional recruiters using screening criteria to provide a mix by race/ethnicity, relationship status, sexual orientation and sexual activity in the past year.
- Groups were segmented by sex, age, and sexual orientation as follows:

Heterosexual /Age

Men	18-29	Women	18-29
	30-39		30-39
	40-59		40-59
	60-70		60-70

Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM)/Age

18-29
30-39

- Each discussion, which lasted approximately one hour, was based on a discussion guide developed in consultation with the NCSH that explored attitudes toward the draft sexual health messages.
- Groups with men and older MSM were led by a male moderator. Groups with women and younger MSM were led by a female moderator.

- Messages to promote the benefits of good sexual health and action steps to achieve good sexual health were tested on multiple levels, including discussions and rankings of benefits, action steps, and proposed definitions of sexual health, as well as exploration of the meaning of the words “sexuality” and “sexual life.”
- During the small group sessions, participants were provided with a series of benefit and action-step statements and asked to review and identify whole or partial segments of those statements that they considered important, relevant or not relevant to them. They also identified the “most compelling” message in a series.
- Overall, over 50 unique messages about the benefits of good sexual health and potential action steps toward good sexual health were evaluated.

Online Message Testing

- 268 individuals representing a regional cross-section of the adult U.S. population completed a 25-question web-based questionnaire that further explored attitudes toward the revised draft sexual health messages.
- The sample of potential respondents invited to participate via an email invitation containing a link to the questionnaire website was drawn in proportion to the general population from a national consumer panel database of over 3 million individuals.
- The interview included closed-ended questions designed to measure the strength and resonance of unique message statements. Respondents were asked to rank (pick the top two) or rate the importance of messaging that reflected their points of view.

About the Data and Quotes Presented in Report

Charts and graphs in this report present responses from the national online panel and have been weighted by sex and age to reflect their actual proportions in the population according to U.S. Census data.

- The sample of online panel participants represents a cross-section of the U.S. adult population, but it is not a probability sample where findings by subgroups can be considered representative or projected to the entire population with statistical confidence.

Highlighted quotes in this report are those of the 33 individuals participating in the small group sessions.

Both the qualitative and online panel findings should be interpreted as directional and not definitive.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall Response to Messages

In terms of message appeal, clarity, relevance, and importance, the sexual health messages tested were received positively by both men and women and across age groups.

In both rounds of testing, participants rated sexual health messages—about benefits and action steps—as ideas that matter to them, even if some were not particularly relevant at this time in their lives. While some benefits and action steps emerged as being more important than others, nearly all were considered valuable.

Moreover, even though some initially associated the concept of sexual health with the avoidance of STIs, a broader concept of sexual health was quickly embraced that included emotions, overall health and relationships.

The first round of testing did reveal that some messages needed refinement and clarification.

- One of the revised messages was a statement in support of the sexual health benefit of having “positive relationships.”
 - In multiple sessions participants reacted negatively to the inclusion of the words “when wanted” in the statement “Experience love, intimacy and affection, when wanted.”
 - To these individuals, “when wanted” suggested an unwillingness or even resistance to experiencing love and affection. As one woman in her 30s remarked: *“When wanted” is a turn off, because we would always want love and affection.*

- Other messages revised for phase two online assessment included:
 - Removing the word “throughout” from the action step message: “Think about what you want throughout your life.” For some participants—both younger and older—the word “throughout” suggested a mandate to plan or have certainty for a future that could not be envisioned.
 - Another change was to not combine in one statement the sexual health benefits of avoiding sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. Most participants did not see the two concepts as belonging in the same sentence.

Overall, the benefits, action steps, and definitions tested well across different demographic segments: men and women, young and old, heterosexual and gay, and different racial/ethnic groups. Any significant differences occurred primarily between men and women, which are described below and within the detailed findings. In addition, messaging around STIs and pregnancy was more relevant to those who are young and/or not currently in a relationship.

- The online wave of message testing found women far more responsive than men to messages that support both the benefits of and actions steps toward good sexual health .
 - While the benefits of good sexual health are important to men there is a consistent chasm at the top of the scale—“matters very much”—between the ratings of men and women.
 - For example, 72% of women vs. 53% of men say “feeling comfortable with yourself, your body and your identity” matters very much to them. The same is true of their reactions to “feeling confident”—70% of women report it matters very much, compared to 51% of men.

The message tests suggest women will respond more intensely to messaging that stresses the importance of trust, openness, valuing oneself, and being treated well. They view choosing partners who “treat them well” (23%) and “valuing” themselves (22%) as the biggest challenges to good sexual health and see the most important action step toward achieving good sexual health as valuing who they are and deciding what’s right for them (29%).

In contrast, men are more likely than women to believe that both the most important action step and biggest challenge to achieving good sexual health is building positive relationships.

- Messaging in support of positive relationships that mattered most to men included “having relationships based on open and honest communication” (68%) and relationships “free of fear, coercion or violence” (62%). Still, the comparative response from women is 16 to 20 pts higher.

When asked to identify the two best steps to take when choosing a partner, both men and women most often report “choosing someone who makes me feel good about myself, comfortable and safe.”

- Yet they diverge over the second step—with 50% of women opting for “someone who respects my boundaries and doesn’t pressure or coerce me” (vs. 33% of men), while 47% of men say “choosing someone who makes me happy” (vs. 25% of women).

Men and women are in unity, however, when asked for the two best steps to take to build positive relationships: 63% say “respect each other and make decisions together” and 55% think the second step is “having open and honest conversations about the relationship, desires and sexual health,” which includes the concept of enjoying your sexuality.

In choosing which of four definitions best describes the meaning of “sexual health” both testing groups were somewhat divided. Even though they leaned toward a definition that included what they had also identified as the core benefits of good sexual health—a healthy body, peace of mind and satisfying relationships—the other versions also had appeal, particularly among men.

Key Themes to Emerge

Most participants embraced a broad, positive and holistic view of sexual health, not just a narrow disease avoidance and physical focus. Positive relationships, feeling good about yourself and having peace of mind, and a healthy body are perceived as very important—but they are also considered to be key challenges.

- Similarly, the most important action steps to achieve good sexual health involve building good relationships, valuing yourself, deciding what's right for you, and choosing partners who treat you well.

Still, the testing strongly suggests that many people want and will accept guidance on how to build good relationships and say relationship education is lacking. They are educated about the benefits of safer sex, but believe that is not enough. Effective communication and good interaction between partners is also key to sexual health.

Participants responded well to messaging that acknowledges the imbalance in many relationships as they see themselves and others struggling to find or create positive relationships. Women were especially keen on the importance of setting boundaries and not feeling pressure in relationships.

- Even some older adults admitted they are struggling with how to build positive relationships. Like younger adults, some find themselves single again. Both older women and men want to have a satisfying sexual life.

For many, a healthy body represents more than just disease and unplanned pregnancy avoidance—it also includes sexual functioning, performance, along with overall health and well-being.

- Good sexual functioning and sexual performance are also of concern to both men and women and across the age span.
- Still, getting regular sexual health care is not considered a major challenge to achieving good sexual health. It is also ranked much lower as a priority action step toward good sexual health. It's unclear if this is the case because people feel they can access services, undervalue the services, or lack knowledge about recommended services.
- The message tests show men and women consistently bottom-ranking messaging about fertility and unplanned pregnancies. In the small group sessions, men and women above age 40 considered these messages important, but not particularly relevant given their life stage.
 - When evaluated by those under age 40, reactions to messaging about fertility were filtered by their status as parents. Those already with children didn't find the fertility messages to be highly relevant, while those younger and single were more responsive to fertility messages, but still more concerned about STIs.
 - Online panel members in their 20s, however, are twice as likely as those older than age 30 to have responded to messages involving risks to fertility.

Detailed Findings

PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL HEALTH

Unaided Impressions of “Sexual Health”



Before being presented with statements describing sexual health benefits and action steps, participants in the small group discussions were asked to describe in their own words what the term “sexual health” means to them. Their responses generally fall into four categories:

- Not getting an STI/STD
 - Sexual performance
 - Emotional well-being
 - Regular visits to health care providers
- While men in all age groups related “sexual health” to “no STDs”, only women under age 40 associated the term on an unaided basis to not contracting or avoiding STIs.
 - Men in all sessions also linked sexual health with sexual performance and “not having erectile dysfunction.”
 - Women also mentioned performance and “proper functioning” as connected to sexual health, though women in their 40s and older mentioned hormonal changes and menopause as influences on sexual desire and performance.
 - Men and women in all age groups also strongly relate “sexual health” to positive emotions and a lack of stress.
 - A few men and women in their 20s and 30s talked about sexual health relating to monogamy, but only one, unaided, associated the risk of infertility to poor sexual health.

What comes to mind when you hear the term “sexual health”?

Being with a safe partner and being monogamous. —Female 18-29

Having good sexual health could prevent risking infertility.
—Female 18-29

Regularly visiting the doctor. Female 30-39

Functioning properly, performance. —Female 40-59

Hormonal and hormonal balance. —Female 60-70

Personal responsibility because there are so many STDs. —MSM 30-39

Mental health. If you are not mentally as strong in a relationship you may be pressured to have unsafe sex. [You need to] find control mentally. —MSM 30-39

Performance and function. —Male 40-59

Being sexually active is healthy. —Male 60-70

Best Definition of “Sexual Health”

Participants in the small group sessions and national online panel were presented with four descriptions of sexual health and asked to identify which is the best definition.

- The same definition came out on top in both phases of message testing, though one could argue that opinions are also somewhat divided.
- A third of the national panel participants, both men and women, selected this definition as “best”:

Being sexually healthy means being able to enjoy a healthy body, peace of mind and satisfying relationships.

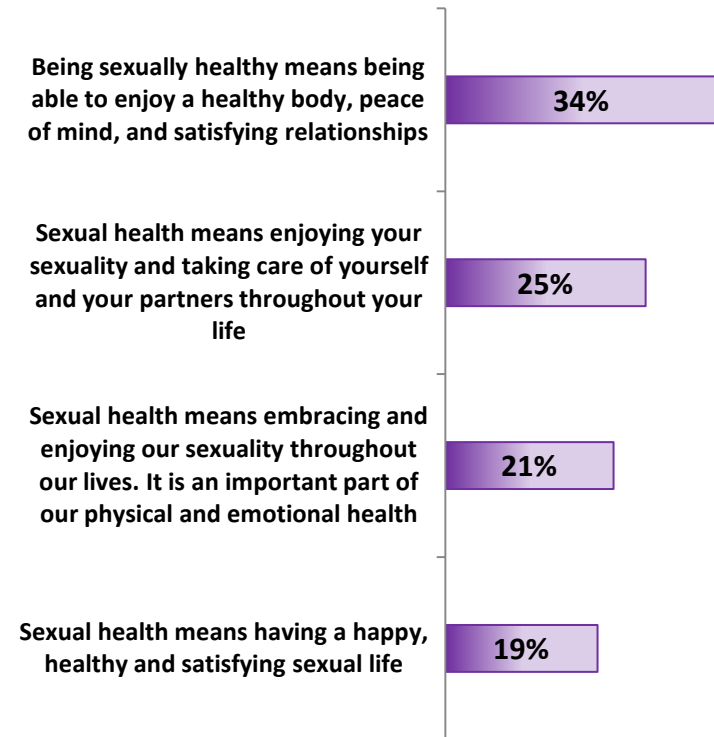
- In the small group sessions, participants who expressed a preference for this definition said it captured concepts of body, mind and emotional connections. As one MSM stated: *This option is more encompassing. It goes beyond just who I’m being sexual with—peace of mind and satisfying relationships.*
- In the national panel, women (39%) had a stronger preference than men (30%) for this description.
- Men on the panel and in the small group sessions were divided between this description and two others:

Sexual health means enjoying your sexuality and taking care of yourself and your partners throughout your life.

Sexual health means embracing and enjoying our sexuality throughout our lives. It is an important part of our physical and emotional health.

The Best Definition of Sexual Health

National Online Panel



Two of the tested definitions of “sexual health” included the word “sexuality.”

- One definition positioned sexual health as “enjoying your sexuality” while the second definition expressed it as “embracing and enjoying our sexuality throughout our lives.”
- When participants in the small group sessions were asked what “sexuality” meant to them, responses were varied and suggested there is no common definition.
- As expressed by these participants, “sexuality” is variously perceived as:
 - Sexual expression
 - Sexual orientation
 - Pleasure
 - Sexual interaction

What does “sexuality” mean?

Means enjoying how sex is pleasurable to you. —Female 18-29

*Sexuality is how we interact with others, how we display it.
—Female 40-59*

Combining the physical and mental health. —Female 60-70

Sexual preference. How open you are with your sex life. —Male 18-29

Boom, immediately you think about one’s sexual preference. Then I might think about your likes, dislikes, what’s attractive. —Male 30-39

*Whether a person is bisexual or homosexual and be happy with it.
—Male 40-59*

Everything that encompasses sex—mental, physical, everything, who you are. —MSM 30-39

Your sexuality is what you like to do. Having well being. How you take care of what goes on in your sex life. —MSM 18-29

Top Benefits of Good Sexual Health

Participants were asked to select the top two most important overall benefits of good sexual health.

- Though not ranked in the same order, both the national online panel and small group participants think **positive relationships**, **feeling good about yourself and having peace of mind** and having a **healthy body** are the top three benefits of sexual health.
- These rankings held true for both men and women and across different age groups.

Avoiding STIs and unplanned pregnancies, as well as having a **satisfying sexual life**, ranked lower as the top benefits of good sexual health among participants in both phases of message testing.

- Notably, twice as many people in their 20s (22%) say avoiding unplanned pregnancies matters very much to them.

If you are in good health, you will have a good sex life. —Female 18-29

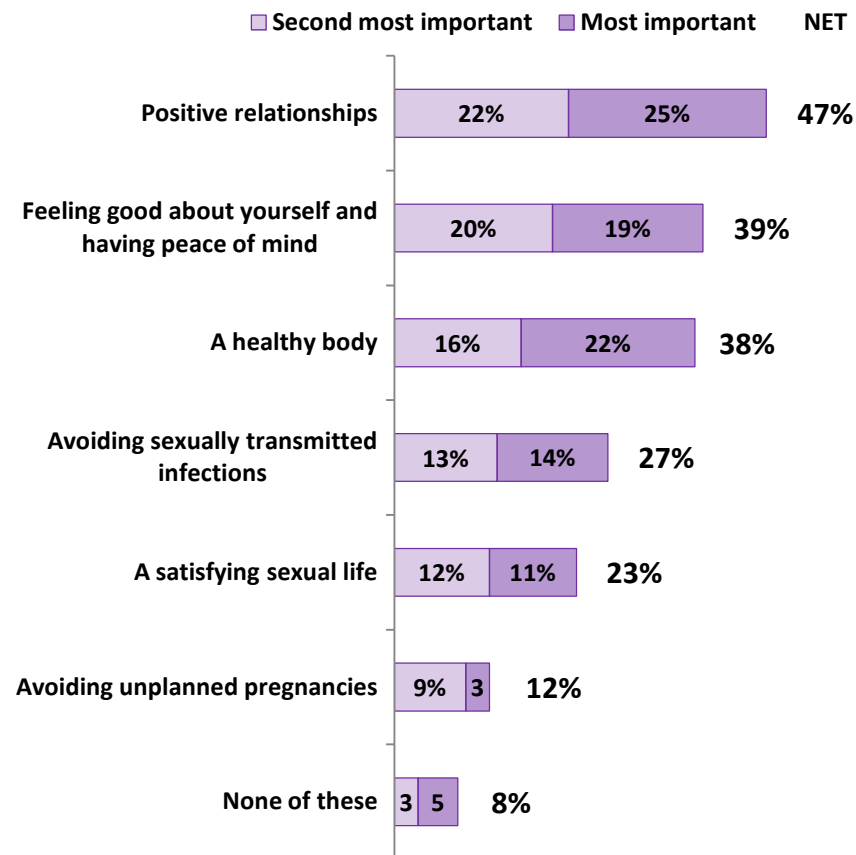
[A healthy body] I love to look good. So you have to love yourself before you can love any other person. —MSM 18-29

With peace of mind you make better decisions. —Male 30-39

You must feel good about yourself and have peace of mind in order to have good relationships. —Female 60-70

Most Important Benefits Of Good Sexual Health

Percent “Most Important” and “Second Most Important”
National Online Panel



Top Actions Steps to Achieve Good Sexual Health



The majority of online panel participants (54%) think the top action step to take to achieve good sexual health is to **value who you are and decide what is right for you**. Findings from the small group sessions suggest the two-part balance of the first message hit just the right chord.

- This was followed by **build positive relationships** with 49%.
- Nearly one third thought **choosing partners who treat you well** and **get smart about your body and protect it** were two of the most important action steps.
- Interestingly, only 16% thought that getting **regular sexual health care** was one of the most important steps.

When evaluating the detailed action step messages for **build positive relationships**, the support statement, “Stay true to yourself and what’s right for you” was among the least compelling messages to participants. Yet another iteration, “Accept who you are and decide what’s right for you” was far more compelling.

- Of the more than 30 action step support messages tested, it was the statement leading off with the words “Value yourself” that tested most positively along with, “With knowledge you will make better choices.”

When I think of the word ‘value’ it means something you really want, whether it’s a car or a person, protecting it, taking care of it.

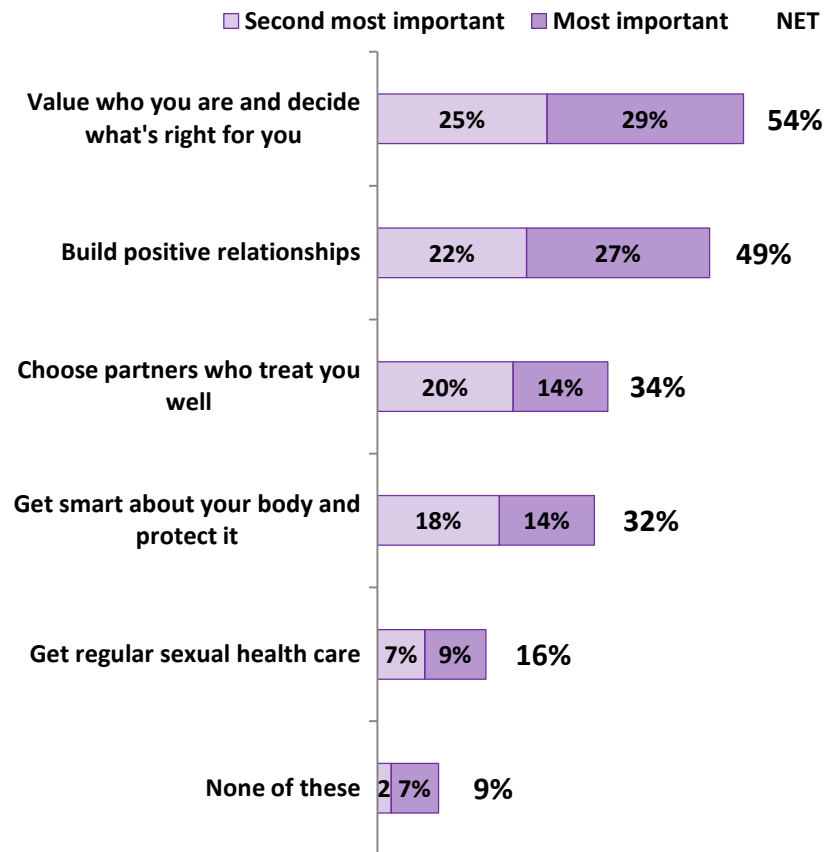
—Female 18-29

When you value yourself, you are accepting yourself. —MSM 30-39

‘Value yourself’ says it all. —Male 40-59

Most Important Action Steps To Achieve or Maintain Good Sexual Health

Percent “Most Important” and “Second Most Important” National Online Panel



While the online panel ranks **building positive relationships** as the second most important action step to achieve good sexual health, they also indicate that establishing those relationships can be the biggest challenge.

- One-in-four panel members say **building positive relationships** is the top challenge to achieving good sexual health and another one-in-five suggest part of the problem is **choosing partners who treat you well**.
 - Notably, women are more likely than men to say choosing partners who treat you well is the biggest challenge (23% vs. 15%, respectively).
- One-in-five also indicate that one of the biggest barriers to good sexual health is **valuing one's self**, the sense of self-worth.
- Participants in the small group sessions also think a lack of communication and “people not talking about sex” are significant barriers to good sexual health.

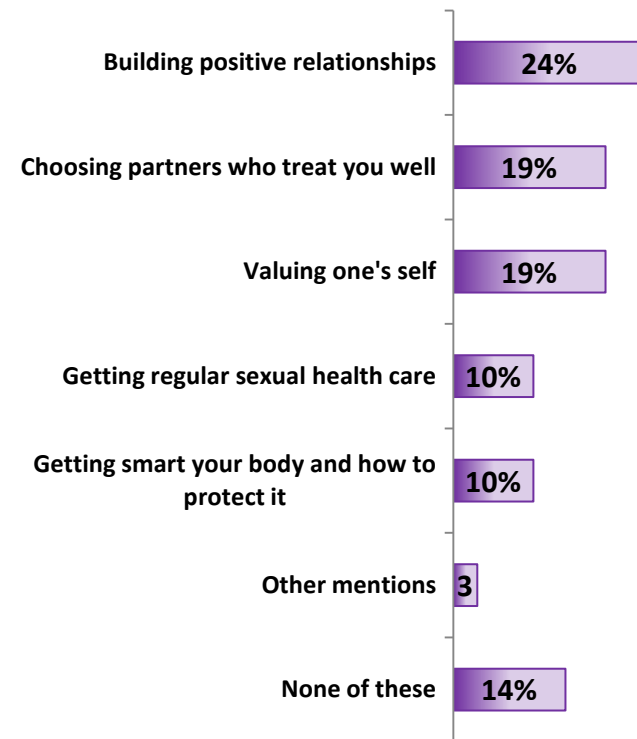
When you are not self assured enough, [you are] subject to coercion.
—MSM 30-39

People not talking about sex is a huge issue. —Female 40-59

Sexual relationships are hard. [If there's] no emotional connection, it's just sexual, complicated. —Female 18-29

The Biggest Challenge To Achieving Good Sexual Health

National Online Panel



Detailed Findings

MESSAGING TO SUPPORT CORE BENEFITS

Participants in the small group sessions strongly responded to messaging about building relationships based on honesty, communication, respect, and the lack of pressure. The online panel did as well, and put as a top action step, **choosing someone who makes me feel good about myself, comfortable, and safe.**

- Fully 84% of women versus 68% of men say having relationships based on honest and open communications matters very much.
- But men are just as likely as women (55% each) to say the best action step to build a positive relationship is open conversation.

When creating messages it will be important to link the benefit of having relationships **free of fear, coercion, or violence** to the action step of **choose someone who respects your boundaries and doesn't pressure or coerce you.**

For a relationship to be positive, you have to do things together. It's no more just thinking about yourself. You have to do it as a team. —MSM 18-29

If there's no honesty, there's no relationship. —Male 18-29

It has to be 50/50, one person should not have the upper hand. —Male 18-29

If you want them to be honest, you need to listen and not judge them for what they end up saying. —Female 40-59

People are afraid to be alone, they jump from one bad relationship to another. —Female 40-59

Messaging About Relationships

“Positive Relationships” Are:
Percent “Matters Very Much” On 5-Pt Scale

- 76%** Based on open and honest communication
- 74%** Free of fear, coercion, or violence
- 71%** Respectful, pleasurable, comfortable, and safe
- 70%** Where you experience love, intimacy and affection
- 69%** Balanced and fair
- 67%** Free of pressure

Two Best Action Steps To Build Positive Relationships
Multiple Responses

- 63%** Respect each other and make decisions together
- 55%** Have open and honest conversations about our relationship, desires and sexual health
- 30%** Stay true to myself and what's right for me
- 18%** Recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship and when to take action
- 10%** Protect my health and my partners' health

Two Best Action Steps When Choosing A Partner
Multiple Responses

- 59%** Choose someone who makes me feel good about myself, comfortable and safe
- 42%** Choose someone who respects my boundaries and doesn't pressure or coerce me
- 36%** Choose someone who makes me happy
- 36%** Choose someone who cares about my health and well-being

Several messages support the benefit of **feeling good about yourself and having peace of mind**:

- “Being in control of sexual choices” matters very much to two-thirds and directly connects to the top action step of “defining personal values, desires and boundaries.”
- “Feeling comfortable with yourself, your body and your identity” matters very much to 62% and links to the number two action message of “value myself—what’s on the inside and the outside, including my body and sexual identity.”

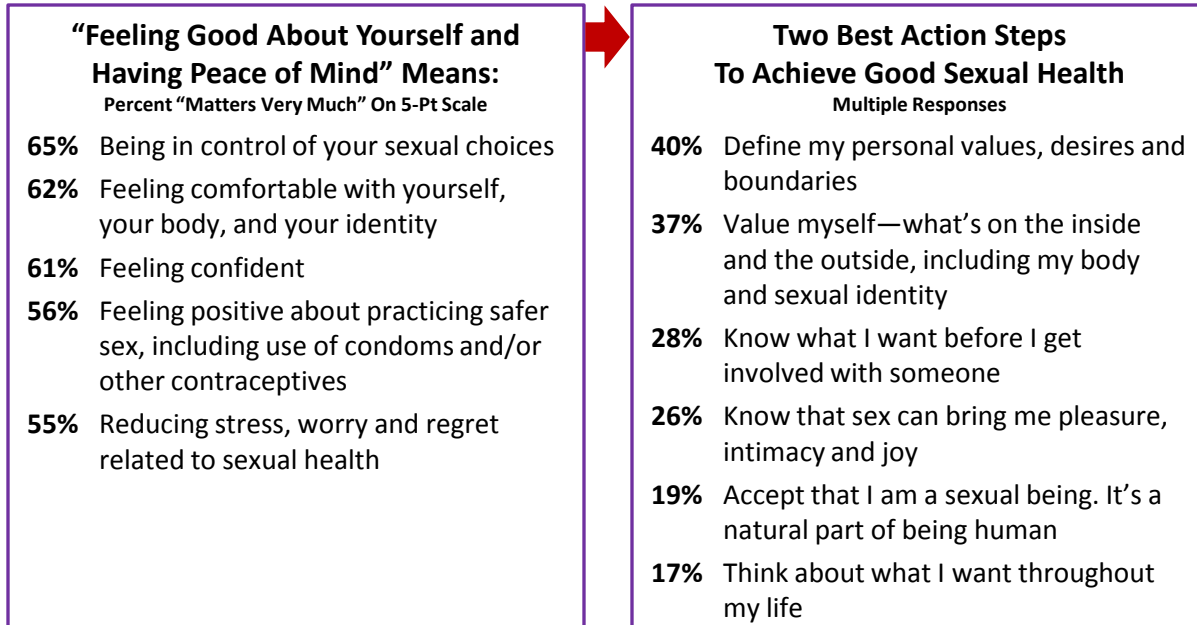
Can't have good sex without having good peace of mind.
—MSM 18-29

Feeling comfortable with yourself . . . hard being pregnant and having your husband point out the differences in your body.
—Female 18-29

If you are not comfortable in your skin, it would be hard to let someone into your comfort zone. —Female 30-40

You have to be comfortable within yourself, and confident, in order to exude that to someone else . . . to make it comfortable and pleasurable for both of you. —Male 30-39

Messaging About Feeling Good and Having Peace of Mind



Approximately 70% of panel members think “positive relationships” are “respectful, pleasurable, comfortable and safe” and ones “where where you experience love, intimacy and affection”

- To have a satisfying sexual life, 61% think it should be “pleasurable,” including 70% of women and 52% of men. An additional 63% say it matters very much that “it’s right for you and your partners.”

Messaging About Having A Satisfying Sexual Life

“Having A Satisfying Sexual Life” Is a Sexual Life That . . .

Percent “Matters Very Much” On 5-Pt Scale

- 63%** Is right for you and your partners
- 61%** Is pleasurable
- 58%** Is based on your personal values, desires, and boundaries
- 58%** Includes the decision to be sexually active or not
- 56%** Reflects what you want, allows you to explore and feel in control of your choices

Both should enjoy it, and agree on certain things. —Male 60-70

Pleasing each other is very important, pleasing her is pleasing me.
—Male 40-59

Can’t have good sex without having peace of mind. —MSM 18-29

Both partners must feel comfortable. It’s an ongoing struggle to feel comfortable and not insecure. —MSM 18-29

Respect is huge, this incorporates many components, such as respecting boundaries, decisions. —MSM 30-39

Just know what you are willing to do, you may not agree .
—Female 30-39

You should be allowed to explore. —Female 40-59

If I’m comfortable, I’m in control of my choices. —Female 60-70

A strong message narrative to support the **healthy body** benefit of good sexual health is protection from STIs, good sexual functioning, and avoidance of cancers related to STIs."

- As previously noted, “no STDs” is a frequent unaided association with “sexual health” and the online panel ranks protection from STIs, especially HIV, near or at the top when indicating what matters most among the health benefits of good sexual health.
- Furthermore, practicing safe sex is also at the top of action steps to maintain a healthy body, along with knowing that **I have the right to choose if and when I want to be sexually active**.
- Reducing the risk of male and female cancers is also considered an important benefit of good sexual health by two-thirds of the online panel. In the small group sessions, the risk to men caught many by surprise.

If you're not a healthy person, it affects everything. —Male 18-29

I always use condoms, but it's still scary. —Male 30-39

I was not aware you can get cancer from STIs. —Male 40-59

I like sex. I want to function properly. —Female 40-59

Messaging About A Healthy Body

Benefits of Having “A Healthy Body” Means:
Percent “Matters Very Much” On 5-Pt Scale

- 70%** Protecting your health and the health of your partners
- 69%** Being protected from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV and related cancers
- 68%** Enjoying good health and well-being
- 57%** Maintaining healthy sexual functioning
- 40%** Having planned and healthy pregnancies, when you want
- 39%** Protecting your fertility (your ability to have children)

Health Benefits of Good Sexual Health
Percent “Matters Very Much” On 5-Pt Scale

- 75%** Avoiding HIV
- 74%** Avoiding STIs, such as chlamydia, HPV and herpes
- 66%** Reducing risk of male and female cancers related to STIs (including cervical, anal, throat, and penile cancers)
- 53%** Avoiding unplanned pregnancies
- 46%** Reducing risk of becoming infertile (being unable to have children)

Two Best Action Steps
Multiple Responses

- 41%** Know that I have the right to choose if and when I want to be sexually active
- 40%** Practice safer sex. Always be prepared with condoms and/or other contraceptives
- 34%** Protect both myself and my partners
- 23%** Plan ahead, whenever possible
- 22%** Learn about anatomy, sexual expression, sexual pleasure, and safer sex
- 7%** Learn more through websites and other sources

Appendix

PROFILE OF ONLINE MESSAGE TEST RESPONDENTS

Profile of Online Message Test Respondents



	Percent weighted n=268
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Sex	
Male	49%
Female	51

Age	
18-29	22%
30-39	17
40-49	18
50-59	18
60-69	13
70+	12

Hispanic	
Yes	16%
No	84

Race	
White	84%
Black or African-American	9
American Indian/Alaska Native	1
Mixed race	2
Other	1

	Percent weighted n=268
--	---------------------------

Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual or straight	93%
Bi-sexual	3
Homosexual, gay or lesbian	3

Marital Status	
Single/divorced	33%
Married	53
Living with partner	9
Widow(er)	5

	Percent weighted n=268
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Household Income	
<\$50,000	40%
\$50,000+	54
Refused	6

Region	
Northeast	18%
Midwest	22
South	38
West	22

Columns may not total 100% because of rounding