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Masturbating stats: Are there gender differences and why? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have searched your files for the answer to a question that has long been bugging me. It has to do with masturbation. I can see by the questions there are many men who masturbate, but I don't see many from women. Do many women masturbate? Are they just more shy about talking about it? Can you give any specifics on the percentage of women, versus the percentage of men, who masturbate?

— Wants to learn more

Answer

Dear Wants to learn more,

The quick-and-dirty answer to your question is — many people of all genders masturbate! However, you're touching on a very real separation when it comes to the breakdown along the gender binary; while many individuals who identify as women masturbate, societal pressures can create barriers that dissuade them from engaging in, or being honest about, solo sexual adventures.

Overall, lots of people — 84 percent of Americans — are feeling themselves. Around 91 percent of individuals who identify as men engage in sexy self-care, with those who identify as women not far behind at 78 percent. Other research demonstrated that age plays a role: emerging adult women (18 to 24 years) report masturbating at a prevalence of 50 percent, with young adult women (25 to 29 years) and middle-aged women (30 to 49 years) coming in at 76 and 46 percent, respectively. Additionally, a longitudinal study showed that women masturbate at higher levels during the year before menopause than during the years they're menstruating. While plenty of women are tickling the tulips regularly, the reported numbers are lower than with men. This could be due to the different gendered expectations that individuals contend with when it comes to sex.

The Sexual Double Standard (SDS), is a specific term in research that describes the tendency to judge women more harshly for engaging in the same sexual acts as men. It's especially prevalent

when it comes to stigmatized sexual behaviors, such as masturbation. Research shows that masturbation is considered to be more acceptable for men than women, including by women themselves. The SDS likely emerged, in part, from gendered sexual scripts, which teach men that they have permission to engage in any, and all, sexual activities that they encounter, while women are taught to limit their sexual exploration to serious partnerships. Research indicates that women are often sent messages that it's only appropriate to receive sexual pleasure from vaginal penetrative sex (not from touching or oral sex, and especially not from masturbation) with her long-term partner (not with anyone else or by herself). Furthermore, if a woman with a partner masturbates, there is often social messaging that there are problems within the relationship. On the other hand, if a woman is without a partner, masturbating is often considered an act of loneliness. All that being said, it's no wonder that many people raised as women face more internal and external stigma around masturbation than those socialized as men to encounter!

Not only is there a taboo around women masturbating, there's also a greater taboo towards talking about it. Sex education in the US seldom addresses masturbation, and it's rare for it to cover the topic of sexual pleasure outside of reproduction. More specifically, even though the majority of masturbating women do so via clitoral stimulation, sex education generally doesn't expand beyond the internal reproductive organs to include the clitoris (though interestingly, part of the clitoris is internal!). No doubt, for some women (and for others too), talking about sex can be awkward. So shyness, as you mentioned in your question, may be another factor in both learning about, and sharing about, masturbation practices.

Masturbation is a healthy and natural part of sexuality and there may be plenty of reasons for everyone to masturbate, if they so desire. Masturbation enables people to learn about their own bodies and genitals as well as to recognize and develop their sexual responses or orgasms. It helps to foster communication in intimate relationships by making it easier for partners to identify and express what feels good physically and sexually for them and to each other. On top of the general benefits that come along with masturbating, cisgender, heterosexual women have even more to gain, given the orgasm gap, which refers to the idea that women orgasm significantly less than men in partnered heterosexual sex. In fact, one study found that 91 percent of men and 39 percent of women report regularly orgasm during partnered heterosexual sex. Although this gap is sometimes blamed on the idea that it's much harder for women to orgasm, when in actuality, 95 percent of women who masturbate have reported achieving orgasm within four minutes! Not so elusive after all!

Candid discussions about sexuality and sexual pleasure can help free everyone from the historically negative and gendered influences that have bound and prevented some women (and people of other genders) from discovering, exploring, and enjoying their sexual selves. These conversations can make it easier to break the taboos and myths about masturbation and can encourage everyone to have enjoyable solo and partnered sex lives.

Alice!

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