

Donnelly, Denise and Elisabeth Burgess. 2008. "The Decision to Remain in an Involuntarily Celibate Relationship." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 70:519-535.

PRIMARY ARGUMENT: The author argues that whether individuals choose to leave involuntarily celibate relationships can be explained by the balance of other rewards from the relationship (vs the costs of remaining celibate) or the costs/rewards of leaving.

IMPORTANT DEFINED CONCEPTS:

- Social Exchange Theory: Assumes that individuals enter relationships as rational and selfish beings who seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs.
- Involuntary Celibacy: Individuals who are unable to obtain sexual contact in their relationship despite their desire for sexual activity. Such celibacy is involuntary as it is often not something the individual chooses.
- Comparison Levels: These are reference points. *Comparison levels* represent what individuals believe they should gain in their relationship by considering what's "normal", and *comparison levels for alternatives* represent what individuals believe they could get from other relationships.

PRIMARY FINDINGS:

1. In our society, the costs of leaving a marriage/cohabiting relationship are usually higher for women than men because they tend to earn less than men, and as they age, they are less likely to find alternative relationships. When the cost of staying in a celibate relationship exceeds its rewards, an individual will leave. If rewards are higher than costs, they stay.
2. Failed negotiations about sex between couples will lead one partner to enter involuntary celibacy. Some couples' sexual activities slowed down or diminished over time; some couples' sex life stopped suddenly due to events such as pregnancy, childbirth, and illness. And for some couples, sexual interactions were never considered a form of essential reward in their relationships.
3. They chose to stay in the relationship while being involuntarily celibate because of a believed lack of alternatives in a better relationship, social prescriptions of marriage and religion, investments in the relationship like kids, homes and finances, or because there were benefited to the relationship that outweighed the cost of lack of sex, like friendship and companionship.
4. The involuntarily celibate partner, whose needs are unmet, will experience frustration. Some common coping strategies include finding other sexual outlets, investing their energies elsewhere, or seeking therapy.

KEY QUOTE: "In making the decision to stay, our participants likely evaluated their partnerships in terms of rewards and costs, as well as comparison levels, equity, investments, and prescriptions. Although everyone in our sample chose to stay in sexless relationships, most felt or acted as if their investments outweighed the expenses of leaving." (532)

QUESTION: Considering the gender expectations and ideologies in our society, are men more likely to leave involuntary celibate relationships than women? How would the reasons for staying in an involuntary celibate relationship and managing it differ between a society that is raised to be relatively sex-positive like the United States versus a society that tends to have more negative connotations towards discussions of sex, like Asian or Middle Eastern communities?