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# Friends-with-benefits: is sex compatible with friendship?

**Biographical note**

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**Abstract**

Natasha McKeever argues that *prima facie,* a friends-with-benefit relationship can be, at the same time, a good friendship. This is because sex is compatible with friendship in that it can complement and potentially even strengthen the three core characteristics of friendship: mutual liking, mutual caring, and mutual sharing. She acknowledges that, by generating uncertainty and having the potential to generate feelings of romantic love, sex does pose risks to friendship. However, she argues that while these risks are significant considerations, they can be mitigated and managed and so do not provide strong reasons against friends-with-benefits relationships.

## Introduction

So-called "friends-with-benefits" relationships, where friends have a sexual relationship, are increasingly common, at least among young people. One study of American college students found that 42.9–54.3% had had at least one such relationship in the past year, with men more likely than women to have had one, and the authors noted that other studies have found similar results (Owen and Fincham 2011: 317). However, friends-with-benefits relationships have been given relatively little consideration by philosophers. It is commonly assumed that romantic relationships are sexual, but friendships are not, and sometimes that sex is what distinguishes these relationships from each other. This view is also found in philosophy, for

example, Bennett Helm argues that there is a clear difference between friendship and romantic love in that romantic love involves sex whereas friendship does not (Helm 2017), and Lawrence Thomas states that romantic love "presumably … has a sexual element to it" whereas friendship does not (Thomas 1987: 221). The concept of "friends-with-benefits" tests this distinction, since it involves friends having a sexual relationship that is not romantic. These relationships, therefore, sit outside of the "standard" categories of friendship and romantic relationship. And though such relationships are becoming more common, they can lead to problems, such as one friend developing feelings of romantic love for the other, which are not reciprocated by the other (Bisson and Levine 2009). Some people might think that sex is incompatible with friendship, perhaps because they hold one or more of the following views: that sex will necessarily damage friendship; that friends-with-benefits are not really friends at all, but something else; that the goods of friendship cannot be realised alongside the goods of sex.[i]

In this chapter, I argue that these views are incorrect, and that friendship and sex are indeed compatible. In order to do this, I first consider three core characteristics of friendship: (1) mutual liking, (2) mutual caring, and (3) mutual sharing. I argue that sex is *prima facie* compatible with each of them. I then consider two potential risks posed by friends-with-benefits relationships: firstly, that they blur the boundaries between friendship and romantic relationships, leading to uncertainty over what can be expected from the relationship; and secondly, that sex could damage friendships by leading to one or both of the friends developing feelings of romantic love for the other. I argue that these risks can be mitigated and managed, so, while they are relevant considerations, they do not provide strong reasons against friends-with-benefits relationships.

## Part 1: Is sex compatible with friendship?

### 1.1) What are friends-with-benefits?

The term "friends-with-benefits" is really a misnomer, since it implies that the non-sexual elements of friendship do not count as benefits. Leaving that issue aside, I want to briefly clarify what a friends-with-benefits relationship is, before going on to evaluate it. The way that people use the term "friends-with-benefits" will likely vary somewhat. In this paper, when I use the term, I will be using it to refer to a non-romantic friendship, which includes a sexual element to it. Of course, what counts as "romantic" and "non-romantic" is up for grabs and will mean different things to different people. Defining these terms is beyond the scope of the chapter, but for the purposes of our discussion, they key thing is that the friends-with-benefits do not *themselves* count their relationship as a romantic one. Further, for it to count as a friends-with-benefits relationship, the friends must have sex on more than one occasion: a one-off sexual encounter between friends would not make the relationship a "friends-with-benefits" *relationship*. In addition, the friends must actually be friends, not just regular casual sexual partners (sometimes referred to as "fuck buddies)." I will explain my understanding of friendship below, by outlining three of its core characteristics. The final thing to note is that friends-with-benefits relationships need not start off as non-sexual friendships; they could begin as friends and develop a sexual relationship, but they could also begin as casual sexual partners and develop a friendship, or the friendship and the sexual element of their relationship could develop together. They could also first have a romantic relationship and then change their relationship to be one of friends-with-benefits. Therefore, sex is not always an addition to an already existing friendship, and, in any case, adding sex to a relationship can sometimes change it quite fundamentally, so it is not always possible to subtract sex from a friends-with-benefits relationship without the friendship changing quite significantly.

**1.2) The characteristics of friendship**

We have established what friends-with-benefits are; I now want to consider whether, *prima facie,* a friends-with-benefit relationship can be, at the same time, a good friendship, or whether

sex necessarily compromises, or even destroys friendship. In order to do this, I will first consider three, I think uncontroversial, core characteristics of friendship – (1) mutual liking, (2) mutual caring (3) mutual sharing. I will argue that sex is compatible with, and may even strengthen, all of them. There is, therefore, no *prima facie* reason to assume that friends-with-benefits relationships will not also be good friendships.

**1. Mutual liking**

Friendship, like romantic relationships, but unlike most familial relationships, are chosen and can be ended if the participants so desire. This does not mean that the choice to become friends with someone is always consciously made; as Thomas notes, "one does not shop for a friend in the way that one shops for an article of clothing," and we can sometimes be surprised to find that we have become friends with someone (Thomas 1987: 218). However, we usually become friends with someone because we like them, and we choose to continue to be friends with them for the same reason. This means that friends must like each other; mutual liking is not sufficient for friendship, but it is necessary (Annis 1987: 349; Jeske 1997: 53). Two people liking each other overall is consistent with them finding some features of each other annoying, or with them not always enjoying each other's company. For it to count as a friendship, the friends must be choosing to continue to be friends, in part at least, because they like each other and desire that the friendship continue. If two people didn't like each other, but continued to spend time together and support each other etc. only because to do so was mutually beneficial (perhaps because both wanted to gain information from the other, or because appearing to be friends would benefit their career), then they would not count as genuine friends.

Furthermore, the friends must like each other *as friends.* I can like someone "as a manager" or "as a teacher," for example, without liking them as a friend. A student might, for example, appreciate the strict discipline his teacher exerts on the class, and her organisation, but know that they would not get on at all outside of the classroom. Whether sex is compatible with the

mutual liking aspect of friendship thus depends on whether sex would impede friends from liking each other in the way that is appropriate to their relationship. While having a sexual relationship with someone is, of course, compatible with liking them, in some cases it can hamper the proper functioning of a relationship, or the appropriate "mode" of liking. For example, if a teacher starts liking her student sexually, this will impede her ability to like him in the appropriate way for a teacher to like a student and this would likely damage the functioning of the teacher-student relationship.

We can imagine something similar happening in a friendship. If Joanna and Junaid are friends but Joanna develops a sexual attraction towards Junaid, she might start liking him more for the qualities of him which make him sexually attractive to her (his muscular arms and gravelly voice, for example) rather than for those qualities which make him a good friend to her (such as his sensitivity and good sense of humour). Perhaps Joanna only wants to spend time with Junaid in the hope that it will lead to them having sex. This might impact on the rest of their relationship and Junaid, if he realised this, might reasonably feel like Joanna did not like him "in the right way."

Therefore, the mode of liking which is appropriate in friendship could conceivably be complicated and damaged by the presence of sexual attraction. However, this is not necessarily the case. Joanna's sexual attraction towards Junaid could lead to her being more drawn to and interested in Junaid; she might end up paying more attention to him and subsequently being a better friend to him overall. She might like him, primarily for his sensitivity and good sense of humour, and only secondarily for his muscular arms and gravelly voice. Or perhaps she is simply able to disentangle the reasons for which she likes him as a friend and the reasons for which she is sexually attracted to him, such that her sexual attraction does not interfere with her friendship with him. It might also be the case that Junaid reciprocates her sexual attraction,

and the friends might find that being sexually attracted to each other creates a playful and intimate dynamic between them which accentuates their friendship.

That sexual attraction may or may not be problematic with regard to the way that friends like each other is a consequence of the fact that friendship has a less clear function than a relationship defined by social roles, such as a teacher-student relationship. It is an example of, what Thomas calls, a "minimally structured social interaction, where how the parties interact with one another is not primarily a function of social roles" (Thomas 1987: 218). As minimally structured social interactions do not have strict norms governing them, what is crucial for them is that the people involved have "a shared conception of the good" (Thomas 1987: 220). Therefore, in a friendship where one friend thinks that sex can be part of a good friendship, and is sexually attracted to the other, but their sexual attraction is unreciprocated and the other friend thinks that sexual attraction impedes friendships from going well, then the sexual attraction here could cause problems. However, if both friends were sexually attracted to each other, and thought that sex could be a part of a good friendship, then the sexual attraction could be unproblematic.

**2. Mutual caring**

Secondly, friends *care* about each other *disinterestedly*, meaning they want what is best for each other, and are not friends with each other just in order to gain things for themselves. "Friendships of convenience" exist, of course, such as when work colleagues are friendly with each other, and go to the pub together on a Friday, in order to make their working lives easier. The work colleagues might care about each other too, but only self-interestedly. For example, Adrian might care that Belinda is ill and want her to get better soon. He might even drop some medicine round to her house to help her. But if his motivation is only that he wants her to get back to work as soon as possible so that he doesn't have to pick up her work, then he cares for

Belinda but only for self-interested reasons, not for her own sake. This would, therefore, not count as a genuine friendship.

Again, whether sex is compatible with this feature of friendship will depend on whether sex interferes with the friends caring about each other for each other's own sakes. This is possible. To continue with our example from above, if Joanna is sexually attracted to Junaid, she might, in certain circumstances, find it more difficult to truly want what is best for him. For example, when Junaid starts dating another person, Joanna might feel jealous and this could lead her to behave coldly towards Junaid, rather than being happy for him. This is because her sexual attraction towards Junaid has made her focus on what she wants from him, rather than on what is best for him.

However, sexual attraction need not lead to a lack of caring about the other for their own sake. Joanna might not expect anything from Junaid as a result of her sexual attraction towards him, and still be happy for Junaid when he starts dating another person, despite her sexual attraction towards him. Jealousy and possessiveness are not necessary consequences of sexual attraction, and feelings of jealousy and possessiveness can be managed in any case.[ii] Indeed, sexual attraction is usually a part of romantic relationships, but it is not impossible for romantic partners to care about each other for their own sakes.

Furthermore, through having sex, friends-with-benefits may have *more* opportunities to show care and concern for each other and contribute to each other's wellbeing. Sex can be highly pleasurable, and so giving someone else sexual pleasure can be a good way of making them feel good. At its best, sex is an activity which involves a great deal of sensitivity and attentiveness to the other's needs and desires. Sexual partners are vulnerable to each other, and, for things to go well, they need to be able to trust each other. As James Giles describes, sexual activity involves acts which are acts used in other contexts to show care and concern:

> "many of the acts which are typically involved in sexual pleasuring are, in other contexts, used to comfort and to show concern and care to someone who might be vulnerable. Thus hugging, holding, and stroking, in addition to being forms of sexual pleasuring, are also used to comfort or reassure someone who is sad, frightened, or has been hurt. Similarly, kissing, sucking, or nuzzling, which are often part of love-making, are also frequently used to show care and concern" (Giles 1995: 350–351).

This is not to say that sex always involves sensitivity and care. Sex can also, of course, involve selfishness, domination, maltreatment and disrespect. However, sex is certainly *compatible* with mutual care and concern in friendship.

**3. Mutual sharing**

Thirdly, to really count as a friendship, the friends need to share interests or activities, and information about themselves with each other. My GP and I might like each other and care about each other's wellbeing. I might think she is kind, and feel concerned for her when she seems tired at an appointment I go to. However, we are not friends unless we spend time together outside of the surgery, and share information about ourselves with each other that is not related to our GP-patient relationship. (I leave aside here the issue of whether a friendship with one's GP is appropriate at all). Mutual sharing is connected to mutual liking and caring. Liking and caring about someone usually leads to wanting to spend time with and share things with them, but equally, mutual sharing is often a precursor to mutual caring. In general, the more of your life you share with someone else, the more opportunity you have to find things about them to like, to develop affection and intimacy, and to care about them. Thus, provided you like the person with whom you are sharing activities and personal information (as opposed to just having been "thrust together" by circumstance with someone you hate, for example), the likelier it is that you will become or continue being close friends.

It is not just the *amount* of one's life that one shares with others that is likely to lead to close friendship though. Two people might work and live together, but not develop much of a friendship. The *type* of interests or activities and information one shares with others is also significant. With regard to interests or activities, while we can have friends with whom we share just one or two activities, our "tennis friends" or our "drinking buddies," for example, the closest friends are likely to be those with whom we share a range of interests or activities, or at least the interests or activities we find most central to our conception of the good life. A political activist, for example, might prefer for her closest friends to also be political activists, since political activism is so central to her life that she finds it difficult to be really close to people who do not care about it.

What counts as "shared interests or activities" should be construed quite broadly here. A person might mostly want to have long, deep conversations with her friends rather than "do activities" such as playing games or going on outings with them. Indeed, two people could share no interests despite their love of conversing with each other and still be friends – pen-friends, for example, may like and care about each other deeply, and share their deepest thoughts and feelings with one another over letter, but never or rarely actually see one another in person. Furthermore, friends might not start out sharing the same interests, but begin to share more interests as the friendship progresses. Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett go as far as to argue that being willing to allow a friendship to change you is central to friendship: "what matters in friendship is that we are responsive to our interests being directed by each other" (Cocking and Kennett 1998: 508).

With regard to sharing information about ourselves, while it is not essential to share *secrets* with a friend, sharing private information with another person can be a good way to develop intimacy with them. Thomas proposes that self-disclosure and the sharing of private information are crucial to friendship for this is how friends convey intimate trust to one another

(Thomas 1987: 223). Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that someone who is an "open book" would find it difficult to have deep friendships because, as they cannot show trust through disclosure, they will be left with "few, if any, resources left" to convey to another that they trust them intimately (Thomas 1987: 224). Cocking and Kennett agree with Thomas that it is important that friends share "private concerns" with one another, and "have an interest in understanding each other well", but they point out that people can share private information with each other without sharing an intimate relationship (such as two psychotherapists who are analysing each other). Conversely, not all private information that I share with others will create intimacy. Cocking and Kennett give the example of information about a person's morning routine, which might be private, but not generative of intimacy if shared (Cocking and Kennett 1998: 516–517). They argue that, to develop intimacy, it is more important that the friends share what they care about than that they share *secrets* (Cocking and Kennett 1998: 518). This seems right, sharing private information might not be sufficient to develop a friendship, and people who are "open books" can still share what they care about with their friends and develop close friendships. Nonetheless, friends do need to share information about themselves with each other in order to build trust and intimacy, which are important features of friendship.

How might sex fit into the mutual sharing aspect of friendship? Sex is an activity, and it could constitute an interest for some people, which may even be central to their life. They might read a lot about sex, spend time in sex clubs at the weekends, and go away on retreats where they learn about sex. Two friends might share a mutual interest in learning about sex, engaging in novel sexual experiences, but also enjoy sharing sex with each other as an activity. However, the friends do not need to have a special interest in sex to enjoy it as an activity and want to share it. For friends-with-benefits, sex will be an activity they share together, and it may be an activity which is important to them. It could also be a way of sharing personal information with

each other, such as what they do or do not like sexually. It is an activity which we, typically, don't share with many others, and it involves sharing information about ourselves that we don't share with many others. This adds to its intimacy and significance. It is also an activity wherein we are vulnerable, and having sex with someone else can feel like a mutual self-disclosure. For one thing, sex often involves nudity, and, typically we are not naked with very many people very often. Consequently, as Giles suggests, nakedness is "the physical equivalent of self-disclosure," and, "an important aspect of clothing is that it allows us to maintain a measure of control over another's perception of us.....when we are clothed we are, to some extent, disguised and unrevealed" (Giles 1995: 349). All of this means that to share sex with another person can be a very good way of conveying trust and fostering emotional closeness and intimacy. This is not, of course, to say that sex is necessary for friendship, nor that it can be expected. However, having sex with a friend, seems *prima facie* at least, to be compatible with the mutual sharing aspect of friendship. Indeed, sex might very well *increase* the intimacy of the friendship, and subsequently deepen the friendship.

**Part 2: Risks posed by friends-with-benefits relationships**

In Part 1, I established that sex *can be* compatible with friendship, and may even enhance it, so there is no *prima facie* reason to think that a friends-with-benefits relationship could not be a good friendship. However, claiming that sex is compatible with friendship is not to say that, all things considered, friends-with-benefits relationships are a good idea. Such relationships might pose significant risks to those involved or to their friendship, which might mean that it is not, overall, a good idea to engage in such relationships. In this part of the chapter, I will explore two potential risks of friends-with-benefits relationships: (1) that, by blurring the distinction between friendship and romantic love, they create troubling uncertainty for the friends; and (2) that the sex may lead to feelings of romantic love which could damage the friendship.

### 2.1. Blurred boundaries and uncertainty

One possible risk posed by friends-with-benefits relationships is that they blur the boundary between friendship and romantic love, causing uncertainty about what the friends-with-benefits can reasonably expect from one another. Relationship boundaries can be useful because they help us to understand and navigate where we stand in relation to those close to us, and what we can reasonably expect from the relationships. However, as Eva Illouz writes, "sexualisation creates confusion in yet another way. In enabling and even encouraging the accumulation of sexual experiences, it blurs the very boundaries between relationships" (Illouz 2019: 86).

As they are "minimally structured social interactions" (Thomas 1987), there aren't clear rules of engagement for friendships or romantic relationships. Subsequently, disagreement over what it is reasonable to expect from each other is a frequent source of tension. However, there are some broadly agreed upon social norms, which provide us with "rules of thumb" over what can be reasonably expected from romantic partners in contrast with friends. For example, it is typically considered reasonable to expect one's long-term romantic partner to be physically affectionate with you, but, although friends might be physically affectionate with each other, it cannot be expected. In addition, long-term, committed romantic partners can usually expect to be involved in each other's important life decisions, such as where they will live. If we are in a long-term, committed romantic relationship, my partner arguably has an obligation not only to tell me that he is moving to Greenland, but to make the decision *with me* about whether or not to move (though his level of obligation will vary depending on factors such as, whether we live together, how long we have been together, whether we have committed to be together etc.) My long-term friend, on the other hand, typically has no such obligation (unless, for example, my friend and I had made an explicit commitment to each other to always live in the same city as each other). Furthermore, it is usually assumed that – length of relationship being equal – a

romantic partner has more responsibility than a friend to do such things as: keep in contact with you, spend time with you, be there for you when you need them, and to prioritise your needs.

A friends-with-benefits relationship is, by definition, not a romantic relationship. However, it contains a significant feature of most romantic relationships, "namely intimacy and sexual passion", meaning that it could be thought of as "a hybrid relationship, one that is not clearly romantic, nor true friendship, yet it does exhibit aspects of both" (García, Soriano and Arriaza 2014: 242). Therefore, there is likely to be *even more* disagreement over what is reasonable to expect from each other in a friends-with-benefit relationship than in a romantic relationship or non-sexual friendship. If my friend-with-benefits is trying to decide whether to move to Greenland, for example, it is not clear whether the sexual nature of our relationship means that they have any more of an obligation to involve me in the decision than they would if we had a non-sexual friendship.

Because there is even less of a clear framework for friends-with-benefits relationships, than for friendships or romantic relationships, such relationships are characterised by uncertainty, which "pertains to the fact that "the grounds of an interaction cannot be taken for granted," that the definition of a situation is up for grabs, that the rules to conduct an interaction are unclear, while actors aim for clarity" (Illouz 2019: 73). One study found that 48.9% of people in friends-with-benefits relationships reported that they were uncertain how to maintain the relationship and what its future trajectory was (Bisson and Levine 2009). Uncertainty can take a toll psychologically: Illouz argues that its psychological impact "can range from shame, discomfort, and embarrassment to anxiety and insecurity" (Illouz 2019: 73). This lack of a clear framework for a friends-with-benefits relationship could be mitigated by the friends communicating explicitly with each other about what each can expect from the other. However, empirical evidence suggests that friends-with-benefits are not good at this, with one study

finding that 85% of friends-with-benefits reported not communicating about the relationship and 73% not communicating about ground rules (Bisson and Levine 2009).

This is not, of course, to say that friends-with-benefits *can't* be good at establishing ground rules. However, even setting out the boundaries of a friends-with-benefits relationship clearly in advance does not necessarily eradicate the potential for felt uncertainty. Two friends might, for example, say at the beginning of their friends-with-benefits relationship that them having sex won't change anything about their relationship, and that the sex they are having is "no strings attached", but find that, nonetheless, they end up having a disparity between what new obligations each thinks are entailed by their sexual activity. For example, if one of them gets bored of having sex with the other and wants to stop, they might not think they have any obligation to explain this to the other, as there has been no agreement to continue having sex open-endedly. However, the other might still find it hurtful that they no longer seem to want to have sex with them. Moreover, it is simply not possible for either to promise wholeheartedly that they will not develop feelings for the other. Illouz discusses the contract made by the characters in the 2011 romantic comedy film "Friends-with-benefits". In the film, the protagonists – Dylan and Jamie – make a contract to have casual sex without developing feelings with each other. Jamie, however, develops feelings for Dylan. Illouz argues that "the impossibility of properly contractualizing emotions explains why the sexual-emotional contract is inherently fraught with aporias and uncertainties" (Illouz 2019: 149). We do not have complete control over with whom we fall in love and sex often does lead to feelings of love and intimacy. Thus, agreements not to develop such feelings cannot be binding.

Uncertainty can lead to differing relationship expectations, which can sometimes have a gendered element too. For example, one study found that 24.8% of men in friends-with-benefits relationships hoped the relationship would progress into a committed romantic relationship, compared with 39.5% of women (Owen and Fincham 2011: 317). This suggests that, at least

in some cases, men and women may have differing expectations of the relationship. Illouz discusses how differing societal gendered expectations regarding sex and care could explain this disparity:

> "For women casual sex creates a conflict between relationality and the autonomization of the body, while for men casual sex is the opportunity to accumulate sexual capital and status. Women's social being remains largely relational because women still provide the overwhelming bulk of care work in society, while for men casual sexuality is a way to perform the main tropes of masculinity: power, detachment, autonomy, instrumentality geared to the satisfaction of one's pleasure" (Illouz 2019: 86).

Not all friends-with-benefits relationships will involve uncertainty and differing expectations, but it ought to be acknowledged that this is a strong possibility, and that people's experiences of such relationships will be influenced by social norms, such as those regarding gender, over which they have little control. In addition, any unequal power dynamics within the relationship could lead to the friend with less power finding it more difficult to explain what they want or need from the relationship, or find that they are not listened to when they do. This is true of other intimate relationships too, of course, but it could be exacerbated by the increased uncertainty and lack of social conventions around friends-with-benefits relationships.

These are significant concerns, but they are by no means insurmountable. If the issue is that there are clearer relationship norms for friendship and romantic relationships, than for friends-with-benefits relationships, then perhaps the friends-with-benefits simply need to be more resolute about creating their own relationship ground rules. Friends-with-benefits could, for example, learn from the polyamorous community, for whom there are also fewer relationship-governing norms and conventions, about the importance of emotional work and open and honest communication (Brunning 2018).

Moreover, the risk of uncertainty that might be generated by friends-with-benefits relationships must be balanced against the advantages of the possibility of such relationships. Although uncertainty in a relationship can be difficult to deal with, there are also benefits to having more options for ways in which to engage intimately with others. Many people find that the monogamous romantic ideal does not suit them, and some people, who identify as aromantic, do not feel any pull towards romantic life at all (Barker 2018: 110–111), but may still desire to have sexual relationships. Other people might temporarily be in a period of their life where they do not want a committed romantic relationship, but still want to have sex, and they might prefer to have sex with a friend than with a stranger. For all of these people, and for others, friends-with-benefits arrangements could add something important to their lives. Therefore, the blurring of the distinction between friendship and romantic relationship could be a feature of friends-with-benefits relationships to be celebrated, rather than a reason not to pursue such relationships.

**2.2) Sex and love**

It is quite common for people to worry that sex could damage a friendship (Bisson and Levine 2009). One of the reasons for this is that people often connect sex with love and so worry that having sex will lead to one or both of the friends falling in love with each other and this will mean that they can no longer continue as friends. Of course, falling in love with one's friend need not be problematic and, as Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy, authors of *The Ethical Slut,* point out, "we *do* love our friends, and particularly those we share sex with." Discussing friends-with-benefits relationships, they suggest that "with practice, we can develop an intimacy based on warmth and mutual respect, much freer than desperation, neediness, or the blind insanity of falling in love" (Hardy and Easton 2011: 48). This is true, but they highlight the need for practice. Thus, if two friends are unpractised at friends-with-benefits relationships, and/or do not have the time or emotional capacity to develop a calmer, less possessive form of

intimacy than that usually associated with romantic love, then, even if neither friends wants it, the sex may lead them, unwittingly, to a kind of love which involves "desperation, neediness, or blind insanity." Although love is, in general, a good thing, romantic love, if unreciprocated, could conceivably damage or even destroy a friendship. One reason that romantic love can be problematic for friendship is that it is often accompanied with a desire that the love be reciprocated, and with feelings of insecurity, possessiveness and jealousy. If one friend's feelings for the other are not returned, this could lead to hurt, anger, and resentment, and could ultimately mean that the friendship cannot continue.

To assess the significance of this concern, we need to know is how likely it is that sex within friendship is to lead to the friends falling in love. We must also acknowledge that people can and do fall romantically in love with friends with whom they have not had sex, so sex does not introduce a totally new risk to the friendship.[iii] Having sex with a friend might make it more likely that you will fall in love with them, but it does not automatically entail that you will; many people have sexual relationships which do not involve love. It is not a fact that, if friends have sex, one or both of them will fall romantically in love with each other. However, it is a reasonable concern. For one thing, our biology may make it more likely that we will fall in love with someone with whom we have sex - oxytocin, a hormone released during sex, generates feelings of attachment towards the person with whom we're having sex. And, as demonstrated by Helen Fisher et al. by putting people experiencing sexual desire and romantic love into MRI scanners, the brain systems for the sex drive and romantic love interact regularly (Fisher, Aron and Brown 2006).

Furthermore, sex is not had in a vacuum, but rather in a social context where various meanings are attributed to it, and it is not always easy to disentangle it from these social and cultural meanings that have been imposed on it over time. One of these meanings is that it is connected to love. Indeed, sex is sometimes referred to as "lovemaking" or "making love" and what I am

calling romantic love is sometimes known as “erotic love” or even “sexual love.” This is perhaps connected, partly at least, to the common belief that sex is an important feature of romantic relationships. In a previous paper, I have argued that there are four features of romantic love which make sex a particularly good expression and vehicle for it: i) pleasure, (ii) union/physical closeness, (iii) intimacy and (iv) vulnerability and care. In other words, sex, ideally, is: pleasurable; involves physical closeness which can be symbolic and expressive of emotional closeness and union; is an intimate act; and involves the partners being vulnerable with and caring for each other. And romantic relationships are (ideally) enjoyable, involve a sense of union between the partners, are intimate, and involve partners being vulnerable with and caring for each other (McKeever 2016). Therefore, though it is perfectly possible for a good romantic relationship to not include sex, or for a relationship that is not romantic to include sex, we can at least make sense of why sex and love tend to be thought of as connected to each other.

Consequently, though it is possible to see sex as just “plain sex,” with sexual desire being understood as purely, the “desire for contact with another person’s body and for the pleasure which such contact produces” (Goldman 1977: 248), it must be accepted that various biological and social forces mean that, for many people, sex will have certain meanings and significance, which can be difficult to resist, even if that is their intention. Empirical studies of friends-with-benefits relationships also suggest that at least in some cases, one or both of the friends desires the friendship transition into a romantic relationship. For example, one study found that 25% of people in friends-with-benefits relationships wanted the relationship to transition into a romantic relationship (Machia *et al.*, 2020: 53) and another found that 39.5% indicated that they *had* a romantic relationship with their friend-with-benefits (Williams and Jovanovic 2015: 162).

When entering into a friends-with-benefits relationship, it is, therefore, important for the friends to discuss and understand how each sees sex, and whether any differences between them over its perceived significance is likely to lead to any problems. In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, the friends-with-benefits may need to commit to engaging in emotional work to try to manage feelings of romantic love, possessiveness and jealousy that could arise. This is especially important in this kind of relationship, since the basic idea behind it is to have sex without commitment or romantic love, but within a relationship that presumably is intimate and significant to the participants. A friends-with-benefits relationship might not lead to love, or to any other emotions or desires which could erode a friendship, but the *risk* that it may do ought to be acknowledged. As I have described in this chapter, sex is compatible with friendship and potentially even beneficial for it, and friends-with-benefits relationships open up new possibilities for people to be intimate with each other in non-romantic, but nonetheless caring and intimate, relationships. The weighing up of these potential benefits against the risks is a task which must be done at an individual level.

**Conclusion**

This chapter sought to establish whether sex is compatible with friendship. In order to answer this question, I first considered three core components of friendship: mutual liking, mutual care and concern, and mutual sharing. I argued that friendship is compatible with each of them, and so *prima facie* at least, sex is compatible with friendship. I then turned to consider two risks posed by friends-with-benefits relationships. The first was that friends-with-benefits relationships may generate uncertainty by blurring the boundaries between friendship and romantic relationships. I argued that while this is a concern, it can be overcome, and the benefits of having more options for styles of intimate relationships may outweigh the potential problems. Second, I considered the concern that friends-with-benefits relationships may lead to one or both partners developing feelings of romantic love for the other, which could

ultimately be destructive of the friendship. I argued, again, that though this is a reasonable concern, and poses a risk to friends-with-benefits relationships, it is not inevitable that feelings of romantic love will develop and the risk must be weighed up against the potential advantages to the friends brought about through them having a sexual relationship.

[i] With thanks to Katharine Jenkins for highlighting the different ways in which friendship and sex might be incompatible.
[ii] For a comprehensive discussion of compersion, i.e., taking delight in one's partner's sexual pleasure had through sex with another person, see (Brunning 2020).
[iii] Thanks to Katharine Jenkins for pointing this out to me.

**Related Topics**

Friendship and Erotic and Romantic Love (Berit Brogaard, University of Miami)

The Values of Friendship (Thomas Hurka, University of Toronto)

Ideals of Friendship (Simon Keller, Victoria University of Wellington)

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