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## Friends With Benefits, and Stress Too

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

To some, it may seem like an ideal relationship, less stressful than an affair, longer lived than a fling or that elusive one-night stand. You can even sit around in your sweats and watch “Friends” reruns together, feeling vaguely reassured.

Yet relationships in which close friends begin having sex come with their own brand of awkwardness, according to the first study to explore the dynamics of such pairs, often called friends with benefits, or F.W.B..

The relationships tend to have little romantic passion, but stir the same fears that stalk lovers: namely, that one person will fall harder than the other.

Paradoxically, and perhaps predictably, the study suggests, these physical friendships often occlude one of the emotional arteries of real friendship, openness. Friends who could once talk about anything now have an unstated taboo topic — the relationship itself. In every conversation, there is innuendo; in every room, an elephant.

The research, conducted among [Michigan State University](#) students, confirmed previous findings that most college students report having had at least one such relationship. Although that is undoubtedly true of many couples throughout history, “friends with benefits” have become a cultural signature of today’s college and postcollege experience.

“The study really adds to the little we know about these relationships,” said Paul Mongeau, a professor of communications at [Arizona State University](#) who was not involved in the research. “One of the most interesting things I get from it,” he said, “is this sense that people in these relationships are afraid to develop feelings for the other person, because those feelings might be unreciprocated.”

In the [study](#), appearing in the current issue of Archives of Sexual Behavior, Melissa Bisson, a former graduate student at Michigan State, and Timothy Levine, a professor in the communications department, surveyed 125 young men and women and found that 60 percent reported having had at least one friend with benefits.

One-tenth of these relationships went on to become full-scale romances, the study found. About a third stopped the sex and remained friends, and one in four eventually broke it off — the sex and the friendship. The rest continued as friends-with-benefits relationships.

In a follow-up study, the researchers gave 90 students who reported having at least one such relationship a battery of questionnaires asking about passion, commitment and communication.

“We found,” Dr. Levine said, “that people got into these relationships because they didn’t want commitment. It was perceived as a safe relationship, at least at first. But also that there was this growing fear that the one person would become more attracted than the other.”

Yet, he added, the overall qualities of the relationships appeared to be true to the name. On standard psychological measures, they appeared more like friendships than romances.

Friends with benefits scored in the middle on a scale assessing intimacy and low on passion and commitment, the study found. “When scores were compared to previous findings with romantic couples, scores on all three dimensions were lower, with the largest differences observed in commitment followed by passion,” the authors wrote.

The relationships may be less common than reported. “Friends with benefits” appears to have become an umbrella term for a wide variety of sexual arrangements, some of which are quite familiar, Dr. Mongeau said.

In addition to budding romances, he said, the “friends” may also be former lovers who occasionally see each other or they may be people who hang out at the same places and now and then end up wrapped around each other, even though they are not really friends.

Dr. Mongeau said the study seemed to have captured the dissonant, circular thinking that characterized what it felt like for a friendship to enter treacherous territory.

“There’s clearly a strong desire to be with this other person, who fills important needs,” he added. “But at the same time, it’s as if I’m saying, ‘O.K., I’m not going to get passionately involved — because then it’s at risk of being a real romance.’”