

{ ON THE COVER }



# IN BED WITH ASEXUALS

'Am I really that interested in sex?' Some people have asked themselves this question and been brave enough to embrace the answer, writes **Oliver Roberts**

Illustration: **Pola Maneli**

**S**EX comes with its own set of problems. Am I in the mood or not? Do I still desire you? Am I still desirable? Should I give in to this temptation? Do I watch too much porn? Why do I find that weird thing so sexy? I can't get enough. It's all I think about.

What if you didn't have to think about these things? What if one of your most basic drives wasn't the need to get laid? What if sex was humdrum to you? What then? Sorry about all the question marks, but sex is like that, isn't it (?). We're always wondering about it. Some wonder every few minutes. Others less. Most, though, wonder at least once a day. We wonder about who's doing it. We wonder whether we're doing it enough or who we might possibly end up doing it with, and how. We wonder if we might have it tonight, or we think about the last time we did.

There is a very small group of people (we'll call them plain asexuals for now because it gets a little complicated — see the glossary on this page) for whom the simmering connotations and nuances of sex are of no great concern. Unlike most of us, they

**'While all my friends at school were talking about it, I wanted to run away'**

have no preoccupation with the activity. They can't always say exactly why, but it simply offers no appeal.

That isn't to say asexuals are without their own conflicts. Most consider asexuals abnormal, dysfunctional even.

Asexuals themselves may even think that at some point, usually when all the crap that keeps us awake in the dead hours begins — puberty.

"Sex for me was pretty much irrelevant," says Patricia Black\*. (We're using names with asterisks today because it's about sex. Again, the delicacy of the subject rears its massive head.)

"I started identifying as lesbian when I was 12 years old. When I came out to my parents, I was told it was a phase. A few years later I thought I identified as bisexual. That was when I realised that sexuality was quite fluid."

"While all my friends at school were talking about it, I wanted to run away," says Dolly Dustin\*. "I consoled myself by thinking maybe I hadn't reached that stage yet, that it would eventually come. It never did."

It was when she entered varsity that Black's self-awareness, combined with the knowledge of how other people were engaging in sex, led her to seek an identity of her own.

"I started identifying as queer," she says. "I had been in relationships with three women and I identified as someone who was a lesbian, but still wasn't

quite sure where other kinds of attraction fitted in, which brought me to where I am today. I started realising that as these relationships progressed, I wasn't really interested in sex with my partners. It was something I did because it made them happy. The sex that was happening in my relationships was not what other people were describing."

So we categorise it. We categorise ourselves because that's what we've been doing all along. We crave identity. We crave people to relate to. And if you don't really care about one or more of the basic human pleasures — eg, eating, sleeping, sex — then you've got a problem because you're in a minority. You're not "normal".

"We are prescribed certain ways to have sex, to explore it," says Black. "Missionary position, on a bed, at night, between male and female. For a lot of people, when someone steps outside of those set ways to have sex it sparks shame and controversy."

**A**SK Alaine, a 20-year-old asexual, whether all these labels, all these prerequisites that define customary human behaviour, annoy him. Or her. Alaine is "male-assigned" by birth but he identifies, and presents himself almost entirely, as female. For the past year he has been in a relationship with a lesbian whom he calls his girlfriend.

"I think one of the fundamental flaws in our society is that we like to say, 'Well, you're like this, therefore you're like this and like everyone in this entire group,' and it's not true."

Despite this, there are parameters that define asexuality. This is not really for the sake of categorisation (which is something those on the fringes have always despised) but rather a way of giving people simpler ways of explaining what their

**'Stepping outside of set ways to have sex sparks shame and controversy'**

preference means.

"Basically, when you talk about asexuality you talk about a spectrum," says Black. "On either side of the spectrum you've got asexual and sexual and in the middle you have the 'grey-A' spectrum."

"This includes people who don't necessarily have a high libido and who don't necessarily experience sexual attraction all the time. In the middle of this are people who identify as demi-sexual. They only experience sexual attraction after forming an emotional attraction, or an intense emotional bond with someone. That's where I identify."

Black quickly emphasises that being asexual does not mean you're repulsed by sex. Many asexuals enjoy physical contact, such as cuddling and kissing. They love the romance of discovering someone. They can be

aesthetically attracted to a person. They just don't want to have sex with them.

**K**ATY North\* is a demi-sexual. She describes herself as a lone wolf, disconnected. She is a post-grad entomologist.

"Personally, I find no pleasure in sex as my sex drive is non-existent and my sexual attraction is very limited. I rarely experience sexual attraction towards someone and then only when I've formed a close emotional bond with them. Generally, any sexual activity to me is boring. I feel sex is overrated. I'd rather spend the time getting to know the person better, or curl up on the couch with someone and watch a movie."

North is in a relationship with a fellow demisexual. She says they have laid out some "ground rules" to define boundaries. She's very happy. Previously, she was in a relationship with someone on the

## THE SPECTRUM OF ASEXUALITY

**Romantic:** Someone who experiences little or no romantic attraction and is content with close friendships and other non-romantic relationships.

**Demisexual:** Someone who only experiences sexual attraction once they form a strong emotional connection with the person.

**Grey-A:** Someone who identifies somewhere between sexual and asexual.

**Queerplatonic:** A type of non-romantic relationship where there is an intense emotional connection that goes beyond what is traditionally considered friendship.

opposite end of the spectrum (ie highly sexed). This not-uncommon situation presents obvious and painful difficulties for an asexual. North describes it as a "hybrid" relationship. In this case, the asexual partner willingly engages in a kind of compromise sex in order to keep the other fulfilled.

In North's case, the sexual opposition and lack of communication about it put so much strain on the relationship that it "spiralled into disaster". Dustin is in a hybrid relationship. She describes her partner as having "normal" sexual needs and they partake in sex according to a framework that works for both of them.

"I never initiate sex and my partner understands that," says Dustin. "But if the need is there I will most likely reciprocate because there's an understanding in all relationships that you sometimes have to do something you don't want to do to keep the balance. I'm okay with that."

Black believes the notion of compromise sex raises a kind of moral conundrum.

"Compromise sex can be very

difficult to negotiate because it's essentially something you're doing to make somebody else happy," she says.

"So where does that position you as an asexual person and what would it be like if the tables were turned? That is very interesting to me."

The great misconception is that asexuals don't enjoy sex once they're having it. In fact, they do. It's a sensory experience that is difficult not to take pleasure from. Our alchemy forces us to revel in its various sensations.

The difference is that, for asexuals, the pastime is either very low on their list of things that satisfy them or it is simply a deed that has no anticipatory appeal. Its thrilling complexities appear dull and lacklustre, much like other necessities, such as going to the toilet or taking out the rubbish.

"People see sex as a prerequisite for loving someone," Alaine says. "And yet society is quite ready to accept the idea that we can have sex without love but not love without sex. So it's a weird double standard. You can have no-strings-attached sex, but if you're in a relationship and you don't have sex there's something wrong and it's something to be pitied."

The notion that an asexual is aberrant and needs to be "fixed" is not uncommon. Despite our apparently evolved acceptance of diverse sexual practices and orientations, and despite the realms of free online information about any subject, there are still huge misconstructions and even derisions about asexuality.

"People stigmatise and pathologise," Black says. "A doctor once told me it's a disease. A very serious disease but it can be cured."

Because sex is so enjoyable, because everyone is doing it or wants to do it, the easy assumption to make regarding asexuality is that it's been sparked by some childhood trauma. This is the bane of asexuals because it's almost always false. Asexuals are not disturbed or in need of repair. All they've really done is make a choice.

"Sometimes it's just a preference," says Black. "And we need to normalise that and say if you don't want to have sex, if you think it's disgusting, then that's okay. The majority of asexuals are

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absolutely healthy, normal, whole and perfect people."

Alaine says: "We had a discussion in class last year and one person said, 'I thought asexuality was the same as bestiality.' This in a university forum, which was concerning to hear. Most people don't understand asexuality."

"Even in the queer communities, there's this

resistance to asexuality as being part of the spectrum of non-normative sexualities. You could be talking to a gay guy and ask whether he likes women and he'll say no.

"Take that and apply it to everyone and you have asexuality."

**S**O we can say that asexuality is not a psychological aberration, nor is it the result of abuse or disability.

However, what did become apparent during the writing of this story is that the asexuals spoken to tended to be inherent loners and life-long outsiders. They were often bookish or academic. They have never fitted in. The question now is whether

**'A doctor once told me it's a disease. A very serious disease but it can be cured'**

there's a link between the loner and the person averse to sex. Does one state sometimes influence the other? If so, which came first? And does a lack of interest in sex in such a sexually saturated world naturally, and somewhat sadly, send the sexually impassive into seclusion?

"It can be isolating," says North. "I'm quite asocial and like to spend a lot of time by myself. I rarely venture out in search of social events. Other asexuals, however, can be really social beings and enjoy crowds. I do think there is some degree of isolation for every asexual. Being the only asexual in a crowd of people can make you feel like a ship lost at sea."

Alaine, who is studying molecular medicine, says being an inherent outsider might make it easier for you to accept your given self.

"If you're already questioning something in terms of your gender or other aspects of your identity, you're more open to other ways of thinking about how you interact with the world, and not accepting the prescriptions of society," he says.

So am I getting enough? Are my friends and neighbours doing it differently, better? What will happen if and when I can't have sex anymore? Why can't I sleep with that person over there? I wonder what they're like in bed? My partner and I haven't had sex for two weeks — is that normal?

Perhaps some of us wouldn't mind being asexual sometimes. If only for some respite from our incessant, Neolithic hormones.

"We've attached so much meaning to sexual attraction," Black says.

"We've attached so much to having sex, to being sexual, to positioning yourself in a way that you want other people to have sex with you, and to be seen as sexually attractive. We miss what it means to not experience that. We miss how positive it can be."

**LS**