

THE  TIMES

# Truly, deeply loving, just not madly sexual

**Helen Croydon**

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## If someone lacks a sex drive, do they really have a mental health disorder? Our writer meets the sex refuseniks

Mark McClellmont, 46, has been single for 13 years. He's attracted to people. He feels crush-like heart flutters when someone he fancies walks into the room. But he never wants to sleep with them. "I do want physical intimacy, hugging and affection. But the interfering of bits and pieces — ugh — I don't want to go near that thank-you very much."

Biology student Mellissa Maranto, 20, is madly in love with her girlfriend of three years. When they are together they can't keep their hands off each other. They are what Maranto says "total monogamists". Except they don't have sex. Maranto is a virgin. "Even as young as 11, I remember finding the thought of sex repulsive," she says. "I'd heard you should have sex with someone you love and that made sense because I thought, how can you do something so disgusting unless you love them?"

Maranto and McClellmont are part of the estimated 1 per cent of the population who are asexual. They claim they always have been: "At the age when friends began pairing off with boyfriends, that was my proof that there is this thing called sexual attraction, which often interferes with feelings of romantic love," Maranto says. "I kept waiting, assuming that I would feel sexual attraction sometime. I met a boy and I kept thinking the feeling would develop once the relationship got going, but it just didn't."

This is something that Michael Doré, well understands. The 27-year-old mathematician at the University of Birmingham also knew from a young age. "At any point in my life, if you'd asked whether I experience sexual attraction, I'd say no," he says. "My peers would make remarks such as 'isn't she hot?' or 'wouldn't you want to sleep with her?', but I just couldn't relate to them. People would shove an explicit picture in front of me and I wouldn't know what the fuss was about."

While Doré, McClellmont and Maranto feel that their sexual orientation is an inherent part of them, the psychiatric consensus is different. Asexuality is classed as a mental health disorder under the so-called mental health bible — the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* otherwise known as *DSM-IV* — but there is a growing campaign to get it removed. It falls under the umbrella condition, hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), roughly interpreted as a lack of desire for sex. HSDD can be caused by many things — low self-esteem, stress, hormonal imbalances or physiological factors such as muscle pain. The psychiatric profession view these things as temporary and “fixable” with therapy or drugs, but the asexual community doesn’t consider their lack of sexual desire as a bad thing. They want it to be declassified as a “desire disorder” because they don’t feel they need to be “fixed”.

Andrew Hinderliter, from the asexuality networking site AVEN, is leading a campaign to do just that. The fifth version of the *DSM* is currently being drafted ready for release in 2013. Hinderliter has written to the policy makers stating his case for asexuality to be removed from the manual of mental health disorders: “In the diagnosis of desire disorders such as HSDD, guidelines state that lack of sexual interest must cause ‘marked distress’,” he explains. “We’re afraid that pharmaceuticals will someday get approval for a drug to ‘fix’ sexual desire and then apply it to a range of people with different causes of low sex drive. Yet there is only a small subset of desire disorders which can be helped by drugs.”

This debate has startling parallels to attitudes towards homosexuality half a century ago. That too was considered a mental health disorder on the *DSM-II* until 1973. Even then it wasn’t removed, but was replaced with the term sexual orientation disturbance, with “marked distress” forming the key diagnostic criteria.

Mark Carrigan is a sociologist at the University of Warwick researching the social identity of asexuals: “It’s hard to conceive that homosexuality was once mythical,” he says. “Until we had homosexuality, we didn’t even have a word for heterosexuality. The world didn’t consider themselves straight or gay. The extension of moral choice over the past 50 years played a huge part in getting homosexuality accepted. Before the millennium, there wasn’t an asexual community. The advent of social networking sites has allowed them to find each other. So it will be interesting to see if it becomes accepted in the same way as homosexuality.”

From next month Carrigan will be running asexuality education workshops at the University of Warwick, which he will then take to campuses around the country. He hopes that awareness about asexuality will help lose the stigma for young people who aren’t interested in sex: “Many asexuals say they felt marginalised before they identified as asexual. They described feeling broken, confused, having image anxieties. This certainly raises questions about the emphasis we put on sex in our society.”

One only has to listen to the stories of asexuals growing up to get a sense of that. “At school, there was pressure from peers,” says Doré. “Being sexually attracted to women is an expectation for a guy. If you’re not interested in women people assume you are gay.”

Melanie, 20, a heritage student, also struggled: “I got into a two-year relationship when I was 18. I felt embarrassed that I’d never been in a relationship. Society pressures you to do that and sex is an expected part. I wasn’t repulsed by sex, but I didn’t have an interest in doing it. But I started to resent it because I felt I had to do it to keep up the relationship. That created an inner-conflict. After we split, the opportunity for a new relationship came up. I was attracted to him and wanted to be with him but when he brought up sex, I wasn’t interested. Again I had this conflict. One day, the word asexual came up in conversation and a light bulb when on. It felt I had found out who I was.”

Melanie is now in a happy year-long asexual relationship. Many may wonder how a relationship without sex is different to a bond with a close friend. But Melanie says: “I just can’t describe how much I am in love with my boyfriend. It is not platonic love. I have love for my friends, but what I feel for my boyfriend is very different.”

Melanie and her partner define themselves as asexual but heteroromantic, meaning they are romantically attracted to someone of their opposite gender. Most of us consider romantic and sexual attraction as one and the same. It takes someone disinterested in sex to articulate the difference: “With sexual people, becoming aroused is inextricably linked to an emotional draw,” McClemon says. “I find certain people of my own gender aesthetically attractive and emotionally alluring. I feel a yearning to be with them and touch them, but not to have sex with them.”

But isn’t this what many sexual relationships evolve into over time — loyal unions with waned passion? Perhaps asexuals are simply skipping a stage of relationship development? “I’ve felt like I’ve fallen in love many times,” adds McClemon. “But it’s always been unrequited. It seems that you need sex and lust to cement that special bond. Once a person has become sufficiently emotionally close, then the relationship can evolve. But you need sexual energy at first to cement it into a partnership.”

As McClemon and Melanie demonstrate, romantic yearnings are just as powerful as sexual yearnings. Actually, evolutionists go further and say sex is less important in defining our ambitions.

Dr Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist, has written five books on the evolution of love: “When it comes to attraction, our brains have three drives — sex, romantic love and attachment,” she explains. “When romantic love is triggered, we lose control. The sex drive is nowhere near as strong. If you want to get someone

into bed and they say no, you don't go killing yourself. But if someone says they don't want to be in a relationship with you, you can go into clinical depression or stalk mode."

If sexual attraction plays a lesser role in the formula for happiness than our romantic desires, then it is surely illogical that an absence of sexual attraction could be viewed as a disorder? Perhaps the thing that really needs "fixing" about these so-called sexual desire disorders is society's obsession with having sex: "True sexual liberation should also mean the freedom to chose not to have sex if we don't want or don't need it," says Carrigan.

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