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SEXLESS AND HAPPY

Most of us can relate to strong uncontrollable feelings of desire — heart flutters or a yearning to ravage someone in an elevator. But where would we be without them? Helen Croydon looks at the world of the asexual

Melissa Maranto, 20, is madly in love with her girlfriend of three years. When they're with each other they can't keep their hands off each other. They kiss affectionately and they cuddle in bed. They are what Melissa says 'total monogamists'. Except they don't have sex. Melissa is a virgin.

Michael Dore, 27, is a research fellow in Maths at Birmingham University. He's highly articulate, good looking and single. But for him there is an added complication in the emotional rollercoaster that goes with searching for a partner. He needs to find someone who shares his abstinence for sex: 'I know that sex is an important part of a relationship for most people and I wouldn't want to be with anyone I couldn't satisfy.'

I imagine, to the reader who picks up a top-shelf mag such as this, that not wanting sex is not something you can relate to. Melissa and Michael haven't taken a vow of religious celibacy, they don't have a fear of intimacy, they don't have any erectile or other mechanical malfunction, and no, they are not on a treatment programme for sex addiction. Their reasons are grounded in more scientific truth than the above. They were born asexual, or as some loosely define it — have no sexual orientation. And they've always known.

'Even as young as 11, I remember finding the thought of sex quite repulsive,' says Melissa. 'I'd heard that 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? When friends began pairing off, I had proof right in my face that there was this thing called sexual attrac-



"I find certain people emotionally alluring and physically attractive but not sexually arousing"

tion that often interfered with romantic love. Once I learned that, 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 wasn't true.'

Michael has never had sex either. He never wanted to and, he adds proudly, he has never been someone to do things just because other people do. 'At any point in my life if you'd have asked if I experience sexual attraction, I would always have said no. My peers would make remarks like "isn't she hot?" or "wouldn't you want to sleep with her?", but I just couldn't relate to that. People would shove an explicit picture in front of me and I would think I don't know what the fuss is about. It didn't worry me though because it didn't cause me discomfort. Not fitting in wasn't pleasant but I was happy, I had a nice life.'

Michael and Melissa are not uncommon. Asexuality affects an estimated 1% of the population. That's not inclusive of people who simply report a temporary fall in libido or a phase of extreme busyness where nookie gets pushed right down the list of priorities. That 1% figure is strictly for those who express a perennial unfaltering absence of sexual attraction. It was calculated by Professor Anthony

Bogaert at Brock University, Ontario — the authority on asexuality: 'That figure is very likely much larger given that people who are asexual, are reluctant to be surveyed about sexuality.'

Larger? So there could be a huge pocket of repressed asexuals too ashamed of not living up to a sexualised society — or just confused as to why their hormones don't dance around like their peers — to actually identify themselves as one. Have we really got to a point in society that the absence of sexual thoughts carries as much shame as an obsession with them? Are we victims of forced liberalism?

Mark McClellmont, 46, is a scientific glass blower (no neither did we!). He tried sex with both men and women before he realised that he was asexual but always, 'with no results'. 'I thought I could be gay because I do find certain people of my own gender emotionally alluring and physically attractive, but not sexually arousing. I always thought that maybe if I was with those people that I was attracted to, there would be a certain situation and it would all click into place and I'd feel sexual — but it didn't.'

This has hauntingly similar echoes to the forced repression of homosexuality up until around two decades ago. Professor Bogaert agrees there is a link: 'There is an expectation that people grow up to be heterosexual so anything non-normative is questioned. Asexuality is less stigmatised because it is less visible. People can get negative feelings towards two gays holding hands in the street. But asexuality isn't going to be evoking negative imagery in people.'

Certainly there may be less stigma, but that doesn't seem to appease the fear for people in 'coming out'. Anxiety over how peers will react seems to cause the most insecurity. 'The idea

that people might never get into the sex thing isn't on people's radar,' says Michael. 'The dominant reaction is "oh you've not met the right person", "you've had a bad experience", "you're gay but you don't know it" or even "you're depressed". And so the typical reaction for many asexuals is to get into a relationship and try to overcome it.'

That is exactly what Melanie, 22, a history student did. She is now in a happy asexual relationship with her boyfriend of more than a year. But her relationship history has not always been bliss: 'I got into a two-and-a-half-year relationship when I was 18. At the time I felt embarrassed that I'd never been in a relationship. Society pressures you to do that. And sex is an expected part of it. I wasn't repulsed by sex but I didn't have an interest in doing it. Then I started to resent it because I felt I had to do it to keep up the relationship. That created a conflict in myself. After we finished, the opportunity for a new relationship came up. I was attracted to him and wanted to be with him but when the issue of sex was raised, I wasn't interested. Again I had a conflict going on. One day the word asexual came up in a conversation and a light bulb went on. It felt like I had found out who I was. I had a whole new pathway to follow.'

As with many marginal groups — from ethnic minorities to people with medical or psychological disorders to sexual orientations, the sense that we can find an explanation for our behaviour is often the panacea to the situation. Mark Carrigan is a sociologist at the University of Warwick who has studied the social identity of asexuals: 'There is an intense pressure on young people these days to sexualise themselves. In the transition from childhood into adulthood, we see sex as a huge step. If

you go back 50 years it wasn't seen this way. We've gone from excessive purity to a degree of obsession.'

But increased exposure to sexual stimulus wouldn't make people turn against sex would it? Surely we can't get sick of a good thing? 'It means it's now harder for an asexual to lie under the radar,' Carrigan explains. 'It's hard to conceive that homosexuality was once mythical. Before homosexuality, we didn't even have a word for heterosexuality. The world didn't consider themselves straight or gay. It's interesting to compare that to asexuality. Before the millennium there wasn't an asexual community. The advent of social networking sites has allowed them to find each other. I've spoken to people in their 50s and 60s who have only just discovered the concept of asexuality. Many express a gnawing dissatisfaction with their whole life and then a sudden sense of understanding who they are. They feel clarification when they realise that they belong to a different subset.'

Why is there a 'gnawing dissatisfaction' anyway? You can't miss something if you don't actually crave it can you? Unless sex is inextricably linked to emotional connections, in which case the people who shun sex take on a handicap in their search for a soul mate.

'I do have what you describe as crushes,' says Mark. 'I have fallen in love with people, which has always been 100 per cent unrequited. With sexual people — it seems it's necessary that you need the sex and the lust to cement that special bond. Once the person becomes sufficiently emotionally close then it can evolve into something else, but you need the bridge. What I experience is that I find someone aesthetically attractive, I have a yearning to be with them. I want physical intimacy — hug-

ging and affection. But the interfering of bits and pieces — ugh — I don't want to go near that thank you very much!

Before Melanie met her asexual boyfriend, she shared his frustration: 'I would feel drawn to people. There'd be a flirtatious thing we both acknowledged. I knew I wasn't interested in sex but I would forget and then there would be a notion of "oh god I'm going to have to have sex" and that destroyed it.'

Consciously, we distinguish romantic relationships and friendships with sex. People are friend or they are lover. If we make the former the latter it usually produces awkwardness, if we make the latter the former, we lose passion pretty quickly. Yet Mark and Melanie make this distinction even without sex. 'What I have for my boyfriend is not platonic love,' Melanie asserts. And then, with enviable feeling: 'I just can't tell you how in love with him I am. I felt love for my friends but what I have for my boyfriend is very different to that.'

Most of us — regardless of sexuality — are either homo-romantic or hetero-romantic, which indicates the gender with which we are intimately attracted to. It is possible to be aromantic and have no desire to be intimately connected to anyone. For most of us our sexual orientation goes hand in hand with our romantic one but all combinations of sexual and romantic orientations can exist.


While this is evidence that a yearning for intimacy can be peeled away from sex, the opposite is also true. An absence of sexual attraction is not necessarily an absence of sexual drive. Asexuals can be non-libidinous and libidinous, referring to whether they still feel physical urges that need satisfying.

'I am capable of becoming aroused and

of having orgasms,' says Mark. 'But the method I use to relieve those urges isn't via another person or doesn't involve visualising anyone or anything else. The method and context is totally different to what other people do. My urges don't translate into the ability to be sexual with someone else.'

Melissa is non-libidinous but her partner does occasionally have a need for sexual release: 'She has sexual desires but they are not particularly strong. There will come a time where I may need to do something to satisfy her or allow her to get satisfaction elsewhere. I don't know because she's never asked but I do think I'd consider doing something like that if it made her happy.'

A negotiated compromise over sex as we all know isn't limited to asexual relationships. In fact, Melanie and Melissa's type of relationship and the one that Mark aspires for is actually what many conventional relationships evolve into over time — sexless but committed unions.

Perhaps asexual relationships are just missing out an intellectually redundant chunk and skipping ahead to relationship Utopia? Logically that makes sense. Sexual desire is, after all, a drive like hunger and can't be rationalised. The pleasure derived from it has physiological rather than physical routes. If we didn't need to eat we wouldn't enjoy food so much. It's not taste alone which satisfies but the ritual of eating and the feeling of being filled. Sex, like food, is a pleasant way of carrying out a biological function. Without the drive for it, it has no place. We should neither judge nor force it upon those who have no desire. Asexuals choose — and one could argue more wisely — to focus on the more tangible, rational pleasures of life. 

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