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No sex, please

A growing number of young people are identifying themselves as asexual - not interested in physical relationships - even though the world around them is charged with sexual imagery

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It was just over a year ago, when talking to a friend studying Zen Buddhism, that Lindsay Loytchenko found the word to describe her feelings about sex.

"I thought I was repressed, but then I started learning about asexuality and Zen Buddhism and I saw that was me," says the 17-year-old CEGEP student.

Ever since she can remember, Loytchenko has had better things to do with her life than get physical with someone.

"I've always been really happy that I'm the only 17-year-old in my group of friends who's not a total slave to hormones," said the outspoken teen. "I just have no desire. I've been asked out, people have offered to start casual relationships, but I don't feel it would be beneficial to me.

"It doesn't sound fun and interesting; it sounds boring and a little gross."

Asexuality is the hottest topic around these days, says writer Elizabeth Abbott, an expert on celibacy. Ever since a New Scientist story last fall about the growing numbers of young people who are "coming out" about their lack of sexual interest, the University of Toronto research associate has been questioned on the topic by the likes of the New York Times and Elle Quebec.

The story, generated because of an online forum created by an American college student named David Jay, revealed that numbers of young people are saying they simply don't feel the urge of sexual attraction toward another person.



CREDIT: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE

Lindsay Loytchenko says sex "doesn't sound fun and interesting; it sounds boring and a little gross."

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Now 22, Jay launched the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) five years ago - a Web log, information site and discussion board that helps asexuals meet others who feel the same way they do about sexual intimacy.

"Because the community is so young," Jay said, "questions about romance and relationships and courtship are still things we're struggling with."

Abbott is quick to point out that asexuality is not the same as celibacy. "Asexuality is a physical manifestation, a lack of interest in sex," Abbott said. "Celibacy means you're not doing it, maybe because you hate it or you're a nun or you can't find the right guy."

"Presumably asexuals would be quite happy to be celibate, but most celibates are not asexuals," Abbott said.

However, even lacking a sex drive, asexuals can fall in love, she said. Problem is, who's going to admit to being asexual in a society in which everyone is supposed to love sex?

"In my generation, it's a case of survival of the sexiest," quipped Loytchenko, who thinks she might be the exception in that she feels rather proud of her asexuality. "If anyone asks, I won't particularly care," she said. "It's like someone who's not ashamed if they're gay or lesbian."

The question of repression of desire is often a painful one for asexuals. "You're sort of told if you're not interested in sex, you're repressed," said Jay, 22, an asexual freshman in college when he started AVEN. "What's implied is that you have to medicate yourself and go through therapy and have sex even if you don't want to," he said.

This is reinforced by many sexologists, Abbott said.

"They treat asexuality as a problem, instead of realizing there's a continuum in sexuality - like being clutzy, average or a great athlete - and you're at the other end of the continuum."

"We live in a culture that says you have to want sex all the time," said Michael Kimmel, a gender issues expert and professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "In the past, it was true that people who wanted sex all the time were considered deviant. But now it's the people who don't want sex who feel abnormal."

As a graduate of Wesleyan University, Jay knows what it's like to feel abnormal for not wanting sex. Wesleyan is famously liberal on all issues, including sexual ones. "I've had people come to my room while I was doing homework and offer to have threesomes like everyone else," Jay said.

Despite our society's fixation on sex - or maybe because of it - the numbers of people who call themselves asexual seems to be growing.

In 2004, psychologist Anthony Bogaert of Brock University in Ontario found that of a sample of 18,876 people in Britain, 1.05 per cent reported being asexual, agreeing with the statement "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all." That number was only slightly lower than the percentage of people in the study, 1.11 per cent, who reported being homosexual.

With AVEN, online visitors are told it's OK not to have sex. Jay says the overriding message is "If sex isn't fun, find other things in life that are."

For many asexuals, those other things involve intimate, if not physical, connections

with other people.

Loytchenko, for instance, who admits she can be a hopeless romantic on an emotional level, feels that it would be fine to have a relationship that resembles "one of those emotional-intellectual things."

The only way she can imagine having a relationship, she says, is to find someone who's also asexual or can accept being part of an emotionally involved couple but every now and then getting together with someone else.

"To me, it seems like people use sex to do things, to communicate things," Jay said. Asexuals find that they can communicate in other ways - some cite the closeness that comes from conversation - and many resent the suggestion that there is some hierarchy of intimacy, with intercourse the crown.

Sociologist Kimmel is wary, however, of generalizing about asexual fantasies and behaviour. Like Abbott, he describes sexual desire as a continuum, with different people experiencing it at different levels.

But the desire to find a mate, he said, is a very powerful cultural force. "It's pretty hard in our culture to escape the sentiment that everyone must pair up."

Perhaps that suggests that the differences between sexual and asexual love are more superficial than once thought, experts said.

"I've always thought that the phrase 'just friends' was kind of strange," Kimmel said, noting that studies show the romantic relationships that last longest are based on deep friendship, not sexual attraction.

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