

Feature: Glad to be asexual

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It is an impossibly hot summer evening in St Louis, a city in the American Midwest best known for barbecues and blues music, and I'm driving around the streets of the town's Central West End wondering if this will be known one day as the place where the revolution began.

In less than an hour I am to meet its leader, a young man whose face I have never seen though we've been talking for months. I know I shouldn't be this eager to greet him in person, to finally see what he looks like, but then again it's not every day you meet a young healthy man who is 100% uninterested in sex.

In a world where lust can be bought in a pill and skin is the marketing tool du jour, being David Jay cannot be easy. At the age of 22 he has never had sex. He has never experienced sexual attraction towards another person and does not believe it will ever happen.

There are many others who have similar stories to tell. They talk about growing up not being able to understand why everyone else seemed so interested in dating, kissing and touching; in experiencing the ritual of mating.

Common label

Until recently these people felt isolated, never suspecting others felt the same. But now, thanks in great part to an online forum founded by Jay, they are finding each other and identifying themselves with a common label. They call themselves asexual, and are coming out to

parents and loved ones, declaring their asexuality to be as valid an orientation as being straight or gay.

They are printing T-shirts and pamphlets, and discussing the concept of “A-pride” and what it means to be “A-sexy”. They are, essentially, announcing to the world that they are not broken or defective, or sexually dysfunctional. Instead they have a bona fide sexual identity that must no longer be ignored.

A few months ago it might have been easy to dismiss these individuals as outsiders whose coming together in the era of the search engine has given them an inflated sense of community. However, little-publicised studies of rodents and sheep suggest that asexual behaviour in mammals is not so uncommon. And this August, a researcher in human sexuality published the first tentative figures for the number of asexual people in the population, which suggested that there might be almost as many asexual people as there are gay individuals.

The figure raises the intriguing spectre of a repressed, underground minority on the verge of bubbling up into the mainstream. Are we about to witness the birth of the asexual revolution?

Coming out

Discovering our sexuality, we are told, is a perfectly normal process that must be celebrated. We might wish to tame it perhaps, but never negate it. Even concepts such as celibacy or abstinence work on the implicit assumption that we are deliberately rejecting sexuality. Doctors tell us that if we lose interest in sex we must seek help with the problem.

Unsurprisingly, one of the hardest things about being asexual is convincing other people that there is nothing wrong with you. Tell someone on the street that you are asexual and they’ll stare at you in disbelief, says Jay. The immediate supposition is that you’re just a late bloomer, he adds.

A powerful example of how people react to the idea appears in an article titled “Eight myths about religious life,” which appeared in Vision 2002, an annual magazine from the National Religious Vocation Conference in the US. It states: “Question: what do you call a person who is asexual? Answer: Not a person. Asexual people do

not exist. Sexuality is a gift from God and thus a fundamental part of our human identity.”

But now, people outside the asexual community are starting to question these assumptions. Elizabeth Abbott, Dean of Women at Trinity College, University of Toronto, Canada, is one of the few academics who are aware of the issue and believes it is a real phenomenon. Soon after her book *A History of Celibacy* was released in 1999, letters started pouring in from people who told her that, like celibates, they didn't have sex. Only in their case, it was not a question of choice – they simply didn't want to.

That's when she realised that asexual people actually existed. “The asexual can be somebody's husband or wife,” says Abbott. But societal pressures keep most asexuals in the closet, she adds. “They have to hide themselves because we are in a highly sexed society. Imagine someone who doesn't even want it and who isn't having a problem if they're not getting it. There's not really anyone for them to talk to.”

Something different

According to Jay, one of the biggest battles is convincing other people that being this way is what feels right. Many asexuals discovered their orientation in their early teens and refer to their asexuality as something that has always been with them. One example is 17-year-old Aspen (name changed), a mild-mannered girl with big blue eyes who lives in Worcester, Massachusetts.

One summer afternoon over lunch she told me that she had looked up the word asexual in the dictionary at age 15, hoping to find a definition for how she saw herself. None of the explanations fitted, so she wrote in her journal: “What am I? Like I said before I'm not anything; not anything there's a word for, at least...If there were a word for what I'm starting to think I am it wouldn't – unlike the word homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, transsexual – have the word sex in it. I'm something different.”

When I asked Kate Goldfield, a 20-year-old college student from Maine, to describe her feelings, she offered an analogy. “It's almost as foreign to me as someone saying ‘You know, when you're 18 we're going to take you on a space shuttle and we're going to go to Mars’.” Angela (name changed), a lively 40-year-old writer from

Massachusetts, explains it this way: “I have never had interest in sex all my life, at all. It’s like algebra. I understand the concept, but have no interest. I don’t have the strong feeling about it that the rest of the world has,” she says.

Loving variety I finally meet Jay face-to-face at the lobby of my hotel. He flashes a confident smile and firmly shakes my hand as if he had known a part of me was secretly expecting a weirdo and he was glad to set me straight. Jay is no Calvin Klein model, but not unattractive either; in fact, he’s kind of got the air of a young JFK Junior, tall and slender, with warm, dark eyes, and the mouth of a Greek god I can imagine young girls dying to kiss.

More intimate

He is living proof that it is absolutely wrong to assume asexuals shun sex simply because they can’t get any. I ask him if anyone has ever tried to convert him into the realm of the sexual. “Yes, that’s definitely happened,” he replies. “That’s actually the time that I made out with [snogged] someone.” It didn’t do anything for him but he ended up having a relationship with the girl – a sexless one, of course. “We had a physical relationship, more intimate in a lot of ways. We hugged each other a lot.”

That Jay “likes” girls is one of several intriguing facts I learn about asexual people as they discuss some of the most intimate details of their lives with me. There are asexuals, for example, who have never felt the need to get close to other people, not even in a non-sexual way, and describe themselves as loners. But others, like Jay, want to connect with males or females – some people would define it as an orientation – only it seems to be purely emotional.

Their desire is to find a “mate” with whom they can share interests and spend time with but not have any form of sexual relationship with. (Jay once worried he could never feel love, but now knows he can. Indeed, unencumbered by sexual feelings, he believes his is a more powerful, unconditional form of love.) In addition, some asexuals are capable of experiencing bodily arousal. They get erections and some masturbate, although even while experiencing the physical cues of arousal there never is an impulse to do anything sexual with another person. A number of asexuals told me that watching porn or looking at erotic pictures were awkward experiences that they couldn’t relate to.

“I get the feelings...but my body never made the mental connection to what I would do about it,” explains Pete (name changed), a high-school student who is in a non-sexual relationship with a girl. “I get the arousal but when it happens it gets annoying because to me there is really no purpose to it, there is nothing I can do about it,” he says.

No definition

The amazing degree of variation in the experiences of asexual people suggests that the underlying causes of their lack of sexual attraction are very different. Some asexuals might simply have extremely low sex drives in spite of an innate orientation towards males or females. Other asexuals might form a fourth category of sexual orientation in addition to the hetero-, homo- and bi-sexual ones, namely people who are attracted to neither gender, even if they have normal sex drives.

There is no official definition for asexuality yet, but it probably needs to take all these variations into account, says Anthony Bogaert, a psychologist and human-sexuality expert studying asexuality at Brock University in St. Catherines, Canada. “The place where we draw the line is the desire to interact sexually with other people,” says Brian (name changed), a navy veteran from Virginia. When it comes to having children, some asexuals say they would like to have a baby, but most would use IVF to avoid having to have sex.

Much of the sense of community that emerges when Brian and others talk about their collective status as asexuals comes from the fact that they have found a virtual neighbourhood where they constantly interact. “It’s made it a whole lot easier for us to find each other,” Brian says.

One such web forum, called AVEN (for Asexual Visibility and Education Network at [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)) was founded by Jay in 2001 and provides extensive information about asexuality along with discussion forums. It began with fewer than 50 members but now boasts more than 1200. People from all over the world have visited the site: from Saudi Arabia, Japan and Cuba.

Convincing the sceptics

Discussion of asexuality in academic circles is virtually non-existent, save for its occurrence in plants, worms and other lowly critters. “It has not been out there, there is nothing written about it,” says Nicole Prause, a graduate student at Indiana University in Bloomington, who has done one of the very first studies on the subject.

One reason is that the bulk of research on human sexuality has been driven by the problems sexual activity creates, such as sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy. “Concern about those problems is what produces money to do research,” says John DeLamater, a human-sexuality expert from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

And even when researchers do study people who are not having sex, it is always on the understanding that sexual inactivity is a problem that needs fixing. “Hypoactive sexual desire” is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) – the bible of psychologists and psychiatrists. The manual says this can happen during adolescence and persist throughout a person’s life. It is considered a disorder if it causes the person distress.

But the hypoactive sexual desire label fails to acknowledge people who are happy and healthy but have a lifelong aversion to sex and feel no attraction towards men or women. It is this subset of the population whose true sexual identity has not been recognised, argues Jay.

Below the radar

“This is a category that has socially not been manufactured yet. It’s below the radar,” says sociologist Edward Laumann from the University of Chicago in Illinois, one of the world’s top experts on human sexuality. “You have to have someone who is prepared to accept asexuality as a way someone is born, like [having] blue eyes,” says Abbott.

This might be a novel view but it’s not unreasonable, adds DeLamater. “Motivation to engage in sexual intimacy is a dimension that runs basically from zero to extremely high, and there are probably some people at that zero end,” he says.

The question is whether that zero end represents a tiny sliver of the sexuality bell curve or a substantial slice. The limited research on asexual mammals suggests that asexual behaviour is actually not that rare. For example, studies in rats and gerbils done as early as the 1980s have demonstrated that up to 12% of the males in the population are not interested in females.

Named “duds,” these animals are described as asexual in the literature. But because males are so aggressive, it had not been possible to put one of these individuals in a cage with another male to test whether their lack of interest in females was had to do with attraction to males.

Sheep studies

In the 1990s, however, three separate teams from the US Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho, Oregon State University in Corvallis and the Oregon Health and Science University, Portland, tackled this question. In one study, young but sexually mature rams were put in a pen with females on 18 different occasions to assess their partner preference.

As expected, the majority of rams mated vigorously with the ewes, but around 10% did not mount the females or show any interest. Those rams were then put in a pen beside either two males or two females and behavioural tests measured the number of times the animals showed “interest” (kicks, vocalisations, sniffs, mount attempts) towards members of either sex.

Some of the rams – between 5% and 7% of the population – tried to mount, sniff and sexually interact with other rams. Intriguingly, another group – some 2% to 3% of the population – showed no interest towards either males or females. “They have no interest whatsoever in mating,” says Fredrick Stormshak from the Oregon team. “They appear to be 100% asexual.”

This asexual preference still held when the tests were performed one year later. Stormshak believes these asexual rams could offer a good model for understanding the basis of asexual behaviour in mammals. They could be used, for example, to see if the hormone levels in these animals are different.

Not having sex

Although such studies might offer insights into asexuality in people, comparisons between such different creatures as humans and sheep are controversial and should be made very cautiously. The closest we have got to understanding human asexuals comes from studies – mostly surveys – of people who report not having sex.

Obviously this category not only includes people who see themselves as asexual but also people who are simply unable to have sex because of old age or ill-health. Nonetheless, these surveys offer some interesting clues. Laumann published one of the best-known sexuality surveys in 1994 (*The social organization of sexuality: sexual practices in the United States*, by Laumann and others, The University of Chicago Press) based on very detailed responses from almost 3500 Americans from all over the country and all walks of life.

The survey showed that about 13% of respondents had not had sex in a year. Forty per cent of those people considered themselves extremely or very happy in spite of this. The study also revealed, according to Laumann, that about 2% of the entire adult population has never had a sexual experience. But that does not tell us whether these people would ever want to have sex.

It is only recently that sexuality research has begun to focus less on behaviour and more on people's desires as a better measure of their sexual preference. Bogaert has just published the very first study estimating the prevalence of asexuality in the population using this notion and the results are intriguing (*The Journal of Sex Research*, vol 41, p 279).

#### Same-sex attraction

In his analysis, Bogaert looked at another study of sexual practices, published in 1994, that surveyed more than 18,000 people in the UK. Although it did not specifically target the issue of asexuality, it did include a section questioning respondents on sexual attraction. One option read: "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all." Bogaert saw that a surprisingly high 1% of respondents had chosen this last option – close to the rate for same-sex attraction, now believed to be running at about 3%.

Prause took a different approach in her – as yet unpublished – study of asexual people. Instead of looking at older data she decided to recruit asexuals via the internet and ask them questions about their sexual experience, their arousability and desire levels.

What she found, though she stresses the results are very preliminary, is that people who describe themselves as asexuals (41 responded to the survey) seem to have similar levels of sexual behaviour to other respondents, suggesting that they are often having sex when they don't really want to. More importantly, says Prause, her study suggests that asexuality is not some kind of illness. "People are using it as their sexual orientation," she says.

A pride

If asexuality is indeed a form of sexual orientation, perhaps it will not be long before the issue of "A" pride starts attracting more attention. AVEN's online store sells items aimed at promoting awareness and acceptance: one T-shirt proclaims, "Asexuality: It's not just for amoebas anymore," and there's a thong that reads, "It's only underwear. Get over it."

Jay has been working hard at raising awareness: giving talks, networking with other organisations and getting the issue of asexuality aired in the media. He thinks asexual activism is indeed beginning to coalesce into a real political movement. "It's interesting because we're in the shadow of the gay rights movement, so it's a very different process now because we have things to draw on.

There is also a culture that is ready to accept sexual variation much more readily than it was before." After raising money through the AVEN website, Jay designed, printed and distributed 5000 educational pamphlets. The front panel reads: "not everybody is interested in sex".

Positive identity

DeLamater says he sees several parallels between this flurry of activity and the beginnings of the gay revolution in the 1970s. "In that sense they are very much like what happened in the gay and lesbian and transgender community; a group of people who originally were treated and thought of themselves as strange or

deviant or not fitting somewhere who gradually come together and create a positive identity out of those characteristics,” he says.

One example of that transformation is the fact that people are coming out of the closet. “I was so excited about finally discovering myself that I just went out and told a few of my friends and it kind of spread,” says Pete. By finding this positive identity and being open to loved ones about it, some asexuals, like 23-year-old Esther Dail from Colorado have even been able to fill “traditional” societal roles by getting married to sexual partners. “He doesn’t push me,” says Dail of her husband, with whom she doesn’t have intercourse and whom she told about her asexuality when they were dating.

Bogaert and other academics believe that while the idea of an asexual movement is not far-fetched, it is likely to have less impact and momentum than the gay revolution because the notion of asexuality is uncontroversial. “It doesn’t repel, it just doesn’t appeal,” says Abbott. But who knows, maybe 10 years from now we will live in a world where it’s totally cool to be “A” and being a “happy single” is no longer considered an oxymoron.