

UNDERSTANDING ASEXUALITY

It is widely assumed that most people will experience some form of sexual attraction at various times throughout their lives. The frequency and intensity of this attraction may vary depending on such factors as age, health and relationship status, and for most people, feelings of sexual attraction will affect how they relate to others and will help shape their sense of themselves as sexual beings. However, such an assumption overlooks the fact that not all individuals feel sexual attraction, and not all individuals have a need to engage in sexual behaviour in order to feel whole and fulfilled. The asexual individual is someone who does not feel sexual attraction and who chooses to explore ways of forming connections and relationships that are nonsexual.

In this instalment of Check the Research, we explore the recent literature to determine how asexuality is defined, how common it is, and how it is understood and experienced by individuals who self-identify as asexual.

OVERVIEW

Asexuality is now seen as a distinct sexual orientation, in addition to the more commonly acknowledged sexual orientations such as heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. The asexual person is not someone who “just hasn’t found the right person,” or someone who fears acting on sexual feelings because of personal, religious or cultural influences. Asexuals do not consider themselves to be distressed or frustrated because of their lack of sexual feelings. Just as those who view sexual feelings as a normal part of the human experience, asexuals consider their lack of sexual attraction to be normal and fundamental to who they are as individuals.

AS FAR AS I’M CONCERNED, AN ASEXUAL IS SIMPLY SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T FEEL THE DESIRE TO ACTUALLY HAVE SEX, AND FOR ME, IT FITS

(study participant cited in Carrigan , 2011, p. 467).

DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF ASEXUALITY

From a psychological perspective, Storms (1980) considered asexuals to be individuals low on the continuum of either homoeroticism or heteroeroticism. Those who are strongly attracted to people of the opposite sex are high on the scale of heteroeroticism, those who are strongly attracted to people of the same sex are high on the scale of homoeroticism, and those who are strongly attracted to people of both sexes are high on both scales of eroticism. Storms classified asexuals as individuals who do not experience any form of sexual attraction.

Bogaert (2004) defined asexuality as the “absence of a traditional sexual orientation,” and noted that asexuals are not sexually attracted to members of either sex. In his research on asexuals, Bogaert studied the responses of over 18,000 individuals in Britain who completed a general population survey on sexual behaviour. For the purposes of his research, individuals who answered yes to the question, “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all,” were considered to be asexual. Bogaert then compiled behavioural, health, social and economic information about this group. He found that approximately 1% of the survey respondents were asexual.

Some researchers have defined asexuality as a lack of, or absence of, sexual desire or excitement. Others have characterized asexuals as individuals who have had few or no sexual experiences. The question of whether asexuality is a form of sexual dysfunction has also been considered. Prause and Graham (2007) have noted that while asexuals



lack sexual desire they generally don't report feelings of distress over this lack of desire. This absence of personal distress sets asexuals apart from individuals who experience hypoactive sexual desire disorders. These disorders are characterized by a "deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity, which causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty" (American Psychiatric Association cited in Prause and Graham, p. 341).

ASEXUAL VISIBILITY AND EDUCATION NETWORK (AVEN)

While theorists and researchers continue to debate and create definitions of asexuality, members of the asexual community have begun to articulate their own views of asexuality. The online community of AVEN was founded in 2001 by an American college student who identified as asexual. Currently, AVEN has an international membership and serves as a source of information about asexuality and offers a forum for discussion and support for the asexual community. The website clearly defines an asexual as, "someone who does not experience sexual attraction." AVEN characterizes asexuality as "an intrinsic part of who we are," in contrast with celibacy, which is a conscious choice made by individuals. AVEN also acknowledges that every asexual individual experiences relationships, attraction and arousal in unique ways.

RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ASEQUALITY

Asexuals can desire and experience emotional intimacy, as well as feelings of attraction not based on sexual urges. Some asexuals see themselves as aromantics, meaning that they have no desire for romantic relationships. Others identify themselves as heteroromantic, homoromantic or biromantic, and form personal relationships that are based on emotional and intellectual attraction. Asexuals may also engage in sexual behaviour, even though they are not motivated by sexual attraction. They may do so for a variety of reasons, such as to please a partner or to avoid conflict in a relationship. As Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, and Erskine (2010) noted: "Because sexual desire and romantic love are independent, it is possible to have love without sex, just as one can have sex without love" (p. 614).

Asexuals may also engage in other forms of sexual behaviour, such as masturbation. Brotto et al. (2010) found that the frequency of masturbation among asexuals was similar to that of the broader population. Masturbation was described by some asexuals as meeting a purely physical need, and was not associated with sexual fantasies or related to emotional or relational needs.

**I AM SIMPLY UNINTERESTED IN HAVING SEX, NOT REPULSED,
AND IF MY PARTNER INSISTED ON HAVING SEX I WOULD OBLIGE
WILLINGLY. IT'S JUST NOT THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION FOR ME
THAT IT SEEMS TO BE FOR MOST OTHER PEOPLE**

(study participant cited in Carrigan, 2011, p.467).

Based on their interviews with 15 asexuals, Brotto et al. (2010) found that a majority of these individuals agreed that they had no feelings of sexual attraction although some indicated that they did experience sexual desire and arousal. These experiences of desire and arousal did not result from relationships with others, and were presented as purely physical occurrences. Most of the asexuals in the study noted that they had always felt different from their peers, and expressed how relieved they were when they discovered the concept of asexuality. This awareness of their lack of sexual attraction at an early age led many to assume that asexuality had genetic and biological causes. Most asexuals expressed the belief that asexuality is a sexual orientation and not a disorder to be cured. Education was seen as key to public acceptance of asexuality.



EVERYONE IN THE ASEXUAL COMMUNITY WANTS TO SPREAD THE MESSAGE THAT IT'S [ASEXUALITY] NOT A DISORDER AND IT'S NOT SOMETHING THAT'S A PROBLEM AND NEEDS TO BE FIXED...

(study participants cited by Brotto et al, 2010, p. 611).

WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Asexuality is generally regarded as a distinct sexual orientation that is characterized by a lack of sexual attraction to others. There is little support in the research for the view that asexuality is a form of sexual desire disorder, since asexuals rarely report feelings of distress over their lack of sexual attraction. Although asexuals do not experience feelings of sexual attraction, some may form romantic relationships or emotional connections with others. Others do not desire romantic involvement and see themselves as aromantic. While some asexuals may engage in sexual behaviour to please partners, or as a result of purely physical need, they still identify themselves as asexuals. Most asexuals are comfortable with their orientation, and accept their lack of sexual attraction as being central to who they are as individuals.

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