Dear Alice,

What is "sexual apathy" exactly?

Thank you,
— Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Experiences of sexual interest, desire, and expression among humans are as diverse as people themselves! First, it can be helpful to talk terminology. The word apathy means a lack of interest or enthusiasm. The term you're curious about, "sexual apathy," is actually increasingly uncommon in clinical and everyday life. There are a host of reasons why someone might experience a lower sex drive, some of which may lead to seeking treatment or counseling, and some of which may feel totally okay and not require any additional support. Although low or no sex drive may be characterized as a disorder by some in the health care community, having little to no interest in having sex doesn’t necessarily equate to sexual dysfunction. Not wanting to have sex could be related to dynamics within a relationship, enjoyment of the activities, or any number of other reasons. It could also be part of their sexual identity, particularly those who identify as asexual. Curious about clinical perspectives on low sex drive, navigating sex drive in relationships, and asexuality? Read on!

Clinical diagnoses for a lack of interest in sex have many names such as sexual desire disorders, sexual interest/arousal disorder, sexual aversion, hypoactive sexual desire, or inhibited sexual desire. Typically, these conditions are diagnosed by a health care provider when someone experiences a lack of desire for sexual activity for a prolonged period of time and it causes them feelings of distress. Treatment depends on the cause, but could include medication changes or hormone therapy.

Some of the many physical factors that may contribute to low sex drive include:

- Pain during sex (which could be related to other sexual health issues)
• Conditions including, but not limited to, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis
• Hormone changes
• Exhaustion or fatigue
• Medication side effects (i.e., from certain antidepressants or other prescription medications)

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [3].

Some people may not have interest in sex generally, and some people may not have interest in having sex with their partners. Sometimes, people in relationships experience a desire discrepancy, in which one partner is more interested in sex than the other. While there could be an underlying medical condition involved, sometimes desire discrepancy has more to do with psychological factors or relationship dynamics than anything else. Previous negative sexual experiences or a history of physical or sexual abuse can contribute to a lower desire to have sex. Anxiety, depression, or stress can contribute to decreased interest in sex as well. In some relationships, a lack of connection, communication, or trust can also contribute to decreased sexual desire.

If you feel that you and your partner(s) have different sex drives and it causes personal distress and relationship issues, it may be helpful to discuss this topic and explore steps that you can take together — or apart — to understand what may be happening.

Enhancing sexual intimacy between partners might include:

• Communicating in an open and honest way
• Seeking counseling with a mental health professional (individually or as a couple, depending on what feels appropriate for you)
• Setting aside time for intimacy
• Finding ways to cope with stress (you might want to be wary when it comes to smoking, drugs, or alcohol, as these substances can negatively impact your sex drive)
• Adding a little spice to your sex life, i.e., try a different position, time of day, or location for sex (you could check out Relationship rev up [4] in the Go Ask Alice! Relationships [5] archives for some zesty ideas)

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [3].

While some people may choose to seek diagnosis or treatment for their low sex drives, others may feel completely comfortable with a low sex drive and may still experience romantic feelings, desires for intimacy, or healthy, meaningful relationships. Some people just may want or like sex less than others. For some, lack of interest in sexual activity may also be associated with sexual identity. Those who identify on the asexuality spectrum may not experience sexual attraction or only feel it in very specific situations. While it's key to distinguish that asexuality and low sex drive aren't the same, for those who are on the asexual spectrum, the lack of sexual attraction may result in a lack of interest in sexual activity. Further, though people who are asexual may still have a libido, many also have low sex drives.

Last but not least — there’s no strict cutoff for what’s typical in terms of sex drive! Sex drive can be complex and what may cause distress for some may feel completely right for others. When it comes to low sex drive, health care providers, mental health professionals, partners, and friends
can all provider support when trying to explore different facets of sexuality.

Alice!
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