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The other half of sex and disabilities: Info for the partner without a disability ^[1]

Hi Alice,

I am a quadriplegic of twenty years and need help with a problem my girlfriend and I are having with our sex life. The main problem is she feels guilty because she is the only one that gets "physical gratification" when we make love. We can't have intercourse but we have tried several other methods that worked great as far as her getting an orgasm, but the guilt sets in a few minutes afterwards. I have tried many times to explain to her that I also get a lot of enjoyment from our intimate times together, but she does not believe me. She thinks the only reason I want to fool around is just to give her pleasure and this is not true. Some of it does have to do with making her feel good, but I also get much pleasure, in a more "mental" kind of way that she can not understand. We live together, love each other very much, and plan to marry in a few months, but I'm scared this problem is going to get worse if she never believes me. I feel bad about marrying her if we can't have a satisfying sex life because I feel like I'm cheating her out of that part of her life.

If there is any way you could help me with this I would really appreciate it. If you know of any books on this subject that would also be a big help.

Thanks and hope to hear from you soon!

John

Answer

Dear John,

For many, it's confusing to figure out how to balance the individual needs of each partner with the mutuality of sex. The issue you speak about is actually a concern for a lot of couples, with or without disabilities, face. When it comes to sexual relationships for individuals with disabilities, sometimes navigating the stigmas and stereotypes associated with disabilities makes this balance even harder. Indeed, pleasuring a partner can be a highly gratifying emotional experience — one that is sexually satisfying in a unique way — and this can be difficult to communicate. It's not your responsibility to educate your girlfriend on sex and disabilities, but it

may be helpful to engage in conversation with her about the stigmas related to intimacy for people with disabilities and how you can work together to overcome some of these obstacles.

For many people with disabilities, the fear and stigma surrounding sex and disabilities stems from a stereotype that individuals with disabilities are uninterested in sex or that their partners are heroes for engaging in relationships with them. Many studies (and your situation) demonstrate that this isn't true — persons with disabilities desire sex just as much as people without disabilities. How that sexuality is expressed, however, may look a little different. It may be helpful to have a conversation with your girlfriend, outside of the bedroom, openly and honestly about what feels good for you and what your sexual needs look like. She may be more receptive to hearing about what makes you feel good if it isn't in response to her own misgivings and guilt. Further, you know your body best and are entitled to make your own decisions about how you express your sexuality.

It's great that you have found practices that give you satisfaction — both from giving your partner sexual gratification and from knowing yourself, your body, and what feels pleasurable for you. If you're looking for varying sensations or ways to stimulate your body, there may be some additional options to consider. You mention that you're unable to have intercourse (penetrative sex). If part of the inability to have intercourse is due to impacted ability to have or maintain an erection, there may be some options that you may have, or may want to consider. For example, vacuum erection devices (VEDs), otherwise known as penis pumps, help pump blood into the penis to maintain an erection. There are also medications, such as sildenafil and tadalafil, that help maintain erections longer. These are decisions that may best be discussed with a health care provider to prevent health risks. As you've noted, genital stimulation isn't the only way to reach satisfaction. There are many erogenous zones on the body, such as the neck, lips, and nipples, that may feel good for you. If you haven't already, it might be helpful to play around with these different options to explore what feels the most comfortable and pleasurable for you.

Your personal pleasure may not be the whole story. You may need to help each other understand each other's different ways of being sexual and learn to trust what the other says. Have you been able to describe to your girlfriend how you receive pleasure the way you have here? Have you shared fantasies with her? If you're both able to talk openly about the great parts of sex with each other as well as the challenges, you may be able to build a foundation of trust and understanding that will help both of you feel more comfortable receiving pleasure in the future. It may take some time for your girlfriend to truly understand how sex for you is satisfying. By having these conversations, and perhaps exploring different methods of physical gratification that work for both of you, you may find your intimacy and sex life even more rewarding. However, without being open and honest about your concerns or desires, it could be difficult to build the trust you need to overcome the feelings of guilt. It may be helpful for one or both of you to speak to a mental health professional, either together or separately, to talk about these concerns. Many focus on relationships (both sexual and emotional), while those who focus on people with disabilities also frequently discuss relationships with their clients.

It might help to think through these issues, and try discussing them together, during times when you're not initiating intimacy. There are a number of resources that may be of use to you. For more information about reducing the stigma around disability and disability justice, you can check out this [resource guide from Project LETS on the History of Disability Justice](#) [2]. Additionally,

these resources may provide some information on sex and intimacy that may help you and your partner:

- [Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States \(SIECUS\)](#) [3]
- [American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists \(AASECT\)](#) [4]
- [National Rehabilitation Information Center \(NARIC\)](#) [5]

It sounds like you and your girlfriend really care about each other, but physical intimacy may make it difficult to express that in a way that both of you trust. People may experience gratification (whether physical, mental, emotional, sexual, etc.) in different ways, and it can be key to do so in a way that feels best for you. You and your girlfriend may benefit from reviewing these resources together, especially as you embark on forever together. This may help you to collaboratively explore new ways to achieve gratification, which may add even more depth and excitement to your romantic and sexual relationships.

Alice!

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