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## How can boyfriend with cerebral palsy get in touch with his body? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

I am dating a wonderful, intelligent, and caring man who happens to have cerebral palsy. We are both 20 years old, and this is the first romantic relationship he's been involved in. I am the kind of person who expresses things physically; through hugs, caresses, kisses, etc. Unfortunately, those sort of things make him terribly uncomfortable (psychologically, not physically). He's not used to physical affection and he just doesn't know how to interpret it.

He doesn't see himself as attractive, and it scares him to think that he can be so to anyone, let alone me. Having lived with a disability his entire life, he has pretty much dissociated himself from his body, it having been mainly a source of frustration to him. Is there anything I/he/we can do to help him feel comfortable in and get connected with his body?

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

It sounds like you have an insightful and sensitive read on the situation already. Your perception that your boyfriend may suffer from a lack of confidence in his sexual appeal and dissociation from his body may be spot on. Likewise regarding your insight into your physical manner of showing affection, which may be causing him some discomfort. But there are some paths you each can walk that can help you meet in the middle.

Having a disability can be especially difficult on men's feelings of masculinity and desirability, because of society's ideals of men as strapping, physically powerful beings who can punch hard and lift heavy things. Strength, competitiveness, control, endurance, and independence are all stereotypically masculine characteristics that some men with disabilities may feel they fall short of, possibly causing them to feel unworthy of sexual attention. Feeling sexual rejection or frustration could even tempt a man to close off sexual feelings in themselves and about themselves.

Social and sexual interactions during the adolescent and young adult years are very important to the formation of sense of self as a competent sexual and social being. If your boyfriend's cerebral

palsy interfered with forming those connections, he might not have the confidence or the skills that are often developed during that time. He might have also felt desexualized by overprotective parents, care-givers, or women who respond to his with kindness but without sexual interest, factors which many people with disabilities feel frustrated by.

This self-protective habit can start to turn around with a gradual building of confidence, in which you assure your boyfriend through words and actions that you find him attractive and sexually desirable, and he lets himself gradually start to believe you. As with any behavior that makes someone in a relationship uncomfortable, it might be a good idea to go slow with the hugs and kisses and physical affection until your boyfriend is more comfortable with it. Cerebral palsy or not, people have their own pacing of how quickly they like to move into physicality. Holding back will undoubtedly require some patience on your part, but meanwhile may foster an atmosphere of trust and emotional intimacy, both of which are elements of sexuality that makes the whole thing more exciting, safe, and deeply felt. Try to take risks along with him, so that the excitement and fear of exposure is there for you both. Are there things you could share about yourself, physically, emotionally, or spiritually that would give you greater sense of being seen, and him a sense that he is getting to witness and hold a part of you that is as delicate and sensitive as the new ground he is treading?

Other steps your boyfriend could take towards feeling more comfortable with his body and sexuality are to try wearing clothes he feels attractive in, getting to know his own body by touching or looking at himself in private or with you, or seeking counseling from a professional who has experience working with those with disabilities. He can also start to value aspects of his experience that aren't stereotypically "male," but are wonderful qualities in intimacy-building, such as interdependence, becoming friends before sexual partners, and the ability to let others to make the first move.

Ultimately, he may have to do what we all have to work to do in relationships, whether it's our first or our thirtieth — cast off what his experience has been and what he has internalized about who he is, and open up to a partner and to himself in new, thrilling, and scary ways.

Alice!

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