

MATING

Shifting to Neutral

No interest in sex is nothing to get worked up about.

BY AMY SOHN

IN A CULTURE glutted with sexual imagery, it is no wonder that the least visible sexual minority is asexuals, who do not experience sexual attraction at all. But in recent years, through the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and its Website, asexuality.org, asexuals have come together to share stories, get information, and make their presence known. One study estimates that asexuals make up just one percent of the population, and are more often women than men, though research is nascent and one of the biggest problems facing them is that so little is known. But one thing is certain: Now that they are discovering they're not alone, asexuals are beginning to view their identity as an orientation that is not freakish, temporary, or defective.

Amanda, 19, is a sophomore at NYU with short, kinky dark hair and almond-shape glasses. She wears T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers and has an intense, often overserious air. She has never had any sexual interaction with anyone, not even kissing; has never masturbated; and has never been in a relationship. Still, she considers herself heterosexually inclined and hopes someday to fall in love.

As a self-described "jock and theater geek" teenager growing up in New Jersey, she had platonic crushes on boys, but when her friends began coupling off, she wasn't interested. Over tea at Teany on Rivington Street, she tells me about when she realized she was different. "In a sociology class senior year of high school, my teacher said, 'Some people are asexual. They're just not motivated by sex.' I raised my hand. I got a couple strange looks, including from him. It was a room full of 16-to-18-year-olds, so this was totally incomprehensible to them."

But she didn't realize she was part of a much larger group until a few months ago, when she read an article about asexuals online and found her way to AVEN. She learned that many asexuals are in happy but nonsexual relationships and that most identify themselves as either "gay-A" or "straight-A," homosexual or heterosexual in their albeit nonsexual attraction. Though they don't experience sexual attraction, most asexuals do have

romantic attraction and a desire for emotional intimacy.

"I had thought, *I don't really want to have sex with anyone. Guess I'll be alone for the rest of my life. That sucks,*" says Amanda. "So it made me really happy to know that there were other people like this and that being asexual does not mean you can't be in love. And it doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. You look for excuses—being a late bloomer, or maybe you just haven't met the right person, or Catholic guilt. You can blame it on any number of things. But ultimately you just are the way you are."

So far Amanda has come out to her college and hometown friends. One friend from home told her, "No offense, but we're not exactly surprised." And she plans to tell her parents, but isn't sure yet how to work it into the conversation.

These are the kinds of stories that make David Jay, the 22-year-old founder of AVEN, happy. A bisexual asexual, Jay began thinking of himself as asexual when he was 15 and came out as asexual while a student at Wesleyan. "By the time I got to college, I decided that I more or less had come to terms with it and became frustrated that there weren't any resources out there."

He launched asexuality.org in 2002, and the site now has about 3,000 registered users from all over the world. Visitors to the site can get educational pamphlets or buy T-shirts that say ASEXUALITY: IT'S NOT JUST FOR AMOEBAS ANY MORE. In an effort to help asexuals meet, Jay recently linked to a dating site, asexuallove.net.

Though there are obvious similarities between asexuals and other sexual minorities like gays and lesbians, both Jay and Amanda are quick to point out the differences. "The whole idea of pride is different for us," says Jay, "because we're not being told to be ashamed of being asexual. We're not told it's dirty or wrong. We're told it's impossible."

"I don't think we're ever going to have a parade," says Amanda. "This is something people want to know for themselves because it explains who you are to you. It offers such an amazing peace of mind to know there's a reason that I feel the way I feel. To know that I am different, but other people are different in the same way."



THE CHARLES COWLES GALLERY

Photograph by Mona Kuhn