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Understanding Your Own Sexuality

Humans tend to develop an understanding of their sexuality some time after puberty, but for some people they are aware of strong attractions to particular people before that. It can be a confusing issue for some people and completely obvious to other people. For most people it takes a number of years and some sexual encounters (activity) to decide whether they would prefer to be sexually or emotionally involved with a man or a woman or a person whose gender is irrelevant. People on the autism spectrum can find it more difficult to understand their sexuality as it involves not just self-awareness but an understanding of others and how we best interact with and fit in with others.

In some cultures it is not acceptable to have sex outside of marriage. In most Western countries this is not the case anymore. Typically, these same cultures do not accept relationships other than heterosexual ones as equal to heterosexual marriage/relationships, although there are

exceptions. In these cultures it can be harder to explore your sexuality or to accept it if it is different from the majority.

While you are learning to understand your sexuality you may start off thinking that you should be like everyone else around you. However, not everyone is the same. You cannot tell someone's sexuality by looking at them. In high school many high school boys and girls say that they are sexually active in heterosexual relationships. Most of these students are in fact lying. Students say this to look more adult as they think that this can give them status at school. Conversely and confusingly it can also lose them status. Teenage girls who get pregnant and have children while they are still of school age are more likely than their friends, who do not become young mums, to live in poverty and struggle to succeed in life.

Sexual attraction is a complicated thing: you know you are sexually attracted to someone because of the way you feel when you see them or are around them. However, you may feel excited to be around a friend, but not sexually attracted to them. If you like touch, you may want to touch particular people or feel very tingly if they touch you. If you do not like touch, then this would not apply. Sexual attraction is often described as an emotional response people experience when they find someone sexually appealing, where this emotional response leads to a desire for sexual contact with the person. Sexual attraction can be experienced towards any person and any gender, or even towards anything or even a concept. Sexual attraction can be in response to any of the qualities of a person; for example, a person's physical qualities such as appearance, movement, smell and clothing, or non-physical aspects such as their personality.

Sexual attraction can occur by itself or alongside other desires such as romantic and/or emotional. When someone experiences sexual attraction without emotional or romantic

desire, it can result in that person only desiring sex and not a relationship. Sexual attraction is not the same as a sex drive, and you can have no current sexual attractions but still have a high sex drive, or conversely be very sexually attracted to a number of people but have a low sex drive, meaning that you do not want to have lots of sex with all those people who you find desirable. Desire and actioning that desire are two different things. It can be easier for some people on the autism spectrum to understand and experience desire than to work out how to take action to fulfil that desire.

If you have sexual desire but currently have no one to engage in sexual activity with, you may want to try giving yourself sexual pleasure. This is covered in Chapter 16.

In order to understand your sexuality you need to work out when you feel differently about people. When you are with your friends, you probably feel very comfortable and relaxed. When you are around people you don't like, you may feel tense, stressed and/or anxious. Strangely, when we are sexually attracted to someone we may feel anxious or tense also. Usually this is because we want them to interact with us but we are not sure. If we get to know them this anxiety and tension will ease, whereas the more we know people we don't like the worse this can get.

Another complication is that sexual identity/orientation is not always fixed for some people and can change over time. For example a teenager may identify as bisexual but as they get older see themselves as heterosexual and then in their mid-30s or 40s they may start to identify as homosexual. This is fine and nothing to be worried about. Equally, it is fine if your sexuality stays the same all your life.

Sexual attraction is thought to have biological, social and psychological aspects. Pheromones are a type of scent-bearing chemical secreted in people's sweat and other bodily fluids.

These are known to play a role in sexual attraction in other animals, and research is ongoing into their role in human sexual attraction. Social norms can influence what a society or culture deems sexually attractive, but they cannot make particular individuals sexually attracted to other specific individuals. For example, in some countries thin women are viewed as more attractive than more curvaceous women, whereas in other cultures the opposite is true.

Research in China (Zhang 2014) found that people with positive personalities are deemed more attractive than people who look exactly the same but are perceived to be less kind or caring. Most people are neither amazingly beautiful nor ugly, they just are. However, if you want to appear attractive to others, the cheapest thing that you can do to help this happen is to be kind and caring!

If you drink alcohol or use drugs, you will be more attracted to people when drunk/high than you would be if you were sober. In addition you may feel more attractive to others when you are drunk/high. In reality, this is the effect of the alcohol and not an actual increase in attractiveness on either side. Most alcohol and drugs have a negative impact on men's ability to have and sustain an erection, which makes many sexual activities more difficult and/or impossible for men in this state.

What sexual attraction looks like

If you are sexually attracted to someone you usually want to look at them more frequently than you would look at other people. You may like to look at a particular part of them or a particular piece of their clothing, such as a soft sweatshirt that they often wear. You should never take an item of clothing or any belongings from someone without asking their permission. Asking for an item of clothing or a belonging of someone

that you are not in a relationship with can be interpreted very negatively by most people, so it is inadvisable to do this.

Often if someone is sexually attracted to you they will look at/make eye contact with you briefly, then turn away and then look back for longer. They may also look at you from head to toe slowly, this is often referred to as undressing someone with their eyes. When people do this they are often imagining what you look like naked, or what it may be like to touch your body. Having someone look at you like this does not mean that they will touch you or try to take your clothes off; it can just be a part of flirting.

People often stand closer to people that they are sexually attracted to – however, this does not mean that the person squished up next to you on the bus or train is sexually attracted to you, it just means the bus or train is full! If you are in a bookshop and looking at books and, when you look up, a particular person is looking at you and then they move closer, this could be them showing they are sexually attracted to you, or it could be that they are a shop assistant and think you need help!

Flirting is what someone does to show someone else that they are sexually attracted to them. However, not everyone who does this actually wants to have a sexual relationship with you. This is because some people just like flirting and in some cultures this is a normal activity that is done just to show someone that you appreciate something about them. Other parts of flirting are ‘chatting you up’, which is where people say particular things that indicate they are sexually attracted to you. These are usually context specific and culturally based. Very few people are obvious, and instead they use ‘subtle’ comments or phrases. It can be seen as rude or inappropriate to come right out and say that you would like to have sex with someone, although this does avoid any misunderstandings!

Ash: In recent years I've come to realize a lot of things about my youth. With regard to sex, relationships and boys/men, my inability to speak the social language was even worse than in other areas.

Before puberty, the thought of anything sexual was revolting to me. I actually felt sick if I saw people kissing. From the reaction of my peers I could tell that what I felt was not normal. Around age 12 or 13 I suddenly became very interested in boys. I had one crush after the next – and I was always madly in love and did stupid things to get in contact with the object of my infatuation. And to no avail. In the beginning I wrote love letters: 'Do you want to go out' – and the boy always said no. When I was 14 I had a big crush on a boy one year older. I spied on him, rang his doorbell and asked stupid questions when he opened, went past in the morning and asked if we should walk together to school, befriended his brother's best friend and asked him to ask this guy out for me. And the object of my desire was not interested. At all. He just said no, and politely rejected me. And I just carried on like nothing happened. Meanwhile, my friends started dating boys. My best friend, Ann, always had two or three admirers. She could pick and choose and very often she chose not to. I couldn't understand it. Nobody ever admired me – I had no offers. We were both good looking, wore the same type of clothes, and there was nothing (that I could see at least) that she had and I didn't.

Many years later I realized what it was. Ann spoke the social language of flirting: She acted a little bit interested, flirted a little, but not a lot, and when a guy approached her she seemed both interested and not interested – indecisive in fact – this way letting him take the initiative and also making her seem mysterious. I was just very bluntly interested. And I took initiatives when there was someone I was interested in. And it never worked.

I had relationships. Plenty, in fact. Every single one of them based on initiatives from guys I never took an interest in. Suddenly this guy showed up, started chatting and eventually we'd end up together. Most of them nice guys and we had a good time. Almost every time he broke up after a couple months. All the crushes I've had never became relationships. And it never occurred to me to change my strategy. In the 'dating market', there are some rules of the game, one of them being that girls or women don't reveal their true intentions, they just act mysterious and indecisive. I didn't know or understand the rules, so I never played by them. And therefore those boys that I was interested in were not interested in me.

When I was 19 I met S at a party. We talked the whole night and I told him to call me – which he did the following day. We walked for hours and fell in love, were madly in love for two or three months and then broke up. We both married someone else (I married one of those that showed up and started chatting...) and had children, got divorced and met again. And got married five years ago. My relationship with S is special in many ways. We are indeed a very good match. And our relationship is the first which is not based on him chatting me up out of the blue – because he actually had a girlfriend at the time we met – and it is not based on one of my fantasy crushes either. We both have a share in our first encounter, and in fact we both have a share in our reunion and marriage five or six years ago.

People can also wear particular kinds of clothes to signal that they are available for a sexual relationship and this varies according to context, culture and sexuality. Just because a female wears a very short skirt, does not mean that she is interested in having sex! Dressing to indicate sexual attraction is very complex and it is very hard to understand. Generally, if you want to indicate that you are available for a sexual

encounter you would dress in a way that gives you confidence and you both look and smell good.

If you are going to a particular type of place or event you need to ensure that you follow the dress code. An example of this is a nightclub that may specify no jeans or trainers, in which case you would need to wear smart casual or smart clothes. Leather clubs may require leather and/or rubber outfits in order to be admitted. For older adults it is less important to wear particular types of clothes and more important to just look clean and tidy.

Some people are particularly interested in dressing up as characters or furies (animal characters), and they meet online or in real life at conventions or private parties. You can choose to dress up completely or to have a more simple costume. Some types of characters are anime, animals or movie characters. There are often specific rules around signalling sexual interest in these communities and they tend to be more open to people asking how to do this or being more blunt and to the point. It would be OK, for example, to ask 'can I scratch your back' at a furry event, and then, if the answer is yes, to do so. You could also be open about not having attended this kind of event before and ask what the rules are around interactions both sexual and non-sexual.

Dress codes for S&M (sadoomasochistic) clubs and events are generally very strict and involve leather and rubber, and these do not indicate anything other than an interest in S&M. People in this type of environment tend to use explicit and easy-to-understand comments and language so that you will know if someone is sexually attracted to you. However, interest in this environment is often of a short duration and may not be continued beyond that initial encounter. This does not mean that the person does not like you, just that they were only briefly interested.

In some cultures, to show a small amount of skin around the ankle or wrist area is seen as being very sexual. It can be far more sexually attractive to be covered than in skimpy clothing in many places, and certainly warmer in cold climates!

Another complication is that some cultures are very specific about what men and women should wear, and in others people can choose how to dress. Subcultures such as younger adults or particular religions or groups who engage in specific activities can have unwritten dress codes – a dress code is what someone is meant to wear to belong to that group or attend an event. An example is a work uniform, while another example is being naked at a nudist camp.

You can ask some friends what clothes are appropriate for different contexts, but it can be difficult for some parents to discuss this with their adult children. If you do not have anyone in real life that you can ask, you may want to join an online group for adults on the spectrum and ask them what they think. Generally, other adults on the autism spectrum are non-judgemental and accepting of a wide range of genders and sexuality.

Lynne: When I was a young adult, I used to go to nightclubs and I was always really uncomfortable and never knew if people were talking to me just to talk to me or if they were trying to indicate a sexual interest in me. I was really jealous of my gay male friends who would just be really to the point if they were attracted to someone and no one was offended by this. When I tried the same tactic, of saying something like, 'do you want to have sex with me?' I was told this was really offensive and I shouldn't do that. It was so complicated and I was told that the way I dressed in 'male' clothing indicated that I would be the person indicating attraction to people I was attracted to. However, I had no idea what my friends were talking about until I read lots of books on the subject. Then I realized that in

some subcultures, like lesbians, the way you dress can indicate a whole set of hidden things, like sexual activity preference. For me this was just so weird, because I like to wear things that are comfortable and this overrides any and every other reason to wear particular clothes.

Dave: I found that if I wore clean jeans and a smart polo-shirt or shirt, women were more likely to talk to me than if I had my comfy trackpants on. My friends had talked to me about making sure I was clean and smelt good and I found out that this was really important to most people I met. For a while I used to just spray deodorant on before I went out, but when I started to have a shower and put clean clothes on before meeting people, I noticed that people would stand closer and interact with me for longer. I also got my first girlfriend after I had been doing this for a while. I think it was because it took me a while to feel comfortable in clean clean clothes and my friends said they could see my uncomfortableness and it made other people feel awkward. Once I was comfortable, they were too.

If you want to increase your chances of being found sexually attractive the best things to do are:

- ▶ Be kind and caring.
- ▶ Show your sense of humour.
- ▶ Dress in clean clothes.
- ▶ Be clean and smell neutral or nice.
- ▶ Have brushed hair and teeth.
- ▶ Stand or sit up straight with your arms down (not folded in front of you).