# Navigating intimacy: the personal journey of a “side” (not “top” or “bottom”)



At 26 years old, a young gay individual finds himself grappling with significant anxiety and body image issues that have begun to impede his intimate relationships. Preferring the anonymity of a pseudonym, Alex shares his struggle with sexual engagement, noting a distressing pattern of freezing and panic during intimate moments, which hampers his ability to maintain erections or achieve orgasm. This challenge persists even with partners he genuinely likes and feels close to.

Alex’s most recent experience saw him feeling physically ill during foreplay, overwhelmed to the point of wanting to cry and leave. His anxieties are compounded by his identification as both “a side”—a term within the gay community for individuals who are not interested in anal sex—and demisexual, a subset of asexuality where sexual attraction only occurs after forming a deep emotional connection. These identifications make Alex feel like he is part of a "triple minority" within his community, which further exacerbates his feelings of isolation and anxiety.

Despite enjoying sex on certain occasions in the past, Alex generally finds greater comfort and satisfaction in non-sexual forms of intimacy, such as cuddling. Alex expresses a strong desire to overcome his fear of sex, aspiring to enjoy romantic and physical relationships without the constant overshadow of stress and anxiety.

Pamela Stephenson Connolly, a US-based psychotherapist specialising in sexual disorders, offers her insight on Alex’s situation. In a response geared to encourage self-acceptance and personal growth, Connolly advises against self-categorisation, which she believes can be limiting. She suggests that Alex’s unique sexual profile should be reframed from a perceived negative to a positive attribute. According to Connolly, allowing oneself adequate time to become comfortable with intimacy is a beneficial approach to relationships, potentially improving the quality of sexual connection.

Connolly also urges Alex to release the pressure to conform to societal or communal expectations surrounding sexuality. She notes that while Alex may currently identify as “a side” and exhibit demisexual traits, these preferences are valid and may evolve over time, particularly as Alex learns to manage his anxiety better and encounters partners with whom he feels entirely safe.

The core of Connolly’s advice revolves around the theme of authenticity and self-confidence. She stresses that Alex does not need to justify or label himself to fit arbitrary criteria. What matters most is his commitment to being his true, authentic self as he navigates his unique journey towards self-acceptance and intimate fulfilment.

Alex’s experience shines a light on the complexities that many individuals face in their personal and romantic lives, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community. Without prescribing specific solutions, his story exemplifies the nuanced struggles with identity, expectation, and self-image, and highlights the importance of compassion and patience towards oneself.