

This month: JOE ON SEXUAL INCOMPATIBILITY

'Me and my boyfriend are both tops who don't want to bottom'

Dear Joe,

I've been seeing my boyfriend for a couple of months now. We really fancy each other. We're still at that stage where we can't keep our hands off one another. Overall, we're having a great time. However, the problem is that we're both tops.

In the past, I've tried being a bottom and really didn't enjoy it. He says the same. We're both used to getting sex fairly regularly, and this incompatibility is starting to cause tension. Are we destined to spend any future time together resentful of the fact that the

other guy won't give it up? I know anal sex shouldn't become the be all and end all in a relationship, but I'm reluctant to give up something I used to enjoy, and I think he feels the same way.

TERRY, EXETER**Dear Terry,**

In my work with gay male, lesbian and straight couples, the issue of sexual compatibility comes up frequently. One partner will be kinky and the other won't be; one partner may have a higher sex drive than the other. Or one may prefer certain positions; or both partners may be bottoms or – as in your case – both tops. As many gay personal ads state, it's 'just a preference'. But along with individual preferences, these differences can contribute to problems in a relationship.

You say you're aware that anal sex shouldn't be the 'be all and end all', and perhaps that's true. But maybe not. So the answer to your question is complicated, to say the least.

Before investing more emotion in the relationship, it's definitely in your best interests to examine this issue closely now. By assessing how important this is to you, you'll possibly avoid breaking up later, and will certainly avert problems now.

I have worked with gay couples where both partners assumed that anal sex could 'happen over time'. At the start, they didn't put much emphasis on it, as they felt so good with each other in every other way. Over time, sadly, the honeymoon wore off as it does for us all, and when the reality set in, they found it painfully unacceptable. I have seen many couples break up over this same issue.

How important is sexual compatibility to you both?

Many people will judge you – and you may be judging yourselves – by asking how important



Illustration DERMOT FLYNN

this should be and say, 'A relationship is more than sex. You found love, so get over it!' Others will play the law of averages: 'Over time, interest in sex diminishes anyway.' These are easy judgements to make but still require that you check in with each other to determine the importance of sex in your relationship – especially if you choose monogamy and agree to be sexual only with each other.

Many straight men give up on receiving oral sex because their women refuse to engage in it, or obviously don't enjoy it when they do, so the couple simply drop it from their sexual repertoire. They suck it up (no pun intended), so why can't you? But if you don't feel you can go without anal sex, that's OK – but you must decide for yourselves.

Do either of you feel any negative stigma about being a bottom?

Many gay men have internalised homophobia about being a bottom. For some time, the gay male community has referred to bottoming as 'being passive'. Even today, bottoms are often stereotyped as being closeted, sexually submissive and often feminised. One study of gay men found that tops are considered to be more masculine. The bias against anyone who isn't 'str8-acting' may be an unconscious obstacle for many men who would otherwise enjoy bottoming for each other. It's awful how we judge negatively gay men who enjoy receiving anal sex. Even gay porn stars are credited as tops or versatile much more often than they are as bottoms.

In allowing yourself to be a bottom, power dynamics can also get in the way.

When it comes to anal sex, couples – straight, lesbian or gay – usually have issues over dominance. Bottoms can feel they are giving up power and control and don't want their partners to wield all the power in their sexual relations. In his book *Anal Pleasure and Health*, psychotherapist Jack Morin says, 'When intercourse is a symbol of power, one or both may insist on "equality" – inserting half the time, receiving half the time – as a matter of principle rather than preference. But all too often, the enjoyment of anal play becomes secondary or non-existent until the underlying power struggle is addressed.'

Is anal sex physically uncomfortable, to the point you cannot enjoy it?

Rather than bite their nails, many people 'discreetly' store tension throughout the day by squeezing their anus tightly. During bowel movements, others strain and push too hard, which leads to haemorrhoids and other anal problems. As a result, their capacity for receiving pleasure during anal sex is extremely limited, if not physically uncomfortable. If this is the case, you can engage in techniques to relax the anus and begin to let it become a place of enjoyment and pleasure.

Another way to 'loosen things up' is to start small. Begin relaxing your anal muscles by introducing fingers, dildos and dilators. Begin by inserting a soapy finger into your anus during showers and over time, as you get accustomed to the sensation, insert two or more. Believe it or not, just by relaxing that area, exploring it and playing with it, your anus can become an erogenous zone.

Does a concern over cleanliness and hygiene account for part of your disinterest?

If this is the case, before engaging in anal sex you can shower together or alone to make sure the area is clean. Many people use enemas to eliminate the intrusion of faecal matter during and after intercourse; many also wear condoms for this reason (though a condom, of course, is always recommended for anal sex in any case).

This involves a discussion with your partner so that you can plan ahead. I see many couples who say that sex should be 'spontaneous'. If there has to be any prep work, it needs to be short and sweet, perhaps even part of the foreplay. Otherwise, one or both partners may lose their desire or somehow feel that they aren't having 'real' sex. But the kind of spur-of-the-moment anal intercourse as depicted in the movie *Brokeback Mountain* doesn't necessarily work in real life.

Planning for sex can actually be sexy, which people find out all the time in the beginning of relationships and while having affairs. So when a couple tell me they aren't interested in sex that isn't spontaneous, I don't believe them. We often discover there are other issues involved.

There is no one 'right way' of having sex. To make it enjoyable for you both, adapt to each other's preferences.

The bias against anyone who isn't 'str8-acting' may stop men who might enjoy bottoming for each other

Do you want to choose an open relationship in order to keep yours together and find anal sex outside the relationship?

Couples need to choose for themselves whether monogamy is right for them or not. I have seen, however, too many couples move too quickly into opening up their relationship for the sake of getting their sexual needs met

without truly communicating what it will mean and what the rules and boundaries are for them as a couple. Sex advice columnist Dan Savage says that while there is so much hype about non-monogamy ruining relationships and a lot of reinforcement for monogamous relationships, not opening up your relationship could be what ends things. This is all grist for the mill to talk about with your partner.

If you choose to experiment with having anal sex I don't recommend diving into it. Jack Morin warns in his book not to make it an 'I will fuck you and then you fuck me' balanced reciprocal thing which will take the eroticism and play out of anal sex. I recommend you truly explore why you both rigidly adhere to the role of being a top and make sure that if you decide that is more important than investing more time and energy into your relationship, that you make sure you ask yourselves, 'Is this really a deal-breaker?'

Every couple has to deal with incompatibility and differences. It is neither the incompatibility nor the differences that is the problem. Rather it is how the couple negotiates these differences.

Good luck to you both, and again I give you much kudos for talking this through sooner rather than later.

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