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Gay relationship experts Alan Downs and Joe Kort answer your questions

THIS MONTH: JOE KORT ON SELF-ESTEEM

'No one will ever love me'

Dear Attitude,

I am 18 and recently plucked up the courage to tell my best friend that I'm gay. She was completely fine with it, but I'm not entirely sure how to tell some other people, who I know are homophobic.

I'm going to university in September. I have never had a boyfriend or any sexual experiences, not even my first kiss. I lack confidence and knowledge of how to meet

other gay guys and talk to them. Nor do I have much knowledge on how to get ready for my first sexual encounter, such as how to prepare myself for anal sex, or what to actually expect during sex. There is this guy who I know who is gay, and I kind of like him and I thought that maybe he liked me, but he told me tonight that he was going to meet someone for a shag and I got really jealous and upset.

I am fat and ugly and I know I'll never find a boyfriend, someone to love me for who I am. I just want someone to be there for me. I'm finding it very hard to think of reasons to keep on living. All my straight friends have someone, but because of how I look no one is interested in me. I don't know how long I can keep going. Any advice you can give me will be greatly appreciated.

JAMES, NEWCASTLE



Dear James,

That you have reached out tells me you see some hope. You should know that while things seem dismal right now, they won't remain this way. It's great that you told your best friend and that her response was so supportive. We all need that courage to come out and be ourselves. I understand *Attitude* magazine has given you a referral to some therapists to help you learn skills to avoid questioning your reason for living.

Reading your letter, I couldn't help recalling all the times I felt exactly as you do. When I was dating, I felt there was so much wrong with me that guys would not like. I have client after client saying what he feels is wrong about himself and makes him ineligible for dating. Whether we're straight, bisexual or gay, male or female, we all take rejection personally and make up stories in our heads about what's wrong with us.

I am going to challenge some of your beliefs because they are self-destructive and fuel a self-fulfilling prophecy. You don't know that you'll never find someone. At only 18, you've hardly had a chance to get out and have dating experiences. Not to minimise your problems because of your age, but by age 18 – even today, when people come out so much younger – most gay male teens haven't kissed another boy or had a relationship.

Your other belief that 'all of my straight friends have someone' is highly unlikely.

I'm sure lots of them don't. I was single all throughout my 20s, and whenever I saw a married guy wearing a wedding ring I would become upset. He had someone, and I was single, and that proved there was something wrong with me. In truth, it proved nothing – just like your straight friends having someone proves nothing.

Do you know how people gain confidence to date and learn to meet and interact with other guys? By getting out there and doing it! The only way to 'practise' dating involves putting yourself out there and being vulnerable to rejection, embarrassment and heartbreak. But with that comes new people with varied interests who teach you things about yourself you never knew. Also, you'll accumulate a 'bank account' of good times and stories of bad dates and the funny, outrageous things guys do.

You don't know how to prepare for your first sexual encounter? That's normal, too. Straight males and females also need to learn sexual confidence – by practising. Movies and books make it all seem so easy, but the truth is that anyone's first experience – and often the next few – are clumsy, awkward and unsuccessful. Many of us men, feeling pressure to do everything right, suffer performance anxiety, which contributes to the difficulty of maintaining an erection or causes premature ejaculation.

Books like *The Joy Of Gay Sex* by Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano and *Anal Pleasure And Health: A Guide for Men, Women and Couples* by Jack Morin can help you prepare for your sexual experiences to some degree. I do recommend you go at your own sexual pace and not rush into anything. Difficult as it sounds, I always recommend that people date at least three times before having sexual contact. You can kiss, hug and cuddle, but anything else changes the relationship and doesn't offer emotional attachment, as do waiting and anticipating what will be.

Join a gay group

We all find it hard to deal with acts of homophobia. I find the kind of gay men who have the hardest time with homophobia are those who avoid conflict and try to keep the peace. When you get to university, the first important thing to do is find the gay group on campus. That way you'll have allies you can turn to when you do encounter homophobes, which we all do, constantly. You can even role-play with them how to deal with someone who tries to demean you, because you'll need the skills to deal with that.

Peer pressure makes us all feel that we should be in a relationship – and if not, there's something wrong with us. We're pushed into forcing emotions prematurely rather than letting a relationship develop organically. There is nothing wrong with you!

When you wrote that you don't know how long you can keep on living without having someone like you for who you are, the therapist in me wonders about what messages you received while growing up. Usually, clients who say things like that come from families who didn't make them feel loved for who they were. Without knowing you or your family, I would ask that you consider whether those feelings derive from memories of how you felt as a child.

The messages we receive growing up gay also makes us feel damaged and unlovable, so I don't want to minimise the negative

effects of these messages. We are taught that no one would love us if they really knew who we were – gay. This negative belief enters our relationships unconsciously as a truth. But it is false.

Our relationships repeat the patterns, echo the beliefs and buy into the messages we learned in childhood. Positive messages, unless unrealistically flattering, don't usually interrupt our lives. But the negative ones do, even if we don't accept them consciously. That's why you need to examine them and make sure you're not projecting them on to your potential boyfriends.

Here are some things to remember:

1. If someone isn't into you, that's not about you – it reflects their tastes and their preferences. It's too easy to tell yourself why someone's not interested or who rejected you, but those are just fabricated stories in your head. The truth is that consciously and unconsciously everyone has a 'template' in mind of what he's looking for. A stranger either fits that image or not. If not, then it is nothing personal. You're simply not his type: physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and even sexually. (Yes, many inexperienced guys want inexperienced guys, too!)

2. If you feel bothered by anything about yourself – in your case, your weight – then do something about it, even if it is a small step. Start some light exercise, or change the way you eat. It doesn't have to be a huge change but something towards feeling better about yourself. Identify things about your body you think are attractive and consider enjoying and embracing them.

3. Get a support group of close friends to help challenge your negative beliefs about yourself. This way, when you experience rejection or start thinking negatively about yourself, they can remind you who you really are.

4. If you want to experiment with anal sex, buy some lube and a dildo and explore what it feels like around your anus and inside. You'll gain some knowledge about yourself – what works for you.

5. Avoid 'catastrophising' everything. When things don't go our way, we tell ourselves, 'It will always be like this and will only get worse.' Then we start detailing exactly how much worse. Though this feels like logical planning ahead, it's usually a waste of time. Whenever you catch yourself doing this, remind yourself that you can never know what's going to happen. Meeting another person can change your life overnight. Be open to possibilities – and remember, there are plenty of them out there.

6. Nobody escapes childhood – especially growing up gay – without receiving negative messages that cause us problems. Go to therapy, ideally with a group of gay men, where you can work through any childhood experiences and beliefs that stand in your way of meeting the right guy.

I wish you well. You are young with many years ahead. Yes, Mr Right is out there, and inside you as well. You just need to keep looking.

Email us with your relationship or sexual problem to advice@attitude.co.uk

*Dr Joe Kort is a licensed clinical social worker and board-certified sexologist. He is best known for being the author of *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives*. joekort.com*