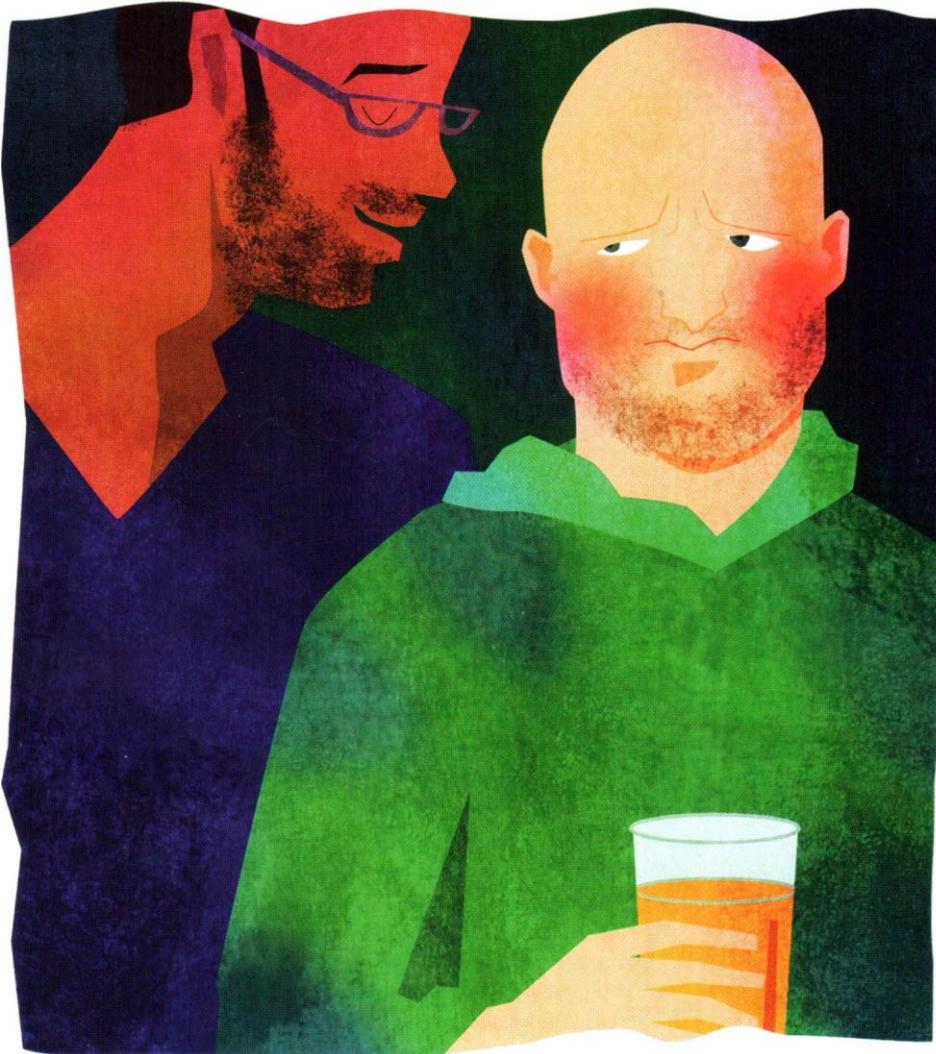


This month: JOE ON SOBER SEX

'I can't have sex without getting drunk'



Dear Joe

I've always had an active social life, and having been single for a couple of years, I frequently take a guy home after I've been out. However, I'm so used to meeting guys when I'm drunk I find that I can't get in the mood these days unless I've had a few drinks. I've recently started seeing someone who I really like, but the thought of having sex with him without a drink makes me uncomfortable. How can I ease myself back into sober sex'?

CIARAN, DONCASTER

Dear Ciaran

My first question is why did you need to be drunk to meet guys? Many people with social anxiety find it easier to interact with others with the help of alcohol. It is for them a social and sexual lubricant. An additional reason gay men drink is often because of internalised homophobia; by that, I mean shame and guilt about being sexual with other men. Alcohol allows people to reduce their inhibitions

and remove their shame, but only for a short period of time. Sadly, inhibitions return. Alcohol merely postpones a person's inevitable need to look more deeply into their psyche to understand the inhibitions.

It is good that you are thinking about 'easing yourself back into sober sex'. If you've been drinking regularly and haven't been able to get into the mood unless you've had a few drinks, then at first sober

Illustration: DERMOT FLYNN

sex is most likely going to seem boring or awkward. You may even experience sexual dysfunctions, such as not being able to get or maintain an erection or not being able to ejaculate. You will need time to get used to it.

The following questions will help you understand why you drank so much and what is making you uncomfortable about having sober sex with this new guy. What can happen, when a person is having newly sober sex, is that he or she will experience all the issues explored in these questions at the same time. You need to be prepared to experience these reactions and be patient with yourself while you get past them.

Are you trying to suppress your own sexuality?

Being sexually free is not easy. As gay men, we learn from young childhood to shut down our sexual desires. Awakening them and accepting them is to go against a lifetime of being told that what we want, and who we are, is wrong.

Do you negatively judge your own sexual fantasies and desires and thus suppress them?

Most people are embarrassed and ashamed of their sexual fantasies. Even though gay men are known for being transparent about what they like sexually, once a man meets someone he wants to date and fall in love with, he often finds it difficult to be open about his sexual desires.

We each have our own individual erotic thumbprint. We don't 'make it up'. It is a core part of who we are. You don't have to be ashamed of what turns you on. You need to find the courage to talk openly about your sexual fantasies with this guy and see how adventurous he is willing to be with you, and you with him.

Do you have negative body-image issues?

Often, judgments about one's body get in the way of sexual pleasure and freedom. In the gay male community, looking great and having a great physique are (over-) emphasised and put extra pressure on relationships. It's as if you can't just be a good sex partner, you have to look good, too.

Are you concerned about the size of your penis?

A typical man worries about his penis size and whether or not a partner will accept it. Perhaps this is something you didn't worry about while intoxicated, but it will be on your mind during sober sex.

Are the messages you received in your childhood (and later) about being gay interfering with your ability to have healthy, sober gay sex?

A gay man might have been raised in a religious home where homosexuality was condemned as a sin. Then, the resulting messages in his head can completely get in the way of his feeling joy and passion in gay sex. Some men were raised in homes where gender roles and gender expression were extremely traditional. When one of these men has gay sex, he might feel feminine and less of a man.

If you answered 'yes' to some of the above questions, you need to

settle with yourself the issues they raised. Otherwise, you cannot have sex in a healthy way.

To have sober sex demands that you not be overly focused on erections and ejaculation. If you put pressure on your penis to perform under conditions with which it is not familiar and doesn't feel safe, it will likely hide and not show up for the performance!

I recommend you tell this new guy you are dating that you really like him and don't want him to be a 'hook-up' or a short-term dating experience. Tell him the truth. You have been single for a while. You've got used to quick sex, often mixed with alcohol. With him, you want to go slow. That will make him feel special and important, which is the truth about how you feel toward him.

Being 'in the moment' and having meaningful and relational sex is not easy for men - especially gay men. Women often teach straight men how to have more relational sex, and this is absent in our culture. When something doesn't come naturally, it makes sense that chemical use gets involved. One reason gay men find quick recreational sex - cruising and hook-ups - comfortable is that it doesn't require much social skill. Anyway, it's intoxicating, in and of itself, without even needing the help of chemicals. While quick

recreational sex is fun and has its place, so does slow and connecting relational sex.

Going slow sexually is hard to do in the gay male community, where often sex is fast and furious. Do you have the courage to tell this guy you want to start out differently?

I also recommend you stop sex altogether with anyone but your new boyfriend. Refrain from looking at pornography. You might even consider not masturbating and saving yourself just for the times you are sexual with him. Harnessing your sexual energy in this

way might give you more energy, interest and desire to be sexual with him. Engaging in the use of pornography, masturbation and dating others can be a substitute for alcohol in that they are distracting and allow for instant gratification. These will not help you establish healthy sexual desire and functioning with this new guy.

I am not saying that there is anything wrong in general with dating more than one person, looking at porn and masturbating. However, it would make sense for you to refrain because you are teaching yourself how to have sober sex.

Making conscious love takes practice. You need to create safety, and this comes only with good communication with your partner. Expect that in the beginning you're going to be uncomfortable. Anticipate that sometimes things will be great, and other times not. He will understand that if you struggle sexually, it isn't because of him. It's because of you, and you are working on making it right. Keep sharing what you're thinking, and let him know he is important to you and that you feel something special with him. He will feel flattered, you will keep his interest, and both of you will be creating the safety you need to make sober sex the best sex possible for the two of you.

To have sober sex demands that you not be overly focused on erections and ejaculation

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