

Understanding Barriers to Heterosexual Attraction and Romantic Interest

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According to a secular society, there are those individuals who are constitutionally incapable of heterosexual attraction and sexual interest. This theory is sometimes presented in a more nuanced way, claiming that there are those individuals who can indeed feel heterosexual attraction and sexual interest, but it pales in comparison to their more natural-feeling, consistent and potent same-sex attractions. Both versions of this argument lie at the foundation of the gay movement, which argues that some individuals simply can't participate in traditional heterosexual marriage and that there is nothing they can do about it because they were "born this way".

My 15 years of clinical experience working mainly in the religious Jewish community, tells me that this popular narrative is deficient because it ignores a whole range of individual experiences that are not quite as rigid and unresolvable as "being inherently gay". Many people, therefore, are being misled to prematurely give up hope on their own - or their loved one's - heterosexual potential before they even have a chance to accurately identify the patterns they experience, thus leading them unnecessarily away from their religious faith, family and community.

In this article, I will attempt to clearly lay out the specific types of heterosexual attraction barriers that I have directly seen in my private practice, specifically among young adults who are considering heterosexual dating and relationships. (Issues of attraction and sexual interest in long-term partnerships may have their own separate dynamics worth considering in a separate paper.) In my view, each of these barriers can offer something much more individualized and empowering than "I'm just gay." In fact, as I will show, most can be easily addressed simply through the provision of accurate information about sexual desire and intimate relationships, no in-depth psychotherapy needed.

I believe that these heterosexual attraction barriers are actually quite common in the population at large, including among those who are not particularly attracted to the same-sex. In this article, however, I specifically address these barriers in the context of same-sex attraction patterns because modern society strangely teaches people to bulk together both sets of "gender data" into one single category called "gay", when they are more likely to be mutually exclusive as I will explain for each category.

Here are the most common factors seen in my private practice, listed in order of the simplest to the most complex.

Lack of Exposure and Experience:

For men and women complaining that they are “just not attracted to the opposite sex”, the first question is always: have you actually had any meaningful experiences connecting and interacting with the opposite sex beyond your siblings or cousins? Surprisingly, the answer can sometimes be “No”, especially if they come from a more gender-segregated school and community. And even if they have more inter-gender interactions, these may be very superficial and sometimes even negative, depending on their specific circumstances. Hence, the data that they are drawing conclusions is from a “research pool” of non-meaningful interactions, which aren’t supposed to ignite strong romantic and sexual feelings.

A young 30 something woman who consulted with me about her worries told me that she rarely interacted with the opposite sex beyond the strangers in her immediate surroundings and the occasional “one and done” date with men, which were often boring, stilted and “interview like”. But she certainly noticed beautiful women and often wished she could be like them. Sometimes she felt strong admiration and a desire to be around them and interact with them. The combination of having these good feelings with women, and the boring feelings with men, made her worry, unnecessarily, that she was “inherently gay”. The therapy focused on giving her the confidence that she was normal and would of course be able to develop romantic and sexual feelings with the right man. We focused on helping her identify and find the types of people she felt safest and most natural with.

Meeting the Wrong Types:

It is surprising to me just how many people complain about negative dating attitudes, believing that there is something inherently wrong with them - that either they are gay, asexual or that they will just never be able to make a strong connection. An analysis of their history often reveals that they are simply meeting the wrong types. Occasionally, this pattern is caused or exacerbated by family, friends and/or matchmakers who, in their desperation to help, end up invalidating this person’s feelings of dissatisfaction on dates, thereby reinforcing the belief that there is something wrong with them.

Similarly, many people also get caught in the dating “résumé trap”, where they seek out the best person with the best family, the best schools, the best grades and the best careers, as the primary way to gauge whether they are a match, as if it is perfection itself, which creates a good match. Helping young adults to consider the *specific* kinds of people with whom they would actually feel comfortable with and excited to talk to, can therefore go a long way in helping them to feel more hopeful and focused in their heterosexual dating. Some specific questions that can be asked in this regard can include:

“Who are the kinds of people that you feel a spark with an instant connection, a feeling that these people know you better, or that are just fun to be with them? What kind of personality do

they have? Are they louder, quieter, shy, bubbly, spontaneous or orderly? What careers or hobbies do they tend to be in? What's the look that you like, irrespective of what your peers consider to be beautiful? Pick and seek out just three of the most important qualities that you are seeking. Now list three negative qualities that you can actually live with and tolerate."

These and other types of questions can be used to give people a clearer sense of what to look for, and what to care less about in a new connection.

Another related cause of lack of heterosexual attraction can simply be related to place, such as dating in a Starbucks or boring hotel lobby where there is no stimulation or in loud bars or concerts where they can barely hear each other talk. Some people hate formal dating, but oddly expect to meet someone at events with swarms of people, where the very act of introducing oneself to a stranger is so complicated and where making a real connection is nearly impossible.

Lack of Confidence and Self-worth:

When people suffer with a chronic lack of self-worth and confidence, it can be very hard to make a connection with another person, especially with the opposite sex, where the stakes can be higher in terms of feeling judged and not good enough. People who struggle with self-worth often approach dating, for example, by hyper-focusing on their own every word, sentence and gesture, worrying that they are sounding silly, dumb or not "cool", that their hair doesn't look quite right, their breath is foul and the way they walk is clumsy. Several young men who I worked even experienced full-blown panic attacks both before and during their actual dates, something that is actually not that uncommon.

In other words, they are too focused inward to even notice the other person and to be present with them. This also makes it hard to have a normal conversation and to express interest and care. People like this have difficulty representing themselves accurately. So how could they possibly feel any connection, excitement or attraction to the other person. Essentially "there is no one home" to make such a connection.

A young man in his 20s who just started dating girls came to see me, complaining that he would never be able to connect with the opposite sex and get married because of his record so far. He never felt good on and after dates and lacked interest in even getting to know them. A quick social history revealed that he walked around constantly criticizing and questioning himself. Dates were just a heightened version of this. He was so in his head worrying about "his performance", that he could barely notice the person he was even talking to. He even admitted that these dates were designed more "to get through the painful experience", rather than making an authentic connection. Therapy then focused on improving his overall self-esteem and self-worth in addition to giving him some practical tools for socializing and dating.

Acute Symptoms of Anxiety, Depression, Dissociation, Personality Disorders

Serious psychological dysfunction can make it very difficult to create an authentic connection with another person, let alone a stranger whom one never met before on a date or in a more spontaneous situation. In addition to being in one's own head with negative feelings, negative thoughts or experiences of being tuned out, a person's rational thinking and "connection parts" tend to not be very "on" when they are in the grips of such symptoms.

Personality disorders pose a particular challenge to relationship formation. These issues are basically defined by chronic relationship disturbance, making authentic connection a difficult challenge. Attraction may be based more on the fulfillment of their selfish-needs as in: "What can this person do for me?" (as opposed to the actual emotional connection with the other person). If these selfish needs are not met there will be no romantic interest or attraction.

Outsized Arousal Expectations:

In my clinical experience, when young people complain about a lack of heterosexual "attraction", further questioning often reveals that what they are actually intending to say is, "I don't feel an immediate sense of excitement and arousal upon seeing or interacting with an attractive member of the opposite sex".

Through these and other clinical interactions, it has become clear to me that young people are being taught by the broader culture to conflate the experiences of "feeling attracted to a real" and "immediate lust for attractive strangers", which of course mean very different things. Being specific about what each person observes in him or herself is, therefore, critically important to know exactly what they are referring to and how to help them.

In my efforts to understand these clients' experiences, for example, I may ask them some detailed questions such as: "Do you notice physical attractiveness in some members of the opposite sex?", a question to which they always answer, "Yes". Have you ever had crushes or romantic interests in the opposite sex, whether as a child, teen or adult, whether with a real person in your life or someone in the media?" Here too, the answer is often "yes".

Going to the next level of feeling, I might ask: "Did you ever have an experience with a non-immediate-family member of the opposite sex where you felt a certain chemistry, bonding or similarity to that person, making you want to spend more time with them or talk more or even feel a certain admiration, or longing to touch them or be physically close?" Here, the answers tend to be more mixed, based on their upbringing and life circumstances. But even if they never experienced this before, many are able to *imagine* feeling this way if circumstances allowed for it. A simple exercise like this can go a long way in helping to improve people's confidence in heterosexual relationships.

Narrowing down their experience in such a way can help them to identify the real complaint, which very often, is an issue of *outsized arousal expectations*. Meaning, they *expect* to feel immediate excitement and high arousal while seeing or interacting with the opposite sex, and they are not, which leads to a sense of confusion, frustration and hopelessness.

When this emerges as the central issue, I teach people how attraction and desire tends to work in new relationships, something that they may have never considered or learned before. First, I will tell them that when meeting a person of the opposite sex in a non-erotic context—where there is no intention to have some kind of sexual encounter—there would be no reason to feel immediate excitement, physical desire and arousal. Our bodies only prepare themselves in that way, when there is a potential opportunity for sexual contact.

I teach clients that when we interact with new members of the opposite sex, if we generally like their appearance and personality, and also feel some kind of initial “chemistry bond” where interactions are fun and easy, it is simply human-nature to feel more emotionally and physically drawn to that person as we spend more time, appreciate their qualities, share enjoyable experiences, and get comfortable enough to share parts of ourselves that we don’t just share with anyone. In fact, I believe that God created all human beings with this inherent potential.

This experience of bonding then creates the *potential* for romantic interest, which can then evolve into sexual interest, depending on a variety of factors. This intensifying of romantic and sexual interest is not supposed to be immediate, but is rather, a gradual step by step process that unfolds when the two parties have the necessary “intimacy” skills, when they are truly well-matched and when they both want to develop the relationship.

The interesting question is, why do many people have such outsized arousal expectations? There are two possible answers based on my clinical experience:

The first is simple: they are uninformed and inexperienced with opposite sex interactions due to their upbringing in a more segregated community causing them to get their “education” solely from the media’s sexualization of the opposite sex. When getting to the point of real interactions with real people, they automatically expect that they are supposed to be turned on right away, causing confusion and frustration when this doesn’t happen.

A second explanation can be understood more in the context of same-sex attractions. For example, in my own clinical practice, among 80 men who presented with an early history of potent and ongoing same-sex interests, all shared the exact same profile: that of feeling immediate, powerful and involuntary arousal responses to very specific types of “stimuli” involving the same-sex.

For example, they might consistently get aroused by various male body parts, physiques, types of hairstyles and grooming, a specific age-group or race, certain clothes or even idiosyncratic interactions and sexual positions. Sometimes this arousal would get generalized later on to a wider range of “stimuli” and sometimes it stayed specific to just that original “object”, all depending on their individual circumstances.

Seeing this clinical picture repeatedly led me to diagnose these reactions more accurately with a term that the psychological literature calls an “arousal template” or what I like to call a “lust-trigger”. Whether involving the same-sex, opposite sex or even inanimate object, lust-triggers all are essentially the same psychological phenomena and may be quite common in the population. Even when they are completely different “objects”, lust-triggers all share the same common denominators of: Childhood based, Recurring, Immediate, Specific and Powerful arousal reactions – a pattern that can be remembered easily with the acronym CRISP.

Three hallmarks of all lust-triggers can immediately clarify why some people implicitly expect to feel prominent arousal reactions in real relationships, whether with new dates or long-term partners:

(a) Lust-triggers activate an abnormally exaggerated level of romantic and sexual interest, very much unlike normal desires in intimate relationships, thereby creating the potential for: (i) preoccupation and addiction since engaging with these stimuli can give a person a quick and predictable high and (ii) making unfair comparisons between these potent reactions vs. their less predictable and immediate arousal in real relationships. When they do make comparisons between these two types of sexual activations, they are implicitly comparing the “quantity of arousal” instead of their inherently different qualities.

(b) this potent lust-trigger arousal tends to be felt more toward *strangers* –whether they present in one’s real life, fantasy-life or on the internet—than to real people with whom they are actually connected to, no matter how objectively attractive they are. This explains why pornography and casual sex are such an allure for those who have lust-triggers of any kind, since it is now so easy to find one’s specific arousal type online and through smartphone apps.

(c) The potent arousal that these triggers activate tends to diminish once the sexual partner is seen as a whole person with imperfections and needs of their own, which then makes it difficult for them to be treated merely as a fantasy fulfillment “object”. Seeking out intimate relationships with one’s preferred lust-trigger is therefore risky, because if there isn’t a more lasting and meaningful connection, they will soon get bored and want to get their “arousal hit” elsewhere. In fact, in my experience, after a sexual encounter with a lust trigger partner, people typically report feeling empty, sad and ashamed.

With an intimate relationship, on the other hand, though the arousal may not be as immediate and charged, it will intensify more gradually through a sequence of predictable “step by step” gestures and actions. The sexual encounter also tends to be more fulfilling, fun and connecting, even if the sexual encounter itself is not as “lusty” or electric.

This provides a second rational explanation for outsized arousal expectations. In this model, the abnormal phenomena is not with real people of the opposite sex, but rather with their same-sex (or any type of) lust-trigger, which provides an exaggerated, immediate but very unnatural “hit” of arousal.

When outsized arousal expectations are the core issue, it is critically important to teach people everything about the differences between these two types of sexual energies in order to help them set realistic expectations. Sadly, without access to this information people could spend their lifetime pursuing the “perfect lust trigger” in their real intimate relationships and will inevitably end up feeling empty and disappointed.

Difficulty With Intimacy, Vulnerability and Trust:

An obvious obstacle to feeling connection with the opposite sex is when people are just staying on a superficial level. For different reasons, the “entry questions” like “What do you do? How many siblings do you have? Where have you traveled? Etc.” don’t lead to anything more personal, which taps into their unique thoughts, feelings, values and perspectives. Many young people who I’ve met have described this obstacle, complaining that dating feels like an interview and a chore. This makes sense: even if their date is the best-looking person they’ve ever seen and has only the best qualities, if they are just staying on this surface level they are unlikely to feel any sense of greater interest, connection or excitement.

This surface level dating can be caused by multiple factors. Sometimes it just comes down to a couple’s chemistry and their natural ways of relating and speaking. Sometimes it is caused by other things like if a person believes that they have to put on a show for their dates in order to impress them, which can often have the opposite effect. Sometimes this pattern comes from people who are insecure or not self-aware, or just trying to avoid silence. I often teach clients that it is in the act of sharing one’s vulnerability (expressed at the right time and in the right way) where intimate feelings get sparked.

Of course, sometimes people come into dating with more serious “attachment wounds”. If they have been harmed by an opposite-parent family member – emotionally, physically or sexually - or if they suffered the loss of a parent early in life, for example, these tend to complicate one’s abilities to trust others and be open to connection in a healthy way. Some people may also have

traumatic experiences in their adult dating life, which can color their desire to try with another person and “drop their guard” in subsequent relationships.

For all of these possibilities, it can be very useful to teach people that relationship attraction is not just based on looks or first impressions, but is more often, sparked by a sense that the other person is letting down their guard and sharing something personal that they would not just share with anyone. This automatically causes us to bring down our own guard, which can then lead us to trust them and share our own vulnerability in turn. This “baring of our souls” tends to automatically create an attraction spark even if the partner does not at first seem attractive. If people then continue to sustain and deepen this connection over time, this initial spark of attraction can quickly grow into stronger feelings of longing, admiration and sexual desire.

Coaching people to work through any of these specific obstacles to intimacy can do wonders to help them feel more excited, connected and hopeful that they too can experience feelings of romantic and sexual attraction with the right person.

Identity as a Barrier:

Probably the most subtle issue here, but one that I see repeatedly in my practice, is when a person cannot connect to another member of the opposite sex because *they are already boxed into a sexual identity lane, which acts almost like a physical barrier*, stopping them from making a connection no matter how great the other person is or how well matched they are.

To use an example from my own life, when I myself started dating, I rigidly sought out women who I deemed to be “intellectual” because this was the identity label that I gave myself. Using this criterion to find a marriage match, however, made it difficult to trust my feelings when I was connecting with a person who I deemed “non-intellectual” causing me to dismiss them as possibilities on this basis alone. I also become unhealthily drawn to the wrong people, simply because I judged them to be “intellectual”.

Similarly, this dynamic seems common among people who are convinced that they are “inherently gay”, whether or not they are public about this identity. When they complain that they “just can’t be attracted to the opposite sex no matter what they do” it can often be because of this identity-lane issue, making even the most compatible person of the opposite sex feel as if they lived on a distant planet. Their attempts to date and feel attraction to women were thus doomed to failure from the get-go. Sometimes they were even used as a kind of twisted confirmation bias to prove the accuracy of the identity label that they had adopted long-ago, even if they claimed to be pained by this label.

Hence, the only way to help such a person be open to heterosexual relationships would be to let them know that they are not actually “inherently gay” – that they mistakenly took on this identity

because these were the only words that they had access to at the time - and to give them a better term and theory to explain their sexual or personality patterns. Sometimes people use “gay” to feel a sense of belonging and social connection, when they have difficulty finding this within their own peer group and community. Helping them to find other ways of feeling belonging, recognized and valued, can also go a long way in helping them to loosen their attachment to the gay identity.

This example shows us just how dangerous the wrong identity constructs can be and just how much identity labels can create traps for people than act almost like a physical barrier.

Dating and Relationship Fears:

In my work with religious men with histories same-sex attraction, I often hear about the same three worries related to heterosexual dating and marriage, which can either prevent them from starting to date women in the first place or which are always “hovering nearby” whilst they are dating and seeking-out relationships. These concerns might also be common among single women with same-sex attractions looking to date men.

In my opinion, each of these three worries are based mostly on myth, which reminds us of just how powerful and pervasive sexual misinformation can be, but which also lets us know just how easily these fears can be extinguished simply with the provision of accurate information.

One common fear is what I call a “desire-comparison fear”, where the person believes that are inherently unfit for heterosexual marriage because they are not as obsessed with or sexually turned on by women. Several facts can be used to educate men and relieve these worries. This includes:

- Many healthy men are not just primed for sex with attractive women at a moment’s notice and are certainly not obsessed with sex. Perhaps more men are inclined this way now, in this particular generation more than in any other, because of our sex-drenched culture. But lack of such knee-jerk reactions is not a sign of being abnormal or inherently different.
- When kids don’t have other healthy ways to feel good about themselves, and when they start to get attention from girls, they can use this attention as a way of keeping busy and feeling a sense of recognition and specialness. If they do not ever develop a more internal sense of self-worth, they can continue to feel emotionally dependent on female attention.
- Watching porn can and should feel wrong and many healthy men have a neutral to negative response to watching it, particularly if they have no psychological need for it and if they did not grow up exposed to less extreme erotic images.

- If one's lust-trigger has involved the same exact same-sex situation from a young age (or any specific situation), the person will not typically get as quickly and powerfully aroused by other types of images or fantasies no matter how "objectively hot" it is. But this has no bearing on the person's abilities to feel interested and aroused with someone who they like and are connected to.
- Men talking about girls can also be a social bonding ritual and is not necessarily an indication of their inherent and constant obsession with women.

In addition to these facts, I often ask these clients to think about times in their life where they felt some kind of crush or spark with a female, either as a child or adult. Inevitably, they are always able to bring at least one example. These examples, I tell them, can be seen as objective proof that they are normal and can easily develop attractions to the opposite sex when there is some kind of spark, chemistry or connection.

Furthermore, I often teach people that in most cultures, children are socialized by families, schools and communities from a very young age to channel their romantic and sexual energy toward the opposite-sex and away from the same-sex. Even if a person has a history of strong desire for the same-gender, unless they were reared in a highly unusual family or society, they do not easily "escape" this basic level of relationship conditioning.

A second common concern relates more to "performance anxiety" and their physiological responses during sex, such as: "What if my body doesn't have an arousal reaction when I'm in the bedroom with my girlfriend or spouse - what if I can't perform?" Here again, accurate information can help. I might say things like:

- If you are comfortable with your partner, and there is connection and closeness, God gave you the amazing ability to have everything work without you having to even try.
- In real relationships, feelings of desire are usually created by some kind of action. They don't just spontaneously strike. When a person, for example, shares something private and vulnerable about themselves with a new or long-term partner, this can quickly ignite a certain desire for affection and physical closeness which can then escalate if the partners choose. When couples have fun and are relaxed together, this too can activate a desire to be flirtatious and physically close. And in the right context, "above the belt" physical touch can easily create a desire for more. Sexual energy then gets increasingly activated as the physical engagement intensifies.
- Often there is a learning curve in our first physical experiences. If people are completely inexperienced with opposite sex physical touch - whether or not they have same-sex experiences - they will have often harbor similar worries about their abilities to perform.

This explains why many people reflect back on their first sexual experiences as being challenging and awkward, very unlike Hollywood movies.

The third most common worry I call the “marriage destruction worry,” and it tends to sound something like this: “If I date and marry a woman, I might cheat on them, they might find out about me, or I could destroy my spouse and family if I get divorced. I could ruin people’s lives!”

In this case, I like to first ask how the person came up with this catastrophizing worry. What articles, horror stories or social media statements were they exposed to? The exaggerated fears surrounding this worry often tell me that it is not coming from just their imagination alone, but from some specific outside sources in the media, often influenced by gay propaganda. Knowing this can be very clarifying and relieving for them.

In response to this worry I might first reassure them that they are good people, who are going to be great husbands and fathers (assuming that I believe this to be true). I might contextualize their fears by reminding them that any marriage is an inherent risk and that no-one ever knows how things will turn out. But the two most important things that help to maintain satisfying marriages are: (a) making smart choices about who to marry and (b) developing and implementing good relationship problem-solving and communication skills so that frustrations are used to bring people closer to each other and are not left to fester where they can cause even greater damage.

Strategizing about whether or how a person would want to tell their potential girlfriend or spouse about their same-sex history - and how to frame it in an accurate way so that the partner does not jump to the wrong conclusion that they are “inherently gay” - could be another path I take in helping clients take more control of this fear. Telling a partner or spouse about a person’s full sexual history is a complicated matter and I tend to follow my client’s lead depending on what they prefer. A person with a history of same-sex attraction is not any different than any other person with a different type of lust-trigger who would not necessarily tell their spouse about the specific people and situations that activate an immediate and involuntary arousal response. Last, I might reassure clients about the many people who I’ve worked with who had the same fears as them but who are now happily married.

Conclusion

Secular culture and the gay movement specifically is teaching our children to mistakenly conflate sexual energy that is activated by our “lust for strangers” and sexual energy that is activated in an intimate relationship. It is also causing children to mistakenly bundle together their feelings toward men and women as “opposite sides of the same coin” or theoretical construct called “gay” or “straight”, when these sets of feelings are mutually exclusive. Both of

these unchallenged trends are leading religious people to unnecessarily doubt their heterosexual relationship potential and to identify themselves as gay.

As I've done my best to show, there are often much more common-sense and resolvable way to explain heterosexual relationship barriers, many of which can be addressed simply through the provision of accurate scientific information about desire and intimate relationships.