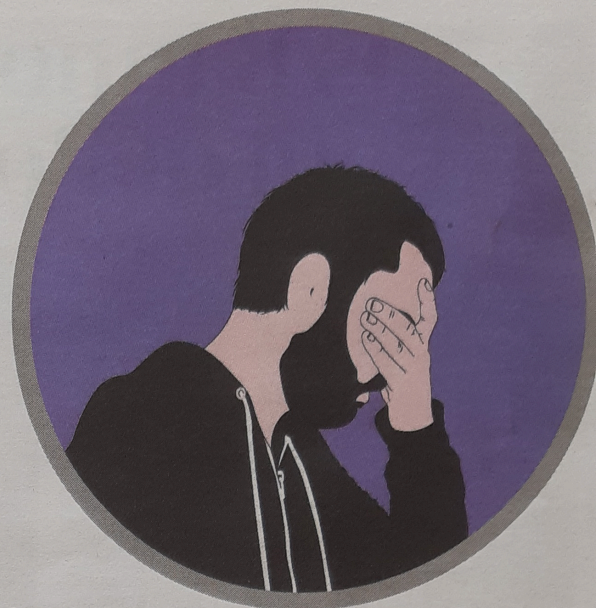


Design For Life

I'm 23 and haven't had sex yet. Is there something wrong with me?

This week, clinical hypnotherapist **Fiona Brennan** advises a reader who has yet to lose their virginity



Dear Expert,

I'm 23 years old, male, a college student - and I have never had sex. I'm not good with women, which you probably don't need to be told considering my opening line. I have no game whatsoever, I freeze a lot and even though I'm not ugly (I'm regular-looking), nobody ever chats me up. I'm starting to think I am one of those people who others regard as asexual, even though that's not true. I don't know how to get from the sidelines to the main arena. None of my friends knows that I'm a virgin, although I think one or two of them suspect. How can I fix this before I get even older?

Dear Reader,

Writing this letter is a courageous act, and two positives are likely to come from it. The first is that you will be liberated from the idea that there is something wrong with you. Secondly, all other people 23 or over who haven't had sex yet will benefit too.

I understand how pressing this concern is for you. However, being a virgin is nothing to be ashamed of. You are very young, even though you may feel old, and there are no laws or rules governing when you should have had sex.

Having said that, your body is full of hormones that need to be released. This can be done through masturbation. It is better not to rush into a sexual relationship just because you want to get it over and done with. Too many people do this, and their first time brings up more negative emotions than positive ones. Being a slightly more mature virgin is an opportunity, not a hindrance.

You can create truly intimate connections that will lead to incredible sex when the time comes. Fulfilling sex is not about notching up a number on your bedpost. It is an expression of respect at the very least, and ideally love.

Your first step is to let go of the idea that you should be having sex by now. Being at the mercy of conventional expectations creates pressure to conform, especially when you are young. Trying to fit into what society deems "normal" will do one thing only - make you miserable.

Consider for a moment how these assumptions can last a lifetime if you let them. You will also be expected to get married, buy a house, build a successful career, have children: the list goes on. There is nothing wrong with these milestones. They are wonderful. However, they are not the only path and they do not all happen on a mail-order basis.

Societal and peer pressure is real, but most of the pressure people experience comes from themselves. The idea that they are not good enough for failing to achieve an expected landmark can produce shame. Shame is a reflexive emotion, which means you feel it in relation to how you believe others see you - a fear of being judged. You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. If anything, I would suggest you hold your head up high as a person who is clearly sensitive and has a lot to offer.

Our job is to build your confidence when communicating with women. Removing pressure is the best way to do this. You say you "have no game". Believe me, this is a good thing. Girls usually see right through any corny pick-up lines and find them a turn-off. Women are looking for the same as you - to connect and feel acknowledged for who they are, not what they look like.

We live in an overly sexualised world. On social media and dating apps, people have become commodities to like or not like. This culture is emotionally toxic. I've seen many clients struggle with the consequences of too many dates going wrong because sex was the only thing on the menu.

Another important aspect of building confidence is to forget what your friends are doing.

Your sex life is none of their business. Likewise, what you suspect they think of you is none of your business. Once you become more at ease with your situation, this is all that matters.

You need to remove sex as a target to be achieved. Instead, focus on cultivating an authentic interest in women. Take the emphasis off yourself and your perceived shortcomings. Simply talk to women like you would with anyone else. First of all, create a friendship. If there

is a genuine attraction, allow the relationship to evolve organically.

Put yourself in situations where you can meet new people. Join groups that are not just about drinking, for example tag rugby or hillwalking. When you get talking to a girl, express an interest in who they are and notice the small things about them that others don't. Give them your most precious commodity - your attention. When you take action, your confidence will grow.

Dispel the belief that you are not good with women. This is a skill you are working on, beginning now. Don't be afraid of rejection, it is part of being human. You say you are "not ugly", but to my mind, there is no such thing as an ugly person. We are all beautiful - and all attractive to someone.

Remember that attraction comes from connection. It is time to step out from the sidelines, but that doesn't mean you have to be centre stage. You can talk to girls with quiet confidence and without any agenda. They say life is short and in many ways it is. But life is also full of different paths - there is no set one that we all have to follow.

You are exactly where you need to be. Wait and see. No pressure. ■

Got a problem or something you'd like advice on? Email anonymously by contacting us via www.businesspost.ie/ask-an-expert and we'll match your query with the best expert we can find on the subject. You can also drop an email in confidence to nadine@businesspost.ie



Fiona Brennan

Fiona Brennan is a clinical hypnotherapist with a private clinic in Blackrock, Co Dublin. A bestselling author, she regularly delivers talks and workshops on a range of areas from stress and anxiety to building confidence and public speaking. On April 4, she will launch Light Up Your World, an eight-week online hypnotherapy programme based on research in the areas of hypnosis, positive psychology, lifestyle medicine, neuroscience and mindfulness. She will also be running Light Up 2022 - The Positive Habit, a therapeutic retreat on the island of Crete in June. Full info can be found on thepositivehabit.com.

WHAT I'M CURRENTLY LOVING IN THE ARTS

I recently saw the film *Belfast*, and was blown away by how well Kenneth Branagh portrayed the city and its people. I spent a lot of my childhood there and it brought a lot of memories back. *Belfast* is a place of paradoxes where one can feel both joy and fear in every corner.