

THE INVISIBLE ORIENTATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO ASEXUALITY

JULIE SONDRRA DECKER



CARREL BOOKS

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The Basics

ASEXUALITY IS:

Asexual orientation currently estimated to describe 1 percent of the population. Asexuality is usually defined as the experience of not being sexually attracted to others. Less commonly, it is defined as not valuing sex or sexual attraction enough to pursue it.

WE'RE NOT:

Asexuality isn't a complex. It's not a sickness. It's not an automatic sign of trauma. It's not a behavior. It's not the result of a decision. It's not a chastity vow or an expression that we're "saving ourselves." We aren't by definition religious. We aren't calling ourselves asexual as a statement of purity or moral superiority.

We're not amoebas or plants. We aren't automatically gender confused, anti-gay, anti-straight, anti-any-sexual-orientation, anti-woman, anti-man, anti-any-gender, or anti-sex. We aren't automatically going through a phase, following a trend, or trying to rebel. We aren't defined by prudishness. We aren't calling ourselves asexual because we failed to find a suitable partner. We aren't necessarily afraid of intimacy. And we aren't asking for anyone to "fix" us.

WE DON'T:

Asexual people don't all look down on sex or people who have sex. We don't all avoid romantic or emotionally close relationships, and we aren't automatically socially inept. We aren't defined by atypical biology or nonfunctional genitals. We aren't defined by mental illness, autism, or disability. We don't try to recruit anyone.

We don't have a hole in our lives where sexual attraction "should" be. We can't be converted by trying sex. We aren't, by definition, lonely or empty.

We aren't, by definition, immature or incompetent. We aren't, as a group, uglier or prettier than anyone else. We don't tell people not to have sex in the name of our orientation, nor do we use the term *asexual* to imply perceiving ourselves to be "above" sex.

WE SOMETIMES:

Some want romance. Some don't. Some are willing to have sex. Some aren't. Some are virgins. Some aren't. Some masturbate, or have a libido, or want children. Some don't. Some feel isolated, afraid, confused, othered, erased, and invisible. We wish we didn't.

SO PLEASE:

If you're not asexual, listen to us. Trust us to describe our own feelings. Understand that happiness isn't defined by traditional sexual relationships. Don't assume we need therapy or treat us like we need to be cured or tell us we're broken. Our rarity forces many of us to go through life without the understanding and support of others like ourselves. We want to be understood outside the deliberately constructed communities in which we're talking to ourselves, and that's why we need you. We want to combat the negative messages that make us feel invisible. If we're introducing you to asexuality, that means we're inviting you to understand.

Meet us halfway.

Asexuality Is a Sexual Orientation

What does it mean to identify as asexual?

If someone says "I'm asexual," usually they're expressing that they aren't sexually attracted to other people.^[1]

ASEXUALITY: A sexual orientation characterized by sexual attraction to no one. Approximately 1 in 100 people is asexual.

In some cases, people who identify as asexual are expressing that, for them, sex isn't intrinsically worth pursuing for its own sake,

or that they aren't interested in sex, or that they don't want or don't enjoy sex, or that they don't want to make sex part of their relationships. But regardless

¹ "An asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction." (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2008)

of what definition someone uses, asexuality as a **sexual orientation** should be respected. Some asexual people prefer to see asexuality as a lack of sexual orientation, which is also a valid interpretation, but many prefer to say that their sexual orientation is, simply, attraction to no one.

Most people use the term *sexual orientation* as shorthand for “what kinds of people are sexy to me.” But when asexual people answer that question with “no one, thank you,” some non-asexual people resist processing that answer. Our society is used to hearing breakdowns: heterosexuality means experiencing cross-sex or cross-gender attraction, and everyone else is gay, bi, or pansexual. But when someone answers the “Who’s sexy?” question with a blank, the world often yells “Hey, that’s impossible!”^[2]

This interpretation constitutes an unnecessarily black-and-white understanding of attraction. Even within the more popular orientations, it’s not always simple. **For everyone, sexual orientation is more like a range, not a simple series of separate categories.** (Especially since gender isn’t as simple as “male or female/man or woman,” which complicates how we describe what genders we’re attracted to; some people are between, outside, or a mixture of the binary genders.^[3])

Describing attraction can get very complex, but for an asexual person, sexual attraction or inclination is toward “no one.” That’s not the same as not having developed a sexual orientation *yet*. Asexuality may look like a blank space waiting to be filled, but even if an asexual person never changes, their orientation is indistinguishable from “not yet” on the outside. It’s impossible to prove a negative.

So if asexuality looks like a big nothing, how is that different from not having a sexual orientation at all? Some say the difference is analogous to a situation that can occur on a multiple-choice test. If answer choice D allows the test-taker to say “none of the above,” that’s very different from simply not answering the question. It’s certainly going to be graded differently. Asexuality *is* an answer to the question, even if that answer is “none.” It’s not just a shrug. The word *none* can still fill in a blank.

2 “To concede that there are two forms of desire—cross-sex and same-sex desire—is to recognize the analytic possibility of at least four kinds of persons. These include: (1) those who harbor cross-sex but not same-sex desire; (2) those who harbor same-sex but not cross-sex desire; (3) those who harbor both forms of desire; and (4) those who harbor neither form of desire. Yet even those who acknowledge that orientation arrays itself on a continuum spanning the first three categories often ignore the fact that the continuum fails to represent the fourth.” (Yoshino, 2000)

3 “Our internal sense of gender relates to our feelings of being a man, a woman, some combination, or neither. Traditionally it was believed that if you felt masculine you would not feel feminine, and vice versa. But [. . .] some people feel differing degrees of masculinity and differing degrees of femininity. Some people do not feel particularly like a man or a woman, and some feel that they have qualities of both.” (Girshick, 2008)

"I've known for years that I'm not like other people when it comes to sex, but I always just thought I was simply not very good at being straight."

—TOM, ASEXUALITY ARCHIVE

Asexual people can say they *haven't* experienced sexual attraction, but yes, it's true they can't be sure it couldn't happen, logically speaking. However, they *can*

be about as sure as anyone else about who they are attracted to, even if it happens to be no one. After all, people who are only attracted to one sex or gender aren't generally interpreted as "not yet" bisexual, but asexual people are held to a different standard.

The past and the present are usually good predictors of the future. Most people identify their orientation based on past and present attractions, so it naturally follows that asexual people could do the same and still have their orientation respected.

When a person has no sexual attraction to others or doesn't seek out sex, some may view that person as an undeveloped heterosexual person, as though being straight is the default. **But sexual orientation is not determined by whether someone has sex or who they have it with. Orientation is not a behavior—not for asexual people and not for anyone.** People who are sexually attracted to cross-gender partners are still heterosexual even if they have not had sex with a cross-gender partner. No one suggests heterosexual teenagers should identify as asexual until such time as they become heterosexual through sex with a cross-gender partner. Abstaining from sex is not the same thing as asexuality; it is the experience of attraction, not the behavior, which defines a person's orientation.

With 1 in 100 people not experiencing sexual attraction and/or not feeling motivated by or interested in sex, that's a lot of people wandering around largely unacknowledged. The 1-percent figure came from a large survey of eighteen thousand people administered in Britain, with 1 in every 100 people surveyed agreeing with the statement "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone."

Some say this figure could be an overestimation because some technicalities could allow people who are not asexual to agree with that statement. And some say it is an underestimation, since some of the 99 percent may not know how to define sexual attraction and assume they have felt it even if they haven't. Some people misinterpret aesthetic appreciation, romantic attraction, or sexual arousal as being sexual attraction, only to realize later that they are asexual. Since this initial sample, researcher Anthony Bogaert has continued to study

asexual people, and says the other samples he's reviewed up until the present suggest this figure is still somewhat accurate.⁴

That said, asexual communities are growing as awareness spreads, with more and more people recognizing themselves in the definitions every day. Respecting their orientation is important regardless of the numbers.

Asexuality Is a Mature State

Just like some people can't see the difference between "an asexual orientation" and "no orientation," many also can't see why "not interested" isn't the same as "not interested *yet*." Asexuality describes a mature state, not a passing phase or a blank spot before "real" maturation. *Asexual* isn't something you call a child before they reach sexual maturity. Asexuality applies to maturing or mature people.

Asexual people are often told they will one day find "the one" and develop sexual feelings and the values society attaches to them. Many asexual folks have to hear this over and over

"I always laugh when I see these claims. I'm thirty-nine years old. It stopped being plausible a very long time ago that I could just be a 'late bloomer.' Yes, there are asexuals in their thirties. We exist. Our asexuality exists."

—LAURA, NOTES OF AN ASEXUAL MUSLIM

and over again, which thrusts a perpetual image of immaturity upon them. Asexuality is not a signal that a person is necessarily stunted emotionally or physically, and feeling sexual attraction or inclination is not the line everyone must cross to be treated like an adult. Maturity should not be measured by willingness or inclination to seek out or accept sexual experiences.

Maturity doesn't have a specific definition with check boxes to tick off. It's common for people—especially people who are in few or no marginalized groups—to define maturity, functionality, happiness, and normality against their own standards, which they present as universal. Because of this, it's common for people who consider sex and sexual attraction part of their adult lives to say, "If you don't have sexual interest, you don't have an adult life."

Asexuality challenges this . . . and it should. **Plenty of people who desire or engage in sex are immature. It doesn't make sense to insist that someone must be immature if they don't have or desire sex.** Maturity is subjective,

4 "There's been other more recent kinds of well-conducted studies and they've varied in terms of the type of question that they asked, along with the percentages that they give, and I think still about a reasonable ballpark figure, at least in my mind, after reviewing some of that work is that 1 percent is probably not a bad figure, a sort of working figure." Anthony Bogaert on the *Colin McEnroe Show* (Bogaert A., 2013)

and how/when it manifests is highly individual. Asexual people usually develop mature adult lives and relationships just fine. The huge amount of diversity in how adults find success and happiness should be acknowledged, even if some adults don't seek out certain types of partnerships or certain kinds of intimate experiences.

Asexuality Is a Description

A sexual orientation is not a decision. A person's sexual orientation *describes* how that person experiences attraction.

It does not describe any decision that person makes about expressing sexuality, and it does not represent a vow or an intention regarding sex. Much like a heterosexual person does not "decide" when to start being attracted to partners, an asexual person doesn't "decide" no one is sexually attractive or worth pursuing sexually. It just happens.

Asexual people are often asked why, how, or when they "decided" to be asexual—usually by a well-meaning person who believes orientation can be chosen. People who ask this question generally feel asexual people are shutting themselves off from something wonderful—something they themselves find satisfying and fulfilling—and they can't understand why an asexual person would "choose" to forgo such experiences.

Sometimes it helps if these people can understand that it wasn't a choice, and that for the asexual person, engaging in sex might not be the fulfilling experience that it is for them. Asexual people can—and often do—decide to have sex. After all, people of any orientation *can* have sex with partners to whom they are not attracted. **But asexuality is about attraction, not about willingness to engage in sexual behavior.**

If someone who has never been sexually attracted to anyone does develop a sexual attraction, that person may decide to start using a different label. Labels are chosen to describe people—to be able to discuss the issues, find similar people, and understand the experience. When circumstances change, labels can too. There's no danger in asexual people describing themselves as asexual because it is not a decision they're now sworn to adhere to.

If someone's hair color or weight or marital status changes, they change how they describe themselves. **The change in description does not mean they weren't an authentic example of what the previous label described when it fit them.** For some people, sexual orientation is fluid.⁵ So there's no

⁵ Lisa M. Diamond defines sexual fluidity as situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness. (Diamond, 2008)

need for anyone to fear that identifying as asexual might become a regrettable mistake. If it changes or turns out to be inaccurate, the asexual person can drop the label. It is not a chastity vow. Asexual communities have a happy history of supporting people who grow to understand that they are not asexual, just like they support those who continue to identify that way.

Asexuality Is a Healthy Status

“But sex is natural!”

Sex is commonly upheld as a normal and necessary part of all people’s lives—especially if it’s heterosexual, potentially procreative sex. The association between heterosexual sex and procreation is sometimes used as an excuse to invalidate other types of sex, though many forms of non-procreative sex are also dubbed “natural” by the majority. But then asexual people come along, describing a lack of sexual attraction or a lack of interest in sex, and all of a sudden the word *unnatural* rings out.

Peculiarly, those who invoke presumed avoidance of procreation as proof that asexual people are unnatural won’t often use that argument to invalidate heteronormative, sexually active, but non-procreative lifestyles. It’s very rare to hear “that’s unnatural!” applied to heterosexual cisgender^[6] people who use non-procreative sex positions, have sex using birth control, or have sex that involves a postmenopausal or otherwise infertile partner, even though procreation cannot result from these couplings. This is because labeling asexuality as unnatural is not actually about reproduction, even when detractors claim it is. It’s about intimate connection—and about the misconception that asexual people cannot experience a supposedly necessary connection with others unless they have sex. Asexual people often cannot be recognized as whole or healthy people if they lack sex, sexual attraction, or sexual inclination in their lives.

Most asexual people can have procreative sex if they wish to; they just happen to have inclinations that are less likely to lead to procreative sex. Even if they have had children or plan to, they will *still* hear their desires described as unnatural. If someone doesn’t want a connection through sex, that’s when the in-depth personal questions about medical history begin. Yes, it is possible to have a hormone deficiency,^[7] or an illness,^[8] or to be on a medication that contributes to lack

6 “Cisgender” or “cis” refers to those whose gender matches the sex they were assigned or designated at birth, distinguishing them from people who *don’t* identify as the gender they were assigned/designated.

7 “[M]inimal critical levels of androgens appear necessary (although not sufficient) for the experience of sexual desire.” (Regan, 1999)

8 “Medical conditions are a frequent source of direct or indirect sexual difficulties. Vascular disease associated with diabetes might preclude adequate arousal; cardiovascular disease may inhibit intercourse secondary to dyspnea.” (Phillips, 2000)

of interest in or enjoyment of sex.^[9] In nearly all cases there are other primary effects besides those relating to sex or arousal, though, especially in the case of atypical hormones; lack of sexual interest can be a symptom of a broader condition, but it is *not* an illness in and of itself. Despite that, “you’d better get your hormones checked” is one of the most common reactions asexual people hear.

Yes, getting tested for abnormalities and paying attention to health are very good habits to form. But there is no evidence that asexual people’s hormones are produced differently from anyone else’s. However, it has been noted that asexual people sometimes have a higher incidence of late and less dramatic puberty,^[10] though plenty of people with the exact opposite situation also identify as asexual.

When discussing hormones, it’s relevant to mention that some asexual people have lowered or absent production of certain hormones, and it is not necessarily “to blame” for their orientation just because hormones are linked to puberty and sex. This becomes particularly relevant in discussing populations known to have atypical hormone production, like those with certain intersex variations.^[11] (*Intersex* refers to people who are born with chromosomes or anatomy/physiology that is not exclusively considered typically male or female.) Some intersex individuals identify as asexual,^[12] but their sexual orientation shouldn’t be assumed to be a “symptom” of their intersex variation that needs fixing. Some who use medication to control or change their hormones still identify as asexual.

In most cases, lack of sexual interest or attraction is unlikely to be caused by any physical issue, hormonal or otherwise. Asexuality also isn’t enough to indicate a psychological problem. If a person’s sexual interest was present and then disappeared suddenly, that might be a physical or psychological issue.^[13] If a person feels that trauma is getting in the way of going through with desired sexual interactions, that person can choose to pursue counseling.

9 “Many commonly used drugs can interfere with sexual function in both men and women, causing loss of libido, interfering with erection or ejaculation in men, and delaying or preventing orgasm in women.” (Medical Letter on Drugs and Therapeutics, 1992)

10 “[A]sexual women had a later onset of menarche relative to the sexual women. Asexual people were also shorter and weighed less than the sexual people.” (Bogaert, 2004)

11 “[I]n [intersex] conditions with gonadal dysgenesis where the gonads are non-functioning there is no endogenous hormone production. . . .” (Minto, Crouch, Conway & Creighton, 2005)

12 In a survey of 3,436 self-identified asexual-spectrum people administered on the Internet in September–October 2011, 1.2 percent identified themselves as intersex (Asexual Awareness Week, 2011). That percentage is comparable to the percentage of intersex individuals in the overall human population.

13 “[A] decrease in sexual desire can signal psychological or physiological disorders (e.g., depression, hypothyroidism), but is low or absent sexual desire necessarily associated with pathology? [. . .] Currently, evidence does not suggest that cognitions and behaviors associated with asexuality necessarily signal a problem.” (Frause & Graham, 2007)

If sexual appetite, sex drive, or sexual interest has declined because of medication and the patient is distressed by this, alternative therapies can be discussed and possibly applied.^[14]

It is of course possible for a person to be mentally and/or physically ill *and* asexual without either of those traits being blamed for the other. Even if a physical or mental disease is part of a person's over-

"I think a search for a cause for one's asexuality can too often go down a road of biological determinism, which leads to questions of hormone levels or an asexuality gene. It devalues the role of the myriad other aspects of one's life in molding who one is as a person."

—M. LECLERC, *HYPOMNEMATA*

all reason for feeling asexual, that does not invalidate the orientation for that person; it does not become less "real" because of any illness. **However, asexuality as an orientation is not a disease or a symptom. It shouldn't be treated like an issue that can or should be cured,** any more than homosexuality should.

Asexuality is *especially* unlikely to be indicative of a detrimental condition if the asexual person in question is embracing it. Finding a name for one's experiences—and realizing that it isn't a sickness or a disorder or a hurdle to leap—is usually a self-affirming experience. For some non-asexual people, sexual attraction is such an integral part of life that they can't help but imagine an asexual life as depressing and fear-inspiring, so it's not surprising when some respond with concern while urging asexual people to get help. But if asexual people are relieved and happy to find they don't have to force themselves to "be sexual" to lead fulfilling lives, it's a lot more likely that trying to help by pushing them toward sexual experiences at all costs will be of no help at all.

Asexuality Is a Reasonable Possibility

Because lack of sexual interest or attraction is often medicalized or thought of as a disorder, it's very common for detractors to want "justification" from asexual people. In their minds, asexual people must prove their sexual orientation is not caused by something else in their lives before they will consider the possibility that the asexual person is really asexual.

14 "No medical treatment is available specific to patients with disorders of desire. If no underlying medical or hormonal etiology is discovered, individual or couple counseling may be helpful." (Phillips, 2000)

"Asexuality isn't something diagnosed by a blood test or MRI scan. (. . .) Definition of asexuality is 'lack of sexual attraction,' another one I've seen and like is 'you're asexual if you think the label fits and is useful for you.' Neither of those are in any way something science can confirm. Both of those are something that each person knows for themselves."

—KAZ, *KAZ'S TUMBLINGS*

Asexuality is not a last resort diagnosis. It is not a diagnosis at all. Studies on asexual people have not suggested a correlation with mental illness,^[15] though some studies suggest asexual people who feel like outsiders in society

can experience depression and other issues^[16]—just like *anyone* who feels like an outsider is more susceptible to being depressed and anxious. Asexuality also doesn't refer to a physical inability to become aroused. There is no reason to search for "damning" evidence in asexual people's pasts, their medical history, their gender identity, their social status, their sexual experiences, their mental health, their physical attractiveness, their attitudes toward sex, or their age to conclude that someone isn't asexual (or that asexuality isn't real).

In asexual communities, there is a type of asexual person jokingly referred to as the *gold-star asexual*—an asexual person who lacks all the traits often blamed for asexuality, and therefore supposedly makes a good spokesperson since they are, for all intents and purposes, unassailable. Gold-star asexual people are not inherently better representations for asexuality, but they are frequently used to that effect, and this can spread unrealistic expectations and misunderstandings about the orientation.

Gold-star asexual people have the following traits:

- Are healthy (mentally and physically, not on medication)
- Are able-bodied
- Have never experienced abuse
- Are extroverted and/or socially competent
- Are cisgender (not transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, agender, genderqueer, neutrois, bigender, third gender, or gender questioning)
- Are supportive of others' consensual sex practices (though indifferent to sex themselves)
- Don't have a libido

15 "There were not higher rates of psychopathology among asexuals." (Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes & Erskine, 2010)

16 "Because asexual individuals may face similar social stigma to that experienced by homosexual and bisexual persons, in that they may also experience discrimination and/or marginalisation, it follows that asexual individuals might also experience higher rates of psychiatric disturbance." (Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2013)

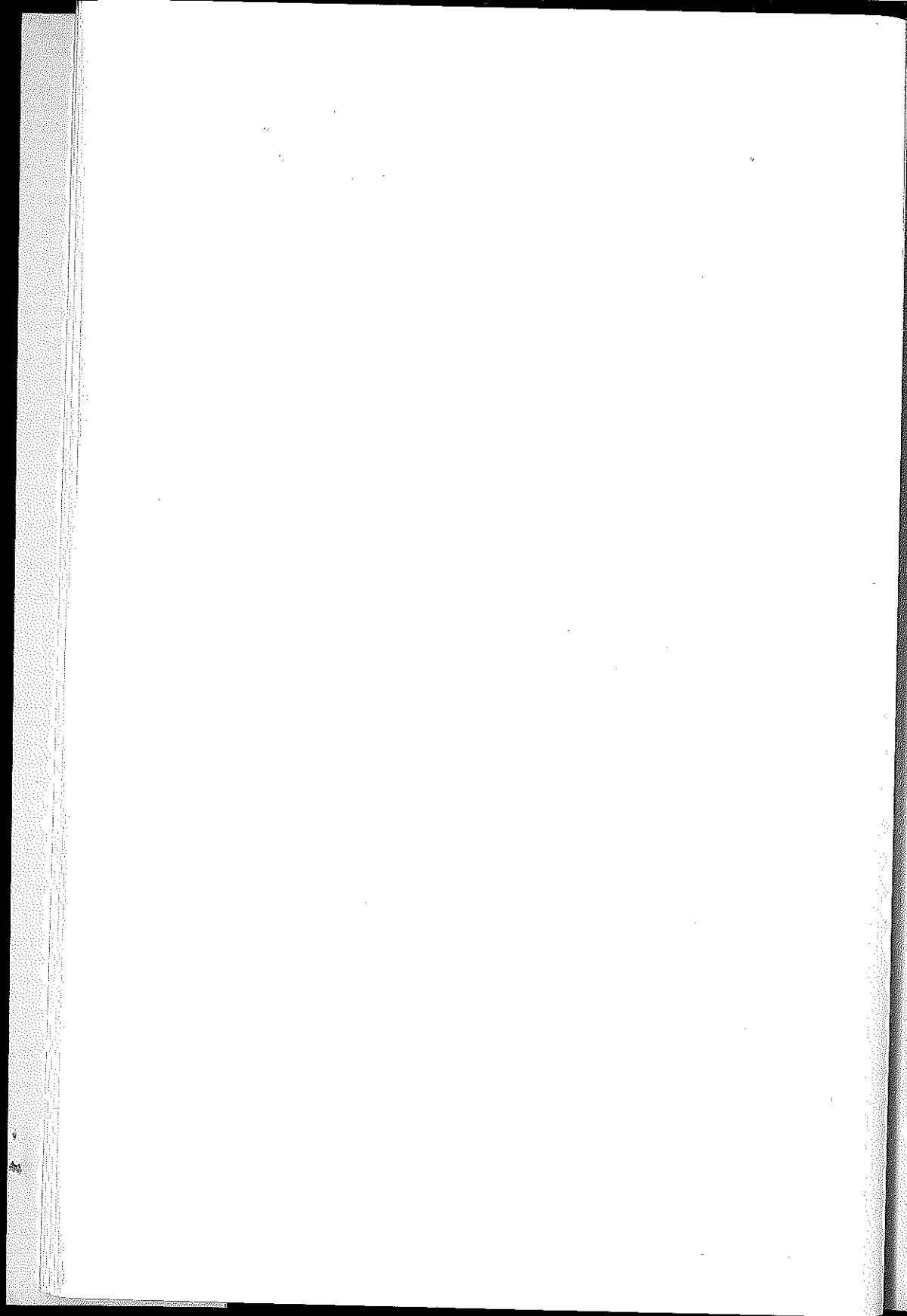
- Are physically attractive
- Are not interested in romantic relationships (or, sometimes, are interested in hetero relationships)
- Are between the ages of twenty and forty

Of course, even asexual people in this “sweet spot” are often targeted with dismissive statements, but any asexual person who also lacks one or more of the above traits will often be immediately dismissed as “not really asexual” because of it.

Asexuality is more common than most people believe, and it only stands to reason that some percentage of the millions of asexual people would be, for instance, abuse survivors, mentally ill, normatively unattractive, gender nonconforming, or shy. It’s not realistic to assign these traits the blame for those people’s asexuality and only agree to “grant” belief in their orientation if all other possibilities have been eliminated.

To review: this chapter covered what asexuality is, as opposed to what it is not. Asexuality is a **sexual orientation** because it describes a person’s pattern of attraction (to no one). Asexuality is a **mature state** because it isn’t a term for what a person is before they develop their sexual orientation. Asexuality is a **description** because it is a word for explaining an experience, not a decision or a choice. Asexuality is a **healthy status** because it is not considered a mental or physical illness to not desire, pursue, or feel attraction that leads to sex. And it is a **reasonable possibility** because feeling sexual attraction or inclination toward others is not the default.

Asexual people shouldn’t be obligated to undertake exhaustive attempts to embrace any other sexual orientation before they’re allowed to “give up” and acknowledge that they’re asexual. If a person hears the word and relates to one of the definitions, it very well may be the right label for them. The rest of this book should help paint a clearer picture of what asexual life looks like, what asexuality is not, and what both asexual and non-asexual people need to know about asexuality.



**PART TWO:
ASEXUAL EXPERIENCES**