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## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

# Voluntary celibacy and the sexual empowerment of saying 'no'



**Jenna Ryu**

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### Key Points

Sex positivity has encouraged consensual sex without shame. But does this apply to the decision to abstain?

Experts say sexual empowerment is about having a choice — even if it means saying no.

They caution this is different from celibacy related to religion, sexual trauma or incel culture.

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Sexual empowerment is all about agency in having pleasurable, consensual sex with who you want, when you want, and with however many partners you want — without judgement or shame. However, this logic often isn't applied to those who choose to abstain.

When Amanda McCracken told people she chose to be abstinent until she was 41, criticism flooded in from both men and women, from feminists and misogynists.

"The most interesting critique that stuck with me was several men who told me I was selfish. 'Really?' I thought. Selfish for knowing what I wanted and willing to wait for it?" reflects McCracken, who works as a sexual empowerment advocate and coach.

For years, movies and TV shows have portrayed abstinent characters as strange, brainwashed, uptight or naïve (Look to Steve Carell's character Andy in "The 40 Year Old Virgin," who is mercilessly mocked by his peers). A

2016 study also found that people who are sexually inexperienced were perceived by potential partners as "flawed" in the dating market.

### **Celibacy:** More about the latest sex and dating trend

But many sex experts don't see it this way. In reality, choosing boundaries can be empowering for those who want to exhibit agency over their bodies and relationships. McCracken explains, "There's just as much power in saying no as yes."

"Being aware of your own needs and desires isn't easy with all the pressure and societal expectations from peers. But I think there's great power in staying true to who you are and what you want, and that's what sexual empowerment is about," McCracken says.

**'Vanilla sex shaming':** The conversation around sex is changing with 'vanilla shaming' and more openness than ever before

### **Why some people choose to refrain from sex**

As a sex researcher, Candice Hargons says there are many known benefits of a healthy sex life. But saying no can also offer similar perks. Some may opt for abstinence because they're fed up with hookup culture and crave an emotional connection. Others may use the opportunity for mindfulness and reflection.

"The pros of celibacy can include the ability to build a romantic relationship with someone without the pressure of sex, the ability to focus on other important parts more readily, and even spiritual growth and alignment for one with religious values," says Hargons, an associate professor of counseling psychology at the University of Kentucky.

Sex experts clarify there's no "right or wrong" way to be abstinent. McCracken dated and was "intimate" with numerous men during her abstinence journey but she

refrained from sex. This experience led her to find a "healthy and irreplaceable" romance with her husband.

"We learned to have intimacy and build that connection without sexual intercourse," she says, adding that it allowed them to better "listen to each other and be present and aware of each other's needs."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting a secure, attached relationship that prioritizes commitment before sex, and for me, there's something beneficial about a slow buildup."

## **'More a mandate than a choice': The darker side of abstinence**

When abstinence is a choice, it "can really be an amazing experience," according to Cate Mackenzie, a psychosexual therapist and couples counselor. Just as it's OK to want casual hookups, it can also be empowering to remove yourself from a culture that pressures people to be sexually active.

"People want different things and are becoming more informed, aware and conscious of what they want, and what they don't want. Or where they want to be touched, or whether they want to be at all," Mackenzie says. "Abstaining can be really amazing in that it gives them time to prioritize themselves and encourages people to have their own autonomy over their sex life."

However, celibacy typically gets a bad rap due to its association with involuntary celibates. Also called "incels," this is a term for men who believe they are celibate not by choice, but rather because women are withholding sex from them. They "feel disempowered because they are not having the sex they desire, and more importantly, they think they deserve," McCracken explains. As a result, this entitlement leads to anger, misogyny, resentment and potentially violence.

**What are incels?** The dangerous idea of being owed sex

"Unlike incels, voluntary celibates don't believe they're entitled to sex. Instead, they believe they're entitled to choose what they do with their bodies, despite what pop culture tells us is normal," she says. "And in that choice lies the empowerment."

In addition, Hargons clarifies that shaming individuals into abstinence with religious purity culture can have adverse effects, including ignorance about safe sex as well as sexual trauma.

"If celibacy isn't autonomous, meaning it has been imposed by one's community as a higher value sexual choice than others, the cons can include guilt and shame, imposing sex negative ideals on others, and difficulty engaging in satisfying sex once the celibacy period ends," she says, noting that those who learned about abstinence through restrictive sex education "may view celibacy as more a mandate than a choice."

**Sexual trauma and violence:** Sex after sexual violence challenges the body. How survivors can heal.

**Let's talk about (queer) sex:** The importance of LGBTQ-inclusive sex education in schools

## **'Sex-positive feminism means accepting a wide range of women's sex choices'**

In theory, sexual empowerment should be about owning your sexuality. Though we've seen this progress with the growing acceptance of different kinds of sex, negative stigma is still pervasive when it comes to the decision to skip sex altogether.

"Feminism is about equality, and sex positivity is about empowerment through agency and sex. It's important that sex-positive feminism means accepting a wide range of women's sex choices, including the decision to refrain," McCracken says.

Hargons adds healthy sexuality looks different for everyone, and no preference is superior as long as they're safe, consensual and informed decisions.

"Celibacy isn't an inherently better or worse sexual option than other options. Sexual wellness and empowerment is about deciding what works for you and your partner... as long as the root of the abstinence isn't shame or guilt," Hargons says.

**Is it healthy to have sex?:** Is daily sex healthy? Experts answer Googled questions about sex