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**A look at Asexuality
and the struggle for validity**

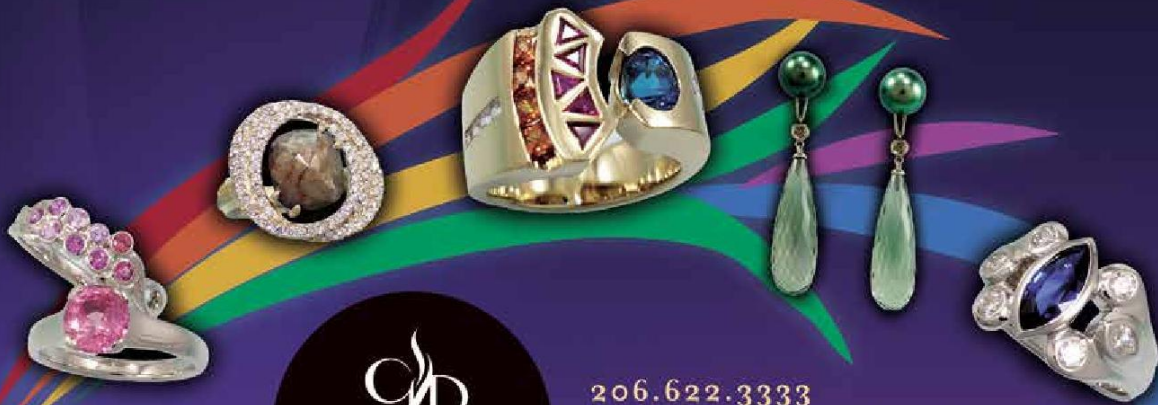
BY LINDSEY ANDERSON
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Love is a battlefield.
While Gay, Straight, and Bisexual people alike unite in the fight against heartbreak and in the desire to settle into a “happily ever after,” one subset of the LGBTQ+ community has to fight to even be recognized in the ranks.

see **ASEXUALITY** page 4

Original photo by Ece AK / Pexels

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ASEXUALITY

continued from cover

“Asexuals have been fighting for visibility within the community for 40 years,” said Aubri Lancaster, an Asexual sex educator.

“The problems of marginalization of asexuality come in a few different forms,” Lancaster explained. The most basic form marginalization is rooted in the fact that many fail to understand what asexuality is. Just as humans tend to do when they don’t understand something, many pretend that it doesn’t exist.

“So, in the sense of the frameworks of... sexual orientation, we don’t exist,” Lancaster explained. “You know, we’re the ‘A,’ so we have to define ourselves in terms of the frameworks available to us today. So, in the sexual orientation framework that asks, ‘Who are you attracted to?’ our answer is ‘no one.’”

What is Asexuality?

Asexuality is much more complex than just a lack of sexual attraction. According to Lancaster, the label “Asexual” can work as both an orientation and an identity.

As an orientation, asexuality is simple — it is the absence of attraction.

However, as an identity, it is complex. “There are also people who consider it as an identity more so than an orientation, because it is, for them, [more] about their lifestyle and their relationship to sex... than their relationship to attraction,” Lancaster said. “So it can be a little bit of both.”

Attraction can be separated into two different forms: romantic and sexual. One who does not feel a sexual desire for others but does experience romantic attraction would typically be considered Asexual (or Ace). On the other hand, one who feels sexual attraction but does not have the desire to form romantic connections or attractions with others would be Aromantic (or Aro).

Someone who experiences sexual attraction at any level would be considered “Allosexual” (or Allo) just as someone who does experience romantic attraction would be considered “Alloromantic.”

“I am Alloromantic, so I do experience romantic attraction, but I do not experience sexual attraction,” Lancaster added.

“Romantic attraction is a kind of limerence,” Lancaster explained. “It’s about feeling a need for reciprocation of feelings and love. So, you can have a long-term relationship of either a platonic nature or a coupled nature or a multirelation, and it can build into a kind of love that we call ‘affection-

As an orientation, Asexuality is simple – it is the absence of attraction. However, as an identity, it is complex.

ate bonding,’ and that doesn’t have to come through the experience of limerence. You can grow to love someone without going through that period of falling in love.”

For some members of the Asexual community, sex can still be enjoyed and even desired. This is because asexuality, like any other identity, exists on a spectrum.

“Of course, there’s going to be [places] in between,” said Lancaster. “Some people will experience sexual attraction but either rarely or only under certain specific conditions. Demisexuality is somebody who experiences sexual attraction only after an emotional connection has been made. So, they need to have an emotional bond with somebody to experience sexual attraction, [though] an emotional connection does not guarantee sexual attraction. Similarly, some people need intellectual attraction to experience sexual attraction — that’s sapiosexuality.”

Often people who identify as somewhere along the spectrum of Asexual to Allosexual fall under the umbrella term “Greysexual.” While some may find these labels confusing, they’re a valuable way for people to communicate their needs and boundaries and find community.

For someone like Lancaster, who identifies specifically as Asexual, dating, love, and romance are certainly not off the table, even if sexual attraction is.

However, discovering her identity and learning how to communicate her preferences was not an easy journey. “As an Alloromantic Asexual, I spent a lot of time when I was young not understanding any of it and just falling for different people in a typical way. It wasn’t until the relationship moved on beyond the falling-in-love stage and into ‘how are we going to continue to have this relationship,’ what’s going to be involved, and the expectations of sex around that that I started to hit difficulties.”

Amatonormativity

Societal expectations around sex and love exposed a gap for people like Lancaster, who felt love and attraction but did not necessarily connect those feelings to sex. “We put a lot of emphasis in our society on

romantic sexual relationships,” she said. “There’s a term for that. It’s called ‘amatonormativity.’”

Amatonormativity is a term coined by Elizabeth Brake, professor of philosophy at Rice University. “It says that our society creates a hierarchical structure that prioritizes sexual and romantic relationships over all others and assumes that everybody wants a sexual and romantic relationship, and to have a happy and healthy life you need to have that, and it needs to be exclusive and monogamous,” Lancaster explained.

Brake’s social theory elaborates on the idea that society values romantic and sexual relationships so much that platonic relationships are often overlooked and undervalued for their importance for our mental health and well-being.

“The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships, as recent manifestos by urban tribalists, quirkyalones, polyamorists, and Asexuals have insisted. Amatonormativity prompts the sacrifice of other relationships to romantic love and marriage and relegates friendship and solitudinousness to cultural invisibility,” Brake says.

Brake built her philosophy on the foundation of the widely accepted idea of heteronormativity — the assumption that all people are straight until proven otherwise, typically by coming out. “Amatonormativity overlaps with heteronormativity,” said Brake. “Like heteronormativity, it can be found throughout social life, and it can be understood concerning other systems of oppression, for example, in its relation to gender roles.

“Heteronormativity can be understood by considering what counts as violating it: the subversion of gender roles or displays of same-sex sexuality. Violations of amatonormativity would include dining alone by choice, putting friendship above romance, bringing a friend to a formal event or attending alone, cohabiting with friends, or not searching for romance.”

Lancaster experienced amatonormativity firsthand. “I was married for seven years to my ex-husband, and we had very different

levels of sexual desire,” she said. “It was a lot of pressure and a lot of feeling broken. So, when I got out of that relationship, I decided I wanted to find somebody that was truly intellectually compatible with me before I let my heart fall in love with them. And to put it out there that sex is not the most important thing for me.”

Ace dating

After her divorce, Lancaster entered the dating world again. This time, she was more aware of what she was looking for. “You can fall in love with somebody without wanting to have sex with them,” she said.

However, she added, “I am sex favorable, which means that I am open to the idea of sex, basically for fun and as a way to bond and be emotionally close. It feels good, but I don’t need it, and my idea of frequent is not ‘typical.’”

While there is no “right” way for Asexual people to meet and date, Lancaster suggests using dating apps that center on personality instead of more superficial swiping apps like Tinder and Grindr.

“I found my [current] husband on OkCupid, and I made sure that I found somebody that I matched with intellectually, so when I was sure that I had that kind of match, I was able to kind of let myself fall in love,” she says.

Lancaster, like many other members of the Ace community, is in a relationship with an Allosexual partner. She says relationships with Allosexuals can work, but both parties need to communicate their needs.

“It’s important to be able to understand that you don’t owe your partner sex, ever. Relationship dynamics are different from person to person, but finding other ways to connect that don’t center sex in the relationship is important. Some people are going to be more receptive to that than others. It can be an emotional conversation or several conversations,” she said.

As far as dating advice goes, Lancaster is aware that dating for Ace and Aro people can be difficult. For one, there are no good Ace dating apps on the market at the moment. “Most are just full of bots,” Lancaster said. “Honestly, people dismiss it, but I swear by OkCupid. I met my husband there 13 years ago,” she laughed.

While OkCupid is Lancaster’s app of choice, she says there are specific steps Asexual people should take when using the app. “The biggest thing is you need to answer at least 500 questions, if not more, and only look at other people who have also answered 500 questions and have a 90% match rating, otherwise don’t try and have a relationship with somebody that you haven’t



Original photo by Pavel Danilyuk / Pexels

The main issue Asexual people face when trying to assimilate into the LGBTQ+ community is the hypersexualization that comes with Queer pride. It can be hard to fit into a group that unites over sexual preference when you, yourself, do not have one.

had the chance to vet," she said. "And only respond to personalized messages. If it could be copied and pasted, delete it. It's spam."

The most important dating tip she has for any circumstance, either online or in real life, is to "be up-front and honest about your orientation, because if that's a deal breaker, let them weed themselves out. You deserve somebody who will see your asexuality as a feature, not a challenge."

Lancaster also suggests doing some self-reflection to figure out how you feel attraction outside of amatonormativity. "Because it is assumed that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are inseparable, a lot of people will spend their life like I did, not realizing that they're Asexual because they don't know that those things can be separate for some people. So, it is an issue of the amatonormativity, compulsory sexuality, and society telling us that to be human we have to experience sex and love."

Allyship and mental health

For people who want to be a better ally to Asexuals, reframing the way we view romantic relationships and attraction as pillars of adulthood and humanity is a good start.

"Being able to step back and recognize that there are aspects of these experiences that we don't share and being able to visualize what a happy and healthy life might look like without those things is a major challenge," said Lancaster. "It is a huge cause of stress for Asexual and Aromantic people, and, according to the Trevor Project, Asexual people have a higher suicide rate than any other orientation."

The statistics about asexuality and mental health are staggering. One of the reasons it can be so hard for Asexual people to come

out is a lack of acceptance and understanding, both from heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities.

"I find that there are a couple of major responses that I'll get. Either people will have an alternative suggestion as to a reason [for my asexuality], such as a hormonal problem, low libido, or sexual dysfunction, or they'll want to fix it," Lancaster said.

Being viewed as a problem instead of validated for their identity causes extreme stress and negativity for many. "They dismiss asexuality as a potential option for themselves or others based on past experiences that don't necessarily have anything to do with attraction. So, they will assume that if somebody has had sex or enjoyed sex that they can't be Asexual. And that's not true."

Labels

Another issue younger Asexual people face is a war against labels. "There are people who worry that taking on a label, especially the younger generation, will prevent them from exploring their sexuality and relationship options. But the truth is, labels are tools. They are tools to help us communicate our needs and boundaries and find community."

Often people are averse to labels because they see them as permanent, but as communities, especially Queer ones, begin to accept fluidity, this notion is also changing.

"We know labels can change; we don't need to be reminded that they can change, because we realized they could change the minute we realized we were Asexual. Because in a heteronormative society, we are assumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise. Taking on an Asexual label is already a change.

"Taking on microlabels that help us

to differentiate our specific relationship with sex and find communities within the [wider] community is valid. When it comes to labels, the best thing a person can do is lean in and figure out what it is that that label is helping that person communicate about their needs."

Intersectionality

Another issue Asexual people face is in the intersections of their identities. Because sexuality is often ascribed to people and assumed by others, it can be harder for some people to identify as Asexual.

"The intersectionality of people of color, who are often oversexualized or desexualized depending on what stereotypes apply to them and their culture, adds another layer to the difficulty [of identifying] as Asexual. You have to translate it through a Western, heteronormative, white perspective that a lot of these things are initially presented through."

Because sex and sexuality are often associated with maturity, Asexual people sometimes have to fight against infantilizing stereotypes. "Asexual people and Aromantic people are infantilized a lot in general. Once again, it's forgotten and ignored that attraction does not equal action. We're still adults, we still have adult experiences, and our relationship to sex does not define that," Lancaster said.

Infantilization impacts more than just the Asexual community. Often people with disabilities and neurodiverse people face similar issues. Embracing sexuality can be a way disabled people fight these stereotypes, but for disabled people who are Asexual, it can be hard to distinguish one identity from the other.

"Disabled people are often desexualized, and I've even heard that issue referred to as assuming disabled people are Asexual. The problem is, some disabled people are Asexual, and disabled people who are Asexual have to fight the [desexualizing] stereotypes that are placed upon them," Lancaster explained.

In the Queer community

Despite "LGBTQ+" functioning as an umbrella term that includes asexuality, many feel excluded from Queer spaces as well.

"Suggesting that Asexuals are going to sterilize a Queer space of all sexual content is just not true," Lancaster said. "And to say that Queer communities are only about sex is also not true. There's a lot of overlap that can work for both groups."

The main issue Asexual people face when trying to assimilate into the LGBTQ+ community is the hypersexualization that comes with Queer pride. It can be hard to fit into a group that unites over sexual preference when you, yourself, do not have one.

"There's, of course, the oversexualization of people in Queer communities. I know some Asexual Gay men who talk about being dismissed in their Gay identity because of their asexuality," Lancaster said.

There is also the issue of straight-passing couples excluded from Queer spaces, which Lancaster can attest to. "[Some couples] are told that if you are cisgender and heteroromantic and Asexual, or cisgender heterosexual and Aromantic, that those cis and hetero aspects preclude you from the community, without understanding that there is still a different experience of sexuality and romance that truly queer the nature of sex and romance in a larger scope."

For Asexuals, love, romance, connection, and community are boundless and do not necessarily require sex or amatonormative relationships.

"We have to break outside of that boundary and that box that they have created for all of society and say some of us don't want those things," Lancaster said. "Some of us value platonic relationships equally, and there can be relationships that are perfectly happy and fulfilling without sex or romance."

ALL THAT YOU DESIRE AND MORE

Spend Valentine's Day weekend with your one true love — food

BY KYLIN BROWN
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Café Flora

Some say food is love. Some don't, but they probably should. This Valentine's Day weekend, Seattle's eateries are buttoning up to get you unbuttoned in satiated bliss — and nothing gets pants off faster than a romantic meal!

Whether you're taking someone out or ordering in for a "self-love Sunday," upgrade your V-Day weekend with these LGBTQ+ restaurants' special offers and events.

Wildrose's brunch show an Afternoon Delight

On Saturday, Feb. 12, at noon, enjoy a romantic three-course brunch from "high femme Queer" cook Andrew J. Montañó of High Femme Foods. Dining at Wildrose is a rare opportunity, and the bar, known for its shows and drinks, will be supplementing the meal with live burlesque performances and champagne service. Performers will include Moonyeka, Velocity Dior Black, Porcelain, Nox Falls, and DJ Toya B, so you're sure to be delighted. Tickets are \$60 per person; two-person and four-person tables can be reserved. Find tickets at <https://bit.ly/336eCIK>.



Wildrose



Tutta Bella



Marination Ma Kai

Date the chef at Tutta Bella

Italian comfort-food specialist Tutta Bella has locations throughout Seattle and in Issaquah, and all of them will be serving a four-course evening meal for Valentine's Day starting on Friday night. Get started with an indulgent burrata aperitivo, followed by a classic Caesar, your choice of two pizzettas, and their renowned tiramisu, served with an optional bottle of La Bella Prosecco. Book your reservation online at www.tuttabella.com/reservations.



Seeking Kombucha



St. John's

Hawaiian desserts to marinate in your mouth

Marination LLC is running a round-up of limited dessert offerings at their award-winning eateries this weekend. On Sunday, they'll be offering Banana Malasadas at Marination Ma Kai in West Seattle and slices of chocolate macadamia Swiss rolls at Super Six in Columbia City.

Keep your heart healthy at Café Flora

Trans-owned favorite Café Flora is set to inspire true love this Sunday with its vegan, gluten-free, four-course dinner spread. From starter to dessert, the restaurant is dishing out unprecedented creations that can only be experienced at this Valentine's Day dinner.

The prix fixe menu is also available for pre-ordered pickup to enjoy at home. Find Café Flora's full Valentine's Day menu details at cafe-flora.com/valentines-day-home-2/ or make a reservation at (206) 325-9100.

Whether you're taking someone out or ordering in for a "self-love Sunday," upgrade your V-Day weekend with these LGBTQ+ restaurants' special offers and events.

Night market and chill?

A suggested donation of \$10 will get you into the Seeking Kombucha taproom for a Valentine's Day Night Market tonight (Friday) from 4 to 8 p.m. Vendors such as Healthy Creations patisserie, tea-infused ice cream pop-up Milk + Leaf Collective,

and Malaysian pop-up expert Masakan will serve up their creations, alongside local artists such as Deycha Nhtae and Boma Jewelry. Tap into this event at 1091 Thomas St., Suite A, in South Lake Union.

"All happiness depends on a leisurely breakfast"

This John Gunther quote lives in the heart of (hungover) brunch-goers across Seattle. That's why Saint John's Eatery said, "We're opening our doors, nothing crazy," when asked about what they're doing for this year's lovers' day. Their usual menu should suffice, if hot biscuits and gravy are all your heart desires.

Anti-Valentine's singles and lazy daters, rejoice. It's time for us to support our favorite LGBTQ+ owned business by celebrating business as usual. I've made the calls for you, and it seems many other eateries are operating normally this weekend.

Unless you feel as intrigued by "chocolate tower for two" on Café Flora's V-Day menu as I do. They may never serve it again. So don't be afraid to get out there! Good food will always love you back.

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LOOKING FOR LOVE IN THE EMERALD CITY

V-Day dates for the Gays, the Theys, & all the LGBTQIAs

BY NICK RAPP
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Volunteer Park Conservatory

Dating in Seattle isn't the easiest. Be it rain, sprawl, general social coldness, or the looming presence of tech monotony, the city does not quite lend itself to meet-cutes.

Add the pandemic to the mix and it seems the only reliable way to meet others right now is on the apps. Then you have to deal with users predominantly boredom-swiping with no intention of actually reaching out, conflicting preferences for online versus in-person interaction, and the inevitable graveyard of dating-app matches because of it all.

Then, if you do decide to reach out or respond, so often the only ideas that come to mind are grabbing coffee, getting drinks, or going for a walk. Not that any of these are bad options! But if you're searching for some plans to shake things up, look no further than this personally biased and incredibly random list of (probably, hopefully) relatively low-cost and free activities to suggest to a new flame.

Southgate Roller Rink

At 9646 17th Ave. SW lies an inconspicuous building with a shockingly shiny interior and the promise of fun, regardless of experience level.

The Southgate Roller Rink feels like a relic of the past — reminiscent of sharing a milkshake with two straws or coyly twirling the cord of a landline. Plus, roller skating feels like a queerer version of a rom-com ice skating date. Or maybe I'm just Gay and like to roller skate.

Either way, the space is perfect for embarrassing yourself at just the right level in front of a new person. Also, Southgate has a skate-in bar at the back, which is novel (and also seems like a liability!).

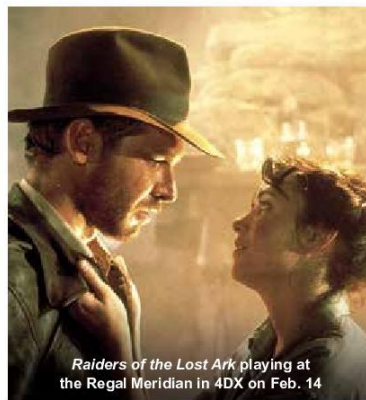
The rink has different events every night of the week, with varying prices for rentals and entry. I would recommend the Wednesday "21+ LGBTQIA+ Pride Skate Night," obviously because this is the SGN, but also because there are fewer kids zigzagging around and the rink is easier to navigate.

Volunteer Park Conservatory

Having finally reopened its doors after a long pandemic-induced closure, the Conservatory boasts cheap admission (\$4) and an incredible variety of gorgeous plants.



Southgate Roller Rink



Raiders of the Lost Ark playing at the Regal Meridian in 4DX on Feb. 14



Lifelong Thrift Store

Look no further than this personally biased and incredibly random list of (probably, hopefully) relatively low-cost and free activities to suggest to a new flame.

There are more orchids than I have seen together in one place elsewhere.

The building itself is beautiful, as it was modeled after Crystal Palace in London. Teeming with chlorophyll, its five houses display palm, cactus, fern, bromeliad, and seasonal plants in close, cared-for beds. It is also heated to temperatures suited to tropical and subtropical plants, so it is more pleasant than the rest of Seattle this time of year.

Of note: two plants in the Conservatory are over one hundred years old!

If you're messaging a Plant Gay or a Cottagecore Bisexual, take them here.

Not your average movie theaters

I have two suggestions here, depending on your preference for high- or lowbrow entertainment.

You could suggest a film screening at one of SIFF's three venues if you feel like going somewhere a bit different and seeing something not being shown at your neighborhood AMC. SIFF frequently screens indie films, award winners, and international films that do not typically travel to mainstream theaters. Occasionally, oldies are shown as well — it's always fun to see something old return to the big screen.

If you're feeling less intellectual and skew more toward the ridiculous, you could take a date to see whichever movie is showing in "4DX" at Regal Meridian downtown. 4DX is about as uncanny and shocking of a movie experience as you could hope for. It feels like a relic of the "Real-D" 3-D films of the aughts, but the technology actually debuted under the radar in 2018.

If you can believe it, 4DX movies feature moving chairs that thrash you around during action sequences, industrial fans that blow wind when characters are in peril, "butt-kicker" components that physically hit your back when characters fight, and even a water-spraying feature. It'll definitely break the ice.

Thrift on Broadway

With a plethora of unique thrift and antique stores, Broadway never disappoints. Lifelong Thrift has art, books, clothing, and oddities galore that rotate daily in discount rates. Shop by tag color — you won't be disappointed!

Out of the Closet features an incredible \$1 rack, and you'll always leave with some cool clothes.

Revival has cool vintage items, Crossroads is always fun to browse, and you could even switch things up and stroll through Twice Sold Tales, the classic used bookstore that is full of cats.

Thriftling with a date introduces you both to each other's style and interests. It is also so easy to browse a store if conversation is lulling. If it's good, you learned about the other person and maybe got some cool used stuff. If it's bad, you hopefully got some cool used stuff. Talk about low risk, high reward!

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PANDEMIC PROTOCOLS FOR THE BEDROOM

How to navigate sex with COVID safety in mind

BY PAIGE MCGLAULFIN
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Photo by Ketut Subiyanto / Pexels

The pandemic has changed the way people approach finding sexual partners, and added a new meaning to the concept of “safe sex.”

An August 2021 study from the University of Minnesota found that the number of people who were engaging in hookups and having casual sexual partners before the pandemic decreased by 48.5% and 53.4%, respectively. Yet as vaccination and booster rates continue to rise and people continue to revisit “before-time” activities, it’s likely they are wondering what constitutes social distancing when it comes to the bedroom.

For those navigating finding sex in the time of Omicron but unsure of how to stay safe, below are a few suggestions to keep in mind.

Get vaxxed, and get tested

If you’re going to clubs, restaurants, or any other business where there’s a risk of exposure to COVID-19, you’ll likely have to be vaccinated or provide a recent negative test result. It may feel weird to apply these same standards to sexual activities too, but it’s one of the easiest ways to minimize your risk of exposure.

Plus, it’s a top priority for many. Dating website Match’s Singles in America 2021 study found that 58% of singles are unlikely

to have sex with an unvaccinated partner, including 57% of Gen X respondents and 85% of Boomers.

“The most important step to take is to ensure that you, and your partner, are fully vaccinated and boosted. For additional peace of mind, you and your partner could get COVID tests as well prior to being intimate,” a spokesperson with Public Health – Seattle & King County, told the SGN in an email.

Keep your circle of partners small, or explore other options

Remember pandemic pods? For those facing COVID exposure risk with sex, it may be wise to adopt a similar practice with your sex partners.

“What we’re recommending for everybody, but particularly for people who are not vaccinated, is that you avoid large sex parties, going to bathhouses, or orgies,” Dr. Chase Cannon, MD, an acting instructor and infectious diseases specialist with the University of Washington, told the SGN.

“Sex is a close-contact sport, and air droplets of saliva will be exchanged, so [we’re] telling people to avoid large situations... and try to stick to maybe a small circle of people...”

Some health experts also recommend

Navigating sex in the time of Omicron is changing the way people engage in intimacy with others. Here’s what we can do to stay safe.

wearing a mask when engaging in sexual activities. Though this advice is useful for activities like anal sex, it falls short for others, including oral sex.

“Lots of people roll their eyes when I say, ‘You could consider wearing a mask during sex,’” said Dr. Cannon.

If masking when intimate isn’t your cup of tea, consider engaging in other activities that limit the amount of face-to-face activity.

“Another way to think about it is just changing the kind of sex that you have... Mutual masturbation, video, sexting, things that will limit your exposure risk might be helpful,” said Dr. Cannon.

Communication is key

King County Public Health shared an Instagram post in October 2020 showc-

ing an example of a conversation between two people discussing hooking up safely amid COVID, including exploring making a glory hole with a shower curtain. While the example raised a few eyebrows, the advice on engaging in proactive communication around COVID-19 has only become more important given Omicron’s high transmissibility.

Taking a few moments to discuss with a partner their recent activities and risk of COVID-19 exposure can be helpful in deciding if it’s safe to engage in sexual activities with them. The same goes for conversations surrounding safe sex and STIs (and with STI cases rising in Seattle, it’s crucial that people to remember to engage in that conversation too).

“I know that there are situations people have, where they may be doing sex work, or sex is more spontaneous, and they don’t have time or the ability to have these in-depth conversations,” said Dr. Cannon. “[But] if you’re talking to somebody on an app for a few minutes, you definitely have time to squeeze in those few questions that I think can be informative. If you have another option of somebody else who’s vaccinated and hasn’t been at a huge party recently, maybe that’s a better option.”

Dating apps have also worked to integrate vaccine status on their platforms (similar to sharing your HIV status of if you’re taking PrEP), Dr. Cannon added.

The pandemic will still continue to change the way people engage in intimacy with others. As it does, there are some online resources that can help advise people on engaging in sex. King County recommends people look at New York City’s “Safer Sex and COVID-19” factsheet, most recently updated on Oct. 31, 2021 (www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-sex-guidance.pdf).



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Thirsty Sword Lesbians

A game of Queer adventures with Queer friends

BY DANIEL LINDSLEY
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER



This Valentine's Day, fans of tabletop role-playing games may want a better way to bring their interests into the festivities. One of the medium's greatest strengths is its flexibility, after all; with some extra work, even a system with such a fraught past as Dungeons & Dragons: 5th Edition can be used to tailor a collaborative storytelling experience to the needs of a given group.

But D&D, at its roots, is a dungeon-crawling tactical game. While none can deny that love can bloom on the hex-grid battlefield, there's a system that's practically made for a Queer Valentine's Day adventure.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians (TSL) is a narrative-focused, tabletop role-playing game, built to tell dramatic Queer stories with friends. The players take the roles of a cast of "angsty disaster lesbians," each working through their own emotional conflicts (although the game can explore other Queer identities as well).

Playing as flawed characters is a must, since that gives them room to grow and create drama, and rather than encouraging "winning" through "optimal" choices, TSL encourages good storytelling.

"Follow your heart, dive headlong into danger, and be larger than life," TSL says, and it lets players do just that without the fear that their character's story will end before it's finished.

Those with little or no experience in tabletop role-playing games, or whose experience has been largely negative, might be wary of one this emotionally involved. Whatever your experience, though, TSL has your back. Some of the first pages of its rules contain tools designed to make sure everyone in a group is on the same page about their needs and wants.

TSL creator April Kit Walsh knew those tools would be important from the game's inception. She refined them through play-testing with strangers at conventions — arguably the ultimate stress test for rules regarding the social contract, a subject sorely neglected in many mainstream tabletop games.

"There are four different layers of ways that I try to protect consent in game



Thirsty Sword Lesbians (TSL) is a narrative-focused, tabletop role-playing game, built to tell dramatic Queer stories with friends. The players take the roles of a cast of "angsty disaster lesbians," each working through their own emotional conflicts

design," Walsh said on Zoom. "[That's] really important if you want people to feel like it's safe to engage with themes like romance and sexuality.

"And emotional found family," she added, "because not all the stories you tell [with TSL] are romance oriented, but they're all about emotional connection."

So the system has the flexibility to tell all sorts of Queer stories, so long as they're dramatic and empowering. It's also adaptable to any setting the players already enjoy, or settings they create together. Does

the group like *Star Wars*? They can make it "Thirsty Lightsaber Lesbians." Do they enjoy high fantasy, but want it to be more Queer? They can finally see to it that their own versions of Sam Gamgee and Frodo Baggins kiss already.

If a group draws up a blank, though, that's okay; the rulebook includes some thoughtfully crafted premade settings.

What makes TSL specifically Queer, though? One answer to that question has to do with the earliest "layer of protection" built into the system, and that's the aesthet-

ics. If the title weren't enough of a hint, the rulebook's cover has two colorful characters clashing swords, eyes locked, in full makeup and ornate pastel outfits.

It's an art style reviled by a particular demographic, likely because it is loved by so many Queer people, and it works a lot like the over-the-top covers on romance paperbacks: it's a ward against the weirdos who might invade the space, or even just complain that this *one* thing in the world wasn't made for them.

"I did not at all want to play down the queerness of the game," Walsh said.

And so far, it seems being unabashed about what TSL is has paid off. The game's original Kickstarter campaign was so successful that the publisher couldn't keep up with the stretch goals. Instead, TSL's writers, artists, and other contributors were just paid more. An official expansion, called *Advanced Lovers and Lesbians*, has also been crowdfunding with flying colors, featuring new settings, character archetypes, and more.

If you're not already sold on TSL, you can review the rules for yourself and watch examples of real play at EvilHat.com. If someone dear to you (yourself included) already owns the TSL rulebook, there's a Valentine's Day bundle of fan-made expansions, titled *Truths of Heart*, for sale on itch.io.

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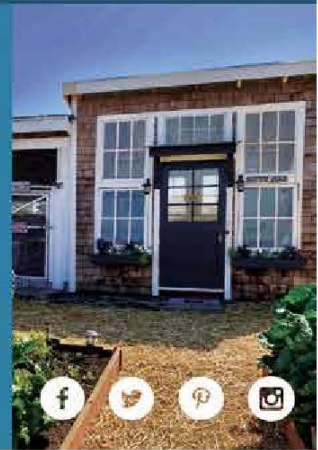


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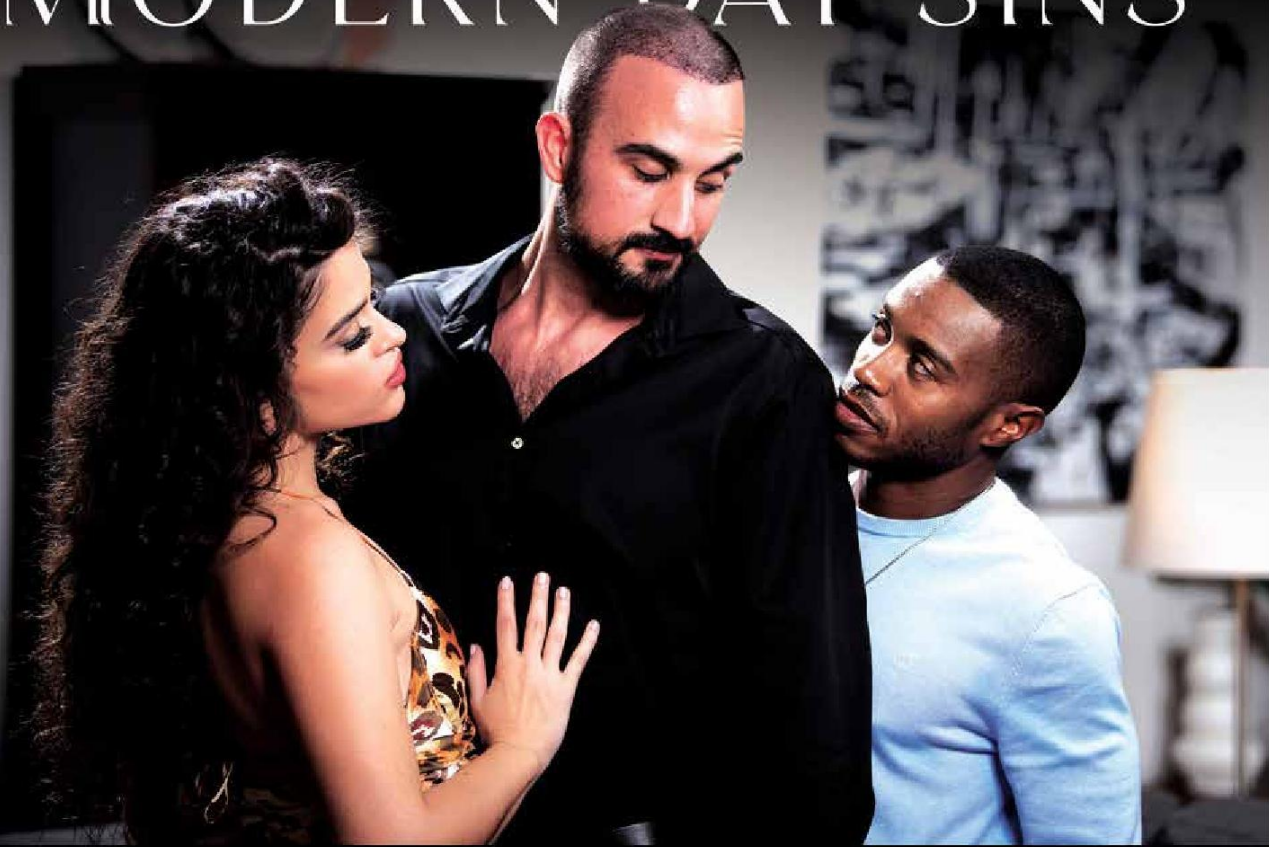
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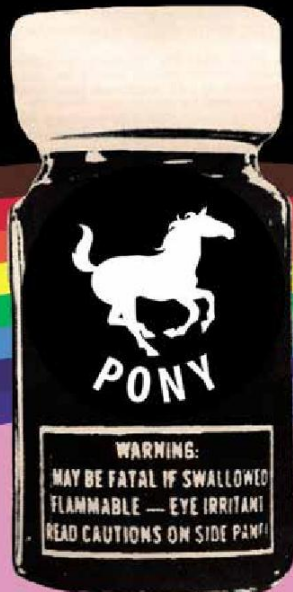
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