

How I reignited my desire for real love and connection

July 14, 2021

After striking out in dating, my friend and I decided to give it up in favor of battery-operated stimulation. It was the thrill of our pleasure-seeking adventure which led to something much deeper and unexpected.



(iStockphoto)

by Scott Gerace

“My therapist suggested I get a sex toy,” said Margo, my former co-worker and close friend.

Her feelings about her reconstructed chest as a 50-something breast cancer survivor had prevented her from allowing someone back in where disease had briefly resided. Now her

shrink, initially concerned she had no man, floated the idea of test-driving an inanimate object.

Margo had avoided intimacy for more years than she remembered. She confessed it also stemmed from laziness *and* the age appropriate men she viewed online.

“Dear God, they’re hideous,” she claimed.

“Oh I’m sure there are some great guys your age—”

“Hideous!”

I too felt disappointment with the online scene. As an overweight kid, I never felt comfortable in my own skin. Now in my late 40s, openly gay, my last boyfriend nearly three years in the rearview mirror, I bemoaned the choices popping up on dating apps. They were either too hot and sexy for the average man, or headless, shirtless torsos posing in public restrooms.

It was hideous out there.

Years of dating had produced little in the way of love, and whenever I met someone, I worried losing what might be my one chance. My recent ex was sweet, smart, and fun to have on my arm at social functions. Our bedroom chemistry never progressed past lukewarm, and I stayed silent with my feelings for almost three years until the festering bubbled up in a New Year’s Day breakup.

Ten years earlier, I moved in with a more lustful boyfriend after only six months. His scruffy beard, ginger hair and blue eyes seduced me on our first in-person meeting, having initially met online. I soon realized he lacked ambition and maturity as he went from job to job finding fault with each new manager who didn’t see his point of view.

What remained in between those two “serious” relationships were casual hookups, a series of empty sessions with strangers who cared little about turning me on and more about getting them off.

When Margo’s conversation mentioned sex toys, my ears perked up.

“I’ve been interested in getting a toy while I wait for Mr. More Than Right Now,” I admitted.

“How about we test them out?”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Let’s make it a real day,” I suggested. “We’ll shop, then have brunch, and then shop some more.”

“Well, when you add brunch, it sounds more respectable,” she replied.

We agreed to meet that Saturday at the Pleasure Chest in the West Village, the infamous location known for the addictive “Rabbit” vibrator.

Our research began hesitantly. We picked up funny greeting cards with naughty sayings and perused the flavored condoms. Margo spotted colorful lollipops and remembered she needed one for her niece’s birthday party.

“You can’t buy that,” I said. “Don’t you see the F-word in bold candy letters on the other side?”

Eventually we settled in, surprised by the welcoming and helpful sales clerks and the number of New Yorkers openly seeking all things sex.

“Jesus,” whispered Margo, “do you see the size of that thing those two guys are discussing? What would you do with that?”

“Never walk right again,” I surmised, checking out the tree trunk rubber penis they waved around.

Taking different journeys through the aisles, we were overwhelmed by the options. She waffled over the right vibrator – battery operated vs. rechargeable, pocket-sized or anatomically life-sized. I debated butt plugs – small or large, one setting or seven “unique rotation patterns” with a hand-held remote control.

We needed brunch to debrief. Food easily outweighed our desire to find love among latex.

“I didn’t expect there to be so many choices,” Margo confessed over her omelet. “People are out there getting busy, having sex.”

“Yes, they are,” I said. “And you’re getting back in the game, on the horse, so to speak.”

While I viewed this scenario as a real opportunity for her to bring action back into her life, I yearned for *less* sex in mine. The revolving “guests” coming in and out of my bed – and their lack of relationship potential – frustrated me.

We moved on to our second stop, Babeland in Soho, and Margo started to open up. She asked questions and debated a potential purchase. She fondled vibrators and wondered whether this one or that one would “get right to her spot.”

I declared quickly that I’d found my Saturday night lover: the b-Vibe Rimming 2, a splash proof remote control vibrating plug. I’d met guys online whose names were easier to pronounce than that tongue twister!

“Don’t even bother buying that smaller one,” Margo advised.

“I think I should start easy and work my way up,” I said.

“Oh please. After a few weeks you’ll get bored and want to come back for the bigger one. Besides, the larger one is blue . . . it matches the blue décor in your apartment.”

“This is for someone who has explored seriously,” the sales woman said, sizing me up at the register.

“I’m almost 50 . . . and gay . . . and been around the block,” I wisecracked.

“Just in case, let me show you the right lube,” she added, sensing I might be out of my element.

One credit card swipe and \$150 later, the b-Vibe blue slid into my backpack and began the journey home with me while Margo left empty-handed.

“You’re always such an impulse buyer,” she said.

“And you’re still sitting on the sidelines,” I said.

I promised to give her a full report, and she agreed to let me know when she settled on a purchase by emailing me a copy of the receipt as proof.

At home, Big Blue charged on the counter, indeed matching the color scheme of my small studio, while I ran a hot bath, put on some classical music, and dimmed the apartment lights. I hoped it would relax me before I invited my new lover inside.

Keeping with my commitment to cleanliness, I decided our first encounter would be on the bathroom floor, ensuring this clinical attempt at pleasure didn’t mean a trip down the hallway to throw bedding into the washer.

Once in play, I tried to enjoy it. One hand worked the remote and the other battled Big Blue to stay put. It didn’t help that I was staring at my own body throughout the process, noticing every flaw. Twenty minutes of this futile passion plan and I called the whole thing off.

I settled in on the sofa with a martini, waiting for my diner club sandwich to arrive – surely a more satisfying end to a loveless evening.

When my cell phone rang I assumed the doorman had my double decker with turkey on the way up. Instead, Margo provided an update.

“Okay, I stopped back into one store and chatted with the sales woman,” she said. “She told me rechargeable is the way to go.”

“See? You’re getting into this,” I said.

“Yes, I’m finding it exciting. I need to go back again.”

“Well I’m starting to think it’s easier to order a man online and have him come over for an hour than try to wrestle pleasure out of a silicone substitute,” I confided.

Over the next few days Margo returned several times to the stores. She talked to men, to women, to a transgender salesperson named Cassandra whom she declared “fabulous and insightful.”

I admired Margo and secretly wanted to be more like her. She had beaten cancer and patiently sought out the right kinds of pleasure to occupy her days. Even in sex toy shopping, she approached it all thoughtfully and with a keen eye toward doing what made her satisfied and content.

My hasty decisions left me with unsatisfying results. I could use more reflection before wrinkling my sheets with another dude, and before seeking solace in toys to replace boys. Short-term fun would never replace long-term satisfaction.

After that disastrous attempt with Big Blue, and the martinis that followed, I started to admit that I’d been faking it all along, going through the motions with the men I had brought into my life. Why wasn’t I asking *them* for what I wanted? Yes, I hoped they brought the fun and the sweet mixed with maturity and solid aspirations. I also yearned to feel sexy and good about how I looked, without ignoring my desires in a relationship.

I needed to express, out loud, what I wanted from the get-go.

A week later Margo’s confirmation text arrived – a screenshot of an Amazon “thank you for this order” receipt with a guaranteed two-day delivery for a vibrating something or other I couldn’t read from the cut off photo. A true lady didn’t have to reveal it all.

Pleasure will come in the mail, she texted.

And apparently it did, often for her. Her new “friend” occupied a spot on the empty side of her bed, easily found in the dark when the need arose.

My bed remained empty. Margo needed a jump start to get her motor running, but I needed to uncover what kept me from finding love: first flings with uncommitted men and now interactions with a device to which I couldn’t commit. I vowed to stop “app-ing” my nights away and start practicing real *emotional* contact with my love interests.

“How’s your ‘friend?’” Margo asked during our next meet up. “Mine visited me yesterday.” She laughed.

“Lonely, I assume, shoved on a shelf. I’m lonely too,” I confessed.

“I understand.” She put her arm around me on a busy street and squeezed me tightly as we strolled.

“Well at least you’re on your way to finding passion,” I said.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for a man in my life.”

Fear. It prevented Margo from showing her body to a man and exploring real love possibilities, while it sapped my self-confidence in how I looked and stalled my ability to communicate with potential partners.

“We’re a pair,” I said.

“Sex toys?!” she snorted, and we both laughed as passersby did double takes.

Gadgets were no substitute for the real deal when it came to love and friendships. While our pleasure-seeking adventure stopped short of true happy endings for us both, it got things moving again.

Margo ventured into a satisfying direction, albeit in baby steps. She seemed bolder about her life choices, resisting a low paying temp job she truly needed after she got laid off from her graphic design position. “I’m worth more,” she told me on a late-night phone call. I now saw clearly why she was waiting for the right man.

I inched along. Giving up hookups, gay apps and unsatisfying endings, resisting impulse decisions and giving out my phone number for *real* dates versus brief transactional visits in the night.

“Oh, you mean to call you for a date sometime?” said a recent guy I chatted up at happy hour. He blinked in silence as he stared at me like some new, exotic creature in the dating world.

“Yes, to call me for a date,” I reiterated.

I’ll be patient. He may call, he may not. I believe someone eventually will. And when my vibrating phone tingles with unexpected excitement, I’ll be ready.

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