A ‘Failure to Launch’: Why Young People Are Having Less Sex

August 03, 2023

Vivian Rhodes figured she would eventually have sex.

She was raised in a Christian household in Washington state and thought sex before marriage would be the ultimate rebellion. But then college came and went — and no sex. Even flirting “felt unnatural,” she said.

In her early 20s, she watched someone she followed on Tumblr come out as asexual and realized that’s how she felt: She had yet to develop romantic feelings for anyone, and the physical act of sex just didn’t sound appealing.

“She assumed this is about shaming other people, and it’s not,” said Rhodes, 28, who works as a certified nursing assistant in Los Angeles. “I’m glad people have fun with it and it works for them. But I think sex is kind of gross. It seems very messy, and it’s vulnerable in a way that I think would be very uncomfortable.”

For what researchers say is an array of reasons — including technology, heavy academic schedules and an overall slower-motion process of growing up — millennials and now Gen Zers are having less sex, with fewer partners, than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations did. The social isolation and transmission scares of the COVID-19 pandemic have no doubt played a role in the shift. But researchers say that’s not the whole story: The “no rush for sex” trend predates the pandemic, according to a solid body of research.

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