

Middle-Aged Virgins: Overcoming The Secret Shame

By Michael Castleman

Roger Andrews, of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is 49 and has never had a sexual relationship with anyone except himself. In fact, he's had intercourse just once—at age 48 with a surrogate partner he engaged to help him, in his words, “get over his terrible handicap and join the world.”

To look at Andrews you'd never imagine his dreadful secret, or the deep shame he has suffered because of it. He's an attractive man: light complexion, thinning blond hair, strong chin. He's a successful computer engineer. He has friendly dealings with coworkers and clients. He's smart, articulate, and insightful, especially about the issue that makes him “a freak.” He's a jazz drummer, and he showed enough acting talent in college to consider a theater career. He's well traveled, and has scuba dived all over the Caribbean. But he's always been painfully shy, and never learned how to have an intimate relationship. “I never grew up in that way.”

Andrews is not alone. No studies have estimated the prevalence of virginity over age 30, but many of the nation's sex therapists report a small, steady stream of older-virgin clients. During 23 years in practice, psychologist David Johnston, Ph.D., of San Jose, California, says he's counseled 50 middle-aged virgins, collaborating with various surrogate partners. “One was 72. A few have been women. But the vast majority have been men in their thirties or forties.”

Fair Oaks, California, sex therapist Louanne Weston, Ph.D., in practice 20 years, has teamed up with surrogates to treat approximately 40 older virgins, all men. “There are more older virgins out there than people imagine. Many are tech guys. They're often charming, but they tend to be nerdy, so women don't go after them. They don't feel socially adept enough to handle the challenges of the dating scene.”

Los Angeles surrogate partner Vena Blanchard, Ph.D., president of the International Professional Surrogates Association (IPSA, surrogatetherapy.org),

says older virgins account for 50 percent of her practice. Like other legitimate, i.e. non-prostitute surrogates, Blanchard works only with men referred by psychotherapists. “Some live in Southern California. They see me and their therapist weekly. Others live elsewhere and come to Southern California for two weeks of intensive therapy, seeing me every morning and the therapist every afternoon. Most are Americans, but I’ve had clients from Canada, the UK, India, China, and Australia. It’s a real commitment for them: air fare, a hotel room and food for two weeks, a rental car, my fee, and the therapist’s fee. Intensive therapy can run \$10,000. But they do it because they’re tired of feeling stuck in their lives. They’re determined not to be alone for the rest of their lives.”

It’s not clear if older virgins are disproportionately men, but it’s the men who seek therapy. “It’s possible that there are as many older virgin women,” Weston explains. “But men generally have more insistent libidos. It’s the men who eventually decide to do something about it.”

Johnston says that in the last few years, he’s seen an uptick in the number of middle-aged virgins seeking therapy. The reason, he says, is the World Wide Web. “Before the Internet, older virgins were isolated. Now they can go to sex information sites, and hear about surrogates. They search ‘surrogate partners,’ find IPSA, and through the organization, find a surrogate and sychotherapists who work with surrogates.

That’s how Andrews found Blanchard. He’s still painfully shy, and consented to be interviewed only under a pseudonym. But he says he feels “a mission” to publicize the plight of older virgins to encourage them to get the kind of help he received.

Except for his college years, Roger Andrews has lived in Fort Lauderdale his entire life. He recalls his childhood as a happy time, with a warm, nurturing mother compensating for a cold, distant father. As a boy, Andrews was no loner. He had male friends. But around girls, he was always painfully shy. “My first relationship with a girl, in junior high, went very wrong. We liked each other, and went out a few times. But I felt totally inept. I didn’t know what to say or do. So I stopped seeing her, cut her off. I couldn’t tell her why. She was hurt, and cried. I felt awful.”

Andrews’ experience describes many people’s adolescent relationship fumbblings. But instead of soldiering on and learning interpersonal skills by painful trial and

error, he became socially paralyzed. “I shut myself off. I can’t really explain why, except to say I was very shy. I was keenly interested in women, but I felt intimidated by them. I had no idea how to get beyond casual friendships to anything romantic. And I haven’t improved much to this day. The teen years—that’s when you should begin to experience intimacy, not just sex, but the ability to feel close to potential lovers. That part of me got stuck at 12 years old—and here I am, 49, still trying to figure out how to grow up.”

“Every older virgin has a unique story,” Johnston explains. “They run the gamut from terrible shyness to emotionally barren families to sexual abuse. But all older virgins feel terrible shame. They feel embarrassed and humiliated by their lack of relationship experience.”

Age 30 is a line of demarcation. “By 30,” Blanchard explains, “older virgins feel so socially awkward and ‘out of synch’ with the world around them that they choose to hide.”

Andrews hid. Throughout his teens, on Saturday nights, he stayed home. His parents noticed. To encourage him socially, his father pushed him to play a musical instrument. He picked drums and gravitated to jazz. “I was into Bill Evans, Wes Montgomery, Chick Corea. I was in a decent garage band. We played weddings, and I played in theatrical orchestras for musicals.”

Andrews’ work in musicals led to an interest in acting. In college at a university in the South, he became involved in theater. “I was a good actor. Every spring, the theater faculty voted for awards like the Tonys. I won Best Actor my junior and senior year.”

How does a guy who’s painfully shy stand up in front of an audience and act? “It was surprisingly easy,” Andrews explains. “You have a script. You have lines and you say them. You don’t know if you’ll get the laughs you want, but you know you’ll get the girl because it’s in the script. My shyness was never a problem on stage, just in real-life where there is no script.”

Friends invited him to parties, but he never attended. After a while, they stopped asking. “I became skilled at pushing people away. I don’t think anyone ever tried to fix me up. I wouldn’t let them. I think they thought I was gay.” But he knew he wasn’t. At one point, he tried a dating service, but that went nowhere. “I just didn’t have the social skills for dating, and the older I got, the more different I felt from everyone else, the more handicapped.”

Living in near isolation, Andrews found solace in computers. It was the mid-1970s. He became a hobbyist like the young techies who invented PCs. After college, he wanted to work in a field that provided steadier employment than music or theatre. His computer skills and family connections landed him a job with a data management company. “The work wasn’t difficult. The hard part was dealing with customers. But I needed the paycheck. I used the phone a lot. It was easier than face-to-face contact. When I had to meet people, I forced myself.” Coworkers and clients invited him out for lunch or drinks, but Andrews declined. “I couldn’t shift from technical topics to social conversation, so I never socialized. I couldn’t. After work, I just went home and spent my free time by myself, except for the one night a week I had dinner with my parents.”

In his solitude, Andrews developed what he calls his “evening ritual.” He drank a beer while smoking cigarettes and cooking himself a nice dinner. Then he downed more beers and smoked more while watching the TV news, followed by cooking shows or tech programs on cable. He ended his evenings polishing off what became a daily six-pack while smoking, watching movie videos, or reading best-sellers: Grisham, Clancy, King. “My ritual wasn’t just about killing time and getting drunk. It was really a substitute for human relationships. It was comforting. I didn’t feel lonely. I could have gone on like this for the rest of my life—except that I want to have a meaningful relationship with a woman.”

Andrews found many women attractive. With some, he was able to overcome his shyness, and initiate casual conversations, but nothing more. The only woman he saw over time was the girlfriend of a close friend. “But she was unattainable, therefore she was safe.” He also kept a diary. “It was filled with agony and despair over my social ineptitude.”

Some men in Andrews’ position might opt for prostitutes. He never did. “It crossed my mind, of course. A few times I even went through the phone book looking for escort services. But I knew my problem wasn’t just a lack of sex. Hell, I could masturbate, and often did. The problem was—and is—my inability to develop an intimate human relationship. You don’t get that from a prostitute, so I wasn’t interested.”

As the years passed Andrews became “obsessed with the intimacy and sex I was missing.” By age 31, he realized that he would never find intimacy on his own, that he needed professional help. “I pulled out the phone book, looked up psychiatrists, and called one at random.” He’s been in therapy for most of the past 18 years.

Andrews' psychiatrist prescribed anti-anxiety medication and an antidepressant. But he wanted more than drugs, so he contacted a clinical psychologist, who urged him into group therapy to deal with his shyness. "I hated the group. I didn't want to talk. I was too shy and clammed up." The group quickly learned that his issue was profound shyness, especially around dating, and reassured him that it's challenging for everyone. "They seemed to think that their reassurances would allow me to step out and date. No way. I just couldn't." At one point, a man in the group confessed sexual frustration and said he might go to California and have sex with a surrogate. (Most surrogates work in California because it's unambiguously legal there. But some surrogates work in other states.) Andrews had never heard of surrogates. Soon after, he left the group, and opted for individual psychotherapy. He's been with his current therapist, a woman, for six years. He likes her, and feels she's helping him. But he still wasn't dating. He was still a virgin.

Eventually, Andrews recalled the man in his therapy group who had mentioned surrogates. On a whim, he did an Internet search. "I got tons of porno, and then I noticed IPSA." He emailed the organization, and heard back from Blanchard, now in her mid-40s who's been a surrogate for more than 20 years. She provided a phone number and invited Andrews to call. He learned several things: that she was not a prostitute but an intimacy coach and therapist, that surrogates don't always have intercourse with clients, that what they do is introduce clients to loving touch and relationship skills. Blanchard said she would send him an application, and asked for a \$200 good-faith deposit, which would be applied to her fee. "The deposit discourages frivolous inquiries," she explains. Andrews agreed.

The application asked why Andrews wanted to work with a surrogate. He replied: "I feel alone and anxious because I haven't had any intimate, sexual relationships." It asked for his treatment goals. He listed seven: "(1) To learn to touch and be touched to fulfill my yearning for physical contact. (2) To feel better about myself because I've had sexual experience. (3) To increase my chances of relationships with women. (4) To end my confusion about the appropriate place for sex in relationships. (5) To satisfy my burning curiosity about women's bodies. (6) To better understand my own body and feelings. (7) To find out what the 'joy of sex' is all about."

Blanchard presented Andrews with options for surrogate partner therapy: He could involve his local therapist and bring a surrogate to his area, or he could travel to California to work with a therapist and surrogate team there. He wanted to stay in Fort Lauderdale so his therapist could be involved. Blanchard was willing to come East, but before that, she wanted to talk with his therapist.

Andrews' therapist was very skeptical. "She kept saying, 'This can't be legal. It's prostitution. I could lose my license.'" Andrews urged her to read an Internet interview with Blanchard (www.sexuality.org... Vena Blanchard interview), and to call her. The therapist balked. Finally, Andrews said, "Your license is safe if I see a prostitute and tell you about it. What's wrong with seeing a surrogate and telling you about it? I want to work with you on this, but if you won't work with me, I'll go to California and see a therapist there." His therapist relented (and has since become a big supporter of surrogate therapy for older virgins).

Frequently, however, it's the psychotherapist who suggests surrogate therapy to older virgins. Weston has arranged for several middle-aged virgin clients to see surrogates. "The surrogates I work with rely on me to screen the guys, to make sure they're safe and not crazy."

Before embarking on surrogate therapy, however, there was one thing Andrews felt he had to do—tell his parents. "We're close—and not close. It's like a business relationship, which might explain why I'm good at business relationships, but not good at intimate ones. I told my parents I was taking a two-week vacation to do something unusual. When I explained, they were surprised, shocked. I'd never told them I was a virgin, and they'd never asked. I left a copy of Vena's Internet interview with my mother. She wrote me a note expressing concern and support. My father had no reaction, and has never mentioned it."

Blanchard flew to Florida. Andrews took two weeks vacation, and spent about \$8,300 for her transportation, hotel, and fee. He felt excited to meet her, but also apprehensive. "Initially, most clients feel anxious" Blanchard explains. "They don't know what to expect. But in deciding to work with a surrogate, they've already confessed their big, dark secret. They don't have to hide anymore, and that's very liberating. They quickly discover that surrogate work is a slow gentle process of building relationship skills. I don't promise they'll have relationships, just that they'll feel more comfortable with the process of trying."

Over several daily three-hour sessions, Blanchard and Andrews talked extensively about his life, past and present, and Blanchard directed him in relaxation and touching exercises. "First, she had me touch an apple, then a comb, then other objects to experience what sensual touch feels like." They talked about what he felt. "Next, she asked me to touch my own arms and face." They talked some more. Then she offered her hands, arms, and eventually her face for him to explore, and she touched his arms, feet, and face.

“Gentle, nurturing touch is new for most older virgins,” Blanchard explains. “Many don’t recall ever being touched that way before by anyone. Imagine what it must feel like never to have known gentle touch, and then to have someone hold your hand, stroke your arm, run their fingers through your hair. It’s a profound experience. Often, clients cry.”

Meanwhile, every afternoon, Andrews met with his psychotherapist, and discussed what happened that morning. “Vena asked good questions and was a very good listener,” he explains, “but it helped to have someone else listening to me and asking questions, too. I needed the extra support and perspective.”

Weston says it’s important to have a therapist backing up the surrogate. “Many older virgins can hardly believe it when they kiss a woman’s lips or touch her breasts or vulva. I reassure them, “Yes, it really did happen. You really did that.”

Blanchard talked with Andrews’ psychotherapist daily. She also provided him with basic sex education. Many older virgins have never had much, she explains “I often lend them books written for adolescents because developmentally, around sex, that’s how old they feel.” Blanchard also answers clients’ sex questions: Does my penis look weird? What’s a tampon? How do you unfasten a bra? What’s the real story about the clitoris, G-spot, and women’s orgasms?

As their sensual explorations continued, Blanchard told Andrews she was open to becoming more intimate, but that she had one firm rule: Before every move they would both ask the other’s permission, and would absolutely respect each other’s answers. He agreed. Andrews asked if they might kiss. Blanchard consented, but first instructed him to practice by kissing his own arm, then hers, and finally her lips. “At first, kissing felt very awkward,” he explains. “I’d never kissed anyone before.” Andrews encountered the problem many young teens have with kissing—where your nose goes. “Vena showed me how to position my head and lips so our noses didn’t get in the way.” They practiced kissing quite a bit. “As I relaxed, I began to enjoy it. Kissing is great.” But they stuck to lip-kissing with closed mouths, no tongue action. “I didn’t feel comfortable with open-mouth kissing.”

Eventually, Blanchard suggested they discuss the possibility of undressing. “That was nerve wracking,” Andrews recalls. “I was a blubbering fool for a few minutes.” So Blanchard encouraged him to imagine how disrobing would feel. They discussed it. She asked how far he wanted to go with undressing. The first time, Andrews chose to stop at their underwear. “I really wanted to see her breasts and genitals, but I didn’t want her to see my erection.” They stood facing each other, Andrews in his bulging shorts, Blanchard in a bra and panties. “She talked

me through looking at her body. I looked at her hair, eyes, nose, shoulders, and on down, scanning everything very slowly and methodically, getting accustomed to it.” The next day, Andrews felt comfortable getting completely undressed, and revealing his erection. “It was fine. It just took me a little while to get used to the idea.” Next they spent time looking at each other together in the mirror. “Seeing himself in the mirror next to a friendly naked woman helped make it real for him,” Blanchard recalls.

Once they both felt comfortable being naked together, Blanchard eased Andrews into mutual whole-body massage. Andrews caressed her face, arms, belly, legs--and eventually, with Blanchard’s permission, her breasts. “Touching her breasts,” he recalls, “was very intense. Vena’s breasts are fantastic. I think it’s the most wonderful thing in the world to touch a woman there.” Eventually their massage exercises included genital caressing with lubricant.

Andrews continued to see his psychotherapist daily. “It was very valuable. I can’t overemphasize it. She helped me process things, and gave me great feedback about what was happening with Vena. I felt very lucky to have her. Still do.”

Andrews felt uncomfortable with the idea of oral sex, so they didn’t explore it. But by the end of his second week with Blanchard, he asked if they might have vaginal intercourse. Some surrogates don’t do this, but Blanchard agreed. “The intercourse itself was not that big a deal,” Andrews explains. “I mean, I was glad to have it. I was glad I wasn’t a virgin anymore, that I’d finally ‘done it.’ But I didn’t need it more than once. Our whole process of becoming physically intimate and talking about it was much more important to me. I felt freed from some of my shame about being so naive and confused about sex. I actually enjoyed whole-body massage more than I enjoyed intercourse, especially touching Vena’s face and breasts.”

But finally having intercourse was important to Andrews in another way: “Once I’d done it, I felt I could move on and think about dating and getting into a relationship.”

One potential hazard of surrogate work for older virgins is the possibility of falling in love with the surrogate partner. This is not surprising. The surrogate knows their terrible secret and doesn’t think the less of them. She is friendly, supportive, and willing to become physically intimate. But Andrews did not fall in love with Blanchard. “She’s very attractive, but I was clear that ours was a professional relationship. I consider her a friend, and hope she thinks the same of me.”

During their last few days together, Blanchard and Andrews talked a great deal about his next step—dating. “It’s hard for me to imagine,” Andrews says. “People say: Just do it, just ask someone out. But I’m still so shy, so inexperienced. The prospect is frightening.” Blanchard suggested some books for him to read, among them, *Dating for Dummies*. And he’s been discussing the challenges of dating with his psychotherapist as well.

Weston says dating issues are a major stumbling block for older virgins who have completed surrogate therapy. “I support them to date,” she says. “I help them figure out their best approach. Some want to place Personals ads. I help them write their ads, and respond to anyone who contacts them. Some want to use professional matchmaking services. I help them with their personal profiles. Some like speed dating, where a roomful of singles spend five minutes with each other and afterward declare who they’d like to see again. If there’s a match, the service puts the two people in touch. And when clients begin dating, I help them evaluate the relationship and decide if they should pursue it. It’s often slow going, but most of my older-virgin clients have dated and had relationships.”

“I can’t claim that every guy I’ve worked with has fallen in love and gotten married,” Blanchard says, “but I’ve received quite a few wedding and birth announcements.”

Currently, Andrews says he’s “getting ready to date.” He’s working to quit smoking, and he’s drinking less. “They’re bad habits that turn women off.” He’s decided not to place or answer any Personals. “They’re too impersonal. I want human contact.” He’s toying with joining a gym, in part to meet women and in part to break the habit of his isolated evening ritual. He plans to join a scuba club that caters to singles. And he says he’s intrigued by speed-dating.”

Andrews is still processing his work with Blanchard, and doesn’t know how he’ll fare in the dating game. But already, he says, he feels better about himself. “Working with Vena has made a big difference in my life. I’m less ashamed of my sexlessness. I don’t feel so stigmatized, or as naive about how intimate relationships work. I’ve realized that T&A is much less important than sensual touch. I was surprised how much I enjoyed the nonsexual touching we did. I feel more open to other people than I ever have. I feel like a real person now, like I’m becoming a citizen of the world.”

