

We speak to the first brand to specialise in sex toys for people with disabilities

At the moment, over half of people with physical disabilities struggle to achieve sexual pleasure alone. Handi was founded on the principle that everyone should be able to get off.

Maddyness spoke to Heather Morrison from *Handi* about learning from sex and disability activists — including her brother and cofounder; the intersection of pleasure and pain; and what it's been like working with UK stalwart LoveHoney across development, manufacturing and distribution.

As you say, sexual pleasure is a human right according to the WHO. What limits access to this, and how does Handi present a solution?

Broadly speaking, there are many limitations placed on our sexual expression and rights — culturally, systemically and physically. To look at culture and systems created by it, sex on its own is still incredibly taboo even in the most

open societies. This increases when you layer in self pleasure and masturbation, and even more so when you talk about disabilities and aging and sexual pleasure.

There is a broad belief system that disabled and aging people aren't sexual beings — that they don't have sexual needs or feelings or that they are asexual.

This means that necessary dialogue and conversation isn't taking place to create a sexually inclusive society, leaving those affected on the sidelines. The systems in place further enforce this — for example, many disabled people are not included in sex ed classes.

From a physical standpoint, the biggest barrier to self pleasure is hand limitations — from weakness, disabilities, lack of dexterity, arthritis, pain, injury etc. Despite hundreds of millions globally being affected, there are no toys on the market designed with this barrier in mind, leaving people feeling pretty frustrated.

Handi believes that everyone has the right to 'get off' and experience sexual pleasure regardless of abilities. So we are working to put pleasure within reach.

First, we are building a brand that tears down the taboos and opens up conversation and dialogue. The Handi Book of Love, Lust & Disability was our first major release to achieve this.

Second, we are creating the first line of sex toys for people who cannot use their hands. Co-created with the design, clinical and disabled communities to ensure we are solving the problem at hand, pun intended. To this end, our first product, called the Handi Joystick, is set to go to presale in May and removes the need for hands and fine motor skills across the entire user experience, from packaging to using to cleaning, charging and storage. We're making sure to consider every step, start to finish.

What inspired you to start up the business?

My younger brother and cofounder Andrew Gurza is a disabled man and also a sex+disability activist. Through his work and lived experience he gave me my lightbulb moment and made me aware of the problem — to be honest, it's one that I had never thought about before, like so many of us who are able to self-pleasure any time we like.

That's something I will never take for granted ever again. Once I had this lightbulb moment, I couldn't shake it.

And we decided to tackle the problem and see if we could help people access their human right to sexual pleasure.

Heather and Andy, cofounders of Handi.

Did you have prior expertise?

My background is innovation and brand strategy — so I am familiar with what it takes to build a strong brand with meaning. And I know how to create products and services that matter based on design thinking and human centered principles.

Andrew brings his lived experience and over a decade working as sex+disability activist, shining a light on this topic. So we're a pretty amazing team to tackle this problem.

However, neither of us are designers or occupational therapists, so we've made sure that we have the best minds in both fields working on this project, including Dr Judith Glover from RMIT University — who holds a PhD in sex toy design, and sr. occupational therapists with sexual health backgrounds.

We've recently partnered with adult retailer and manufacturer Lovehoney to help product development, manufacturing and distribution, ensuring we'll be

able to get our products into homes and bedrooms globally.

What have the biggest challenges been? Manufacturing, funding, stigma?

We've run into three major challenges:

Infrastructure wary of taboo — Because of the taboo nature of sextech, things like infrastructure and traditional marketing platforms are more difficult to navigate. It's harder, for example, to find an insurance provider and even created a few extra hurdles in setting up our business at the beginning.

From a marketing POV, they say sex sells, but not on Facebook and Instagram. The main social platforms, which most startups are able to use, are off the table for us as they remove our content, even when it's not product related, due to very strict regulations that don't even allow sexual health and wellness conversations to take place.

We are constantly caught between trying to force FB to take our money, and wanting nothing to do with a platform that doesn't align with our values.

Hardware is hard — When we set out to completely reimagine sex tech for disabled people, we had never heard this turn of phrase commonly used in startup land.

Essentially, birthing a physical product into the world takes more capital and work than it does to create an app or online marketplace. It involved design, testing, physical prototypes, materials, manufacturing, shipping and meeting of regulatory standards, to name a few.

There are far more hurdles standing in the way of a hardware business than there are for software. We are still in the process of navigating these. However, we have an amazing team of advisors, advocates and partners helping us every step of the way.

Investment — Underpinning both of these is the lack of investment for sextech

from traditional VCs and even family or business grants. Many don't want sextech associated with their names or don't understand the incredible value and ROI within the category (currently estimated at \$32B annual revenue). If we had more investment across the category and certainly within Handi, both of the previous two issues would be resolved.

Is disability often considered across the sextech landscape? How do you differ from any competitors?

No, it's not often considered. I wouldn't go as far as to say it's never considered but when it is (which is rarely) it's an afterthought or a bolt-on. It's not core to the mission or design.

“Handi is the first brand that is designing products and a brand that specifically focuses on the needs of the growing disabled population.”

Our populations are aging and as we age, our likelihood of disability dramatically increases. So this isn't a niche play — it's a mass market play. Because there are 500,000,000 people globally currently affected and rising. Not to mention, universal design benefits us all. Whether it's as we age, incur a disability, or benefit from designs today.

Our research has told us that +80% of able-bodied people are interested in hands-free sextech. But instead of going mass, and then trying to squeeze in disability later, we are focusing on the highest unmet need, and then ensuring that there is mass appeal. We've flipped the script.

Tell us about your partnership with LoveHoney. Do you think they have changed the world of sextech as a

brand?

Our partnership started with the release of The Handi Book, which LoveHoney helped distribute and retail globally. It has now moved into The Handi Joystick, our first product.

It's incredibly exciting for us as LoveHoney provides decades of experience in product development, manufacturing and distribution globally, which we can leverage. It massively derisks the supply chain and logistics pipeline that so many hardware startups can get caught in.

I don't know that I can claim it's changed the world of sextech as a brand — that's a big claim — but the team's purpose is to be 'the sexual happiness people', which ladders into our mission of putting sexual pleasure within reach in a really great way.

Both brands are incredibly inclusive and want to ensure sexual rights and freedoms, for everyone. It's been an amazing experience working with such a large entity; we've learnt from the team's experience and benefited from the networks they've already set up. Further to that, they believe in our mission and have been incredibly supportive. We couldn't have asked for a better partnership.

Can you give us a few of the top insights from your recent book on Love, Lust and Disability?

The Handi Book was the first product and first book that Handi released. It was born from the realisation that while there is content that exists about sex and disability, it's all very clinical and very focused on the mechanics — can disabled people have sex (yes), are they sexual beings (yes; since they're people just like everyone else, some are sexual some aren't), how do they have sex (depends and is personal preference and based on their abilities), and so on.

There was nothing that really went deeper and got under the skin of the issue.

Nothing that looked at what it *feels* like to have sexual experiences and a disabled experience. We wanted to fill that void, looking at questions that had never before been openly explored and talked about. Certainly not published.

Questions like: What was your best sexual experience and what was your worst? What's the sexiest thing anyone's ever said to you about your disability? How does your disability influence your body image? What's it like to be the sexual partner of a disabled person?

We took these questions and many others to the community, working with 50 disabled contributors from all ages, backgrounds, geographies and disabilities to give their voices a space and place where they have been silenced and ignored for so long. The book is *now available in print, audio and digital* with every single dollar of profit helping to fund our first toy, The Handi Joystick.

In terms of insights, we learned so much creating this book and every one of us took something different away from it. Some really interesting findings for me included the intersection of pleasure and pain — with so many people talking about how sexual pleasure was the only way they could escape chronic pain, some even claiming it was more effective than morphine!

On the flip side, many people talked about seeking out pain within their sexual experiences in order to feel in control of something they don't have control in during their day-to-day.

Another chapter that really got to me was the chapter on Coming Out and how so many people felt stronger and more confident once they owned their disability and surrendered to it instead of hiding or fighting it.

I promise you, every person who reads it will take away something different and learn something unexpected.

For more candid insights on the world of sexual wellness and sex tech, listen to our new podcast. VOICE by Maddyness is available on Spotify and Apple podcasts now.

Host Graham Hussey speaks to: the investment banker and gynaecology doctor behind HANX; the cofounder of the UK's most-funded sextech startup, MysteryVibe; the entrepreneur democratising digital sex therapy, based on his own personal hardship, at Blueheart; the hostess with the mostess behind Killing Kittens, which has taken to hosting online sex parties over lockdown; and the MADE.COM founder turned sextech pioneer behind Kama.

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