The sex therapists of Silicon Valley are overwhelmed by tech guys

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"Dan" seems at first to perfectly embody that popular object of scorn these days in San Francisco: the privileged tech worker. He's a developer-turned-manager at a thriving startup, the type of guy you would expect to see dodging protesters at a Google bus stop or evicting low-income tenants in order to build his dream condo. But beyond that veneer of untouchable privilege, there is a soft underbelly. He's a 40-year-old virgin, and his troubles with women are bad enough that he's sought out a sex therapist for help.

While being a virgin at 40 may be extreme, Dan is one of many tech guys who are driving business for the sex therapists of the San Francisco Bay Area. The counselors I've spoken with say that anywhere between 50 to 90 percent of their clientele are tech workers, and the vast majority of them are heterosexual men. (Tech employees were estimated in 2011 to account for only 12 percent of workers in the Bay Area.)

This is in part a result of techies' higher-than-average salaries, which allow them to pay for therapy, particularly when it comes to non-traditional counseling that isn't covered by insurance. There's something else at play here, though: In general, tech workers are more vulnerable to issues around love and intimacy, according to several local sex therapists I've interviewed. The reasons for this are wide-ranging, but in Dan's particular case, it resulted from being tagged as a prodigy at a young age. He excelled in science and was encouraged to pursue it to the exclusion of all else.

"These are the tropes of tech development," says Elizabeth McGrath, his sex therapist, who shared his story with me. (McGrath did not give me her patient's name, and asked me to use a pseudonym when writing about him.) "To his mind, and his processing, there was no desire to prioritize anything other than that." She spends much of their sessions trying to teach him the very basics of talking to women.

That's a frequent focus for the sex therapists in Silicon Valley and surrounding areas. "[These men] often spend their time in environments that are mostly male, like in school and tech offices," explains another therapist, Celeste Hirschman. "So they don't have a lot of practice just relating to women, period, let alone learning how to meet, pickup, seduce, touch." Hirschman follows a less-traditional therapy method known as Somatica, which is "body-based" and allows for non-genital touch between the counselor and client, the idea being that there are things that can't be learned through talk alone. For example, she will wrestle with clients just to get them out of their heads and into their bodies.

Another common issue that these therapists encounter with tech clients is they treat sex like a line of broken code in need of debugging, or a mathematical equation. "That's the crux of trying to interact with a human, though: there isn't a formula," says McGrath. "Human connection is not formulaic. Does it have statistics, can you look at data, can you research it and quantify it? Sure. But in one-to-one, it is always variable. That's where those things fail." This isn't entirely unique to programmers — a look at glossy magazine headlines or popular self-help books suggests that many people are interested in finding a magic key to unlock good sex — but she says, "For people in tech, it's just a little bit harder."

Vanessa Marin, a psychotherapist who specializes in sex therapy, says her tech clients are too much in their own heads. "A lot of what I hear from my clients is they're sitting doing a code all day long and then you get home and it's trying to make that transition into being with another human being and trying to connect with someone on an emotional level and be present with them," she said. "It just feels a little jarring. They don't have the time to ease back into being back at home — or they might still be on their computers, checking work email from their phone." Of course, people in general find it hard to unplug these days, but she says, "It's definitely more common in the tech industry."

Add to that insane work days that never seem to truly end. "A big thing that I see with tech couples and individuals is a complete lack of time and work-life balance," says Hirschman. She's seeing a couple now in which both partners are techies and the wife only wants to have quickies so that she can get back to her long to-do list.

McGrath is working with a couple in which the woman is a yoga instructor and the man works for a startup. His work takes so much out of him that he tends to treat sex like a chore to be checked off at the end of the day. "That doesn't feel like present, connected sex; that feels like going-to-the-gym sex. It's like 'I'll get on the treadmill and I'll run and I'll feel better,' and she doesn't want to be a treadmill." The New York Times recently published a feature about tech guys too busy for real meals who subsist on protein powder shakes — clearly, that mentality also applies to sex.

These kinds of consequences exist in any job with high stress and long hours. It just so happens that in the Bay Area, tech is that dominant field. Ian Kerner, a New York-based sex therapist, sees a similar phenomenon with bankers. "Many don't have time for long-term relationships so they rely on a steady diet of hookups and are using apps that offer a panoply of sexual options with immediate gratification," he says. "For those who are in long-term relationships, many also grapple with low libido due to stress and anxiety, or a problematic relationship with their digital devices." Many times, these bankers can't even turn their devices off during therapy, he says.

In a sense, tech guys are the new bankers—at least in San Francisco. Inevitably, the money that can be made in the industry impacts dating and relationships. Hirschman says some of her clients will downplay or hide the money they make out of fear that it's the primary reason a woman will be interested in them. "I had one client I was just talking to the other day, he said, 'I don't know if I want to bring women to my house right away because it's a big, huge house and

suddenly they're wanting to nest after the second date and they haven't even gotten to know me yet!'"

McGrath believes that while there may be women out there on the prowl for a Google billionaire, these men's fears largely come from deep-seated personal insecurity. "Part of that is, 'A woman couldn't be interested in me for me,'" she says. "That is a common thread for many men who are in the tech industry. They have never been seen as 'the boyfriend' or felt attractive or sexy. They felt dorky or like outsiders."

It's important to note that sex therapists are necessarily going to see only people who are having trouble with sex, so their experiences with tech workers certainly aren't an accurate representation of the field as a whole. (It's also true that the definitions of "tech worker," "startup" and "tech company" are becoming increasingly diffuse.) There are those who perfectly embody the anti-social pocket-protector cliché, but many are socially competent, even savvy. McGrath points out, too: "There are plenty of what is commonly referred to as bro-dudes in tech that are very successfully sexual, to the point of detriment to them and the people they are dating," she says. "But those guys aren't coming to me."

The men, like Dan, who *are* coming to see her have been hindered by the very thing that allows them to excel in their field. "There is a very strong reinforcement [in tech] on using your brain," says McGrath. "You brain is what's of value." But when it comes to sex, she says, "our brains are bullshit."