

Michael is a 36-year-old man who has recently become close friends with a woman at his tennis club. They have been on several dates to the movies and restaurants and he is reasonably confident that the relationship will become sexual should he prove willing. Michael comes to therapy and, after several sessions during which he establishes trust, he discloses that the reason for his presentation is not his concern about the relationship per se, but rather that the only way he is capable of engaging sexually is by masturbating alone while surrounded by balloons. This has been the case for him for many years. Michael has delicately broached the subject of differing sexualities, and of rubber in particular, with his prospective partner, over several weeks, and he has become convinced that, were he to disclose his sexuality to her, the nascent relationship would end.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Michael?
- What themes can you imagine emerging as you continue?
- What assumptions might you bring to this?
- How would you proceed?

It is important to bear in mind that there is nothing inherently harmful about masturbating while surrounded by balloons. In the larger scheme of things this is an innocuous activity. The difficulty arises from Michael's wish to have a romantic relationship and the conflict with that. Of course it may be that, as above, there is no actual conflict but rather the problem is more due to Michael's concerns about a potential conflict. However, if this possibility has been excluded, we are then left with considering how best to accommodate these apparently conflicting desires.

Of course, any potential way forward will need to come from Michael himself, but it is important not to rush to a reflex response as he may feel that his desire is so transgressive that, once again, of course he would wish to be rid of it entirely. If the sexual practice – or desire – is longstanding, it will be extremely difficult, or impossible, to remove, and consequently will best be adapted or accommodated. Accommodation may be achieved through undertaking the practice privately, or with another partner, etc. Or adaptation may be achieved through some means of pursuing the desire in a form which coincides with Michael's new relationship, for example, by

broaching the possibility of wearing rubber clothing, watching pornography of this type together, expanding the sexual menu in various ways, etc. Creative consideration of all such possibilities will be a useful part of therapy. It may be that the practice and relationship are simply incompatible, in which case the therapeutic aim may ultimately be coming to terms with this and acknowledging Michael's pain and frustration about it.