

# RELATIONSHIPS

## Proud to be a virgin

### Can it really be cool to just say no?

By JUDITH NEWMAN  
 © New York Times News Service

"Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee, lousy with virginity," sang Stockard Channing, the cool fast girl taunting goody-two-shoes Olivia Newton-John in the 1978 movie "Grease." Teen-age virgins in the audience heard the movie's message all too clearly: If you want to win the man you love, stop being such a stiff.

Get out of that fluffy sweater and into a pair of leather pants and stilettos (as Newton-John's character did to win over the heartthrob played by John Travolta). Smoke. Have sex. Live.

But the recent revival of "Grease" on Broadway seemed peculiarly dated. For all its poodle skirts and ducktails, "Grease" seems steeped in a '70s sensibility: Sex as an adventure, even for good girls and boys.

It's a message that no longer rings true because virginity is making a comeback, along with sexual abstinence.

Well, maybe not in actual numbers.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States says that 55 percent of high school students have had sex by the time they are seniors. As Debra W. Haffner, executive director of the council, puts it, "The 'increasing trend toward virginity' is an adult's hopeful myth."

But the idea that virginity is in some sense hip is spreading through popular culture.

On television, America's most popular virgin is Donna Martin, played by Tori Spelling on "Beverly Hills, 90210"; a continuing theme has revolved around whether she will Do It. (She hasn't.)

The title character on "Blossom," played by Mayim Bialik, remains proud of her virginity, despite some

groping on the couch. Edward, a teen-ager on "Family Matters," is still a proud virgin, as he told his admiring buddies. And on "L.A. Law," the virginal lawyer Jane Halliday went into syndication unscathed, despite some heavy-duty flirting with masher Arnie Becker.

But chastity isn't being espoused by just fictional characters created by grown-ups. Kennedy, the host of an MTV show, hinted that she is a virgin.

While rock groups that espouse Christian fundamentalism have been singing the joys of virginity for years (the Christian rap group D.C. Talk went gold with an album that included such cuts as "I Don't Want It" and "That Kind of Girl"), other pop performers have begun to support the abstinence message too.

For example, rock musician Julianna Hatfield has declared that she is a virgin. And country singer Reba McEntire has said she is pleased that "She Thinks His Name Was John," a song about a woman regretting a one-night stand with a man who had AIDS, has been interpreted as a message for abstinence.

Perhaps most startling has been the emergence of a group called Athletes for Abstinence. Spearheaded by Phoenix Suns forward A. C. Green, the group also has marshaled David Robinson of the San Antonio Spurs, Barry Sanders of the Detroit Lions and Darryl Green of the Washington Redskins for a 35-minute film, "It Ain't Worth It."

Need further evidence of chastity's acceptability?

Just tune in to a daytime talk show, the petri dish of sexual peccadilloes. "One sure way to get a round of applause on the show is to announce your virginity," said Bill Lancaster, a producer for "Geraldo."

"These days, there's nothing bold or innovative about saying you sleep around. What takes a lot of

guts is to say you're a virgin."

Diane Ackerman, author of "A Natural History of Love" (Random House, 1994), said, "In the time I was privileged to experience — a time of free love and minor health fears — virginity would have been considered gauche. But in these plague years, it's definitely hip to be 'safe' and healthy."

Why the change?

"Virginity, which was not valued in men but was prized in women in virtually all societies, was traditionally associated with naiveté," Ackerman said.

"Now we live in a culture that educates young people very fast. We used to learn about sex in whispers and back alleys, and sometimes in books, but only by suggestion or insinuation. Now we can go to movies and see graphic sex. Now virgins can be worldly wise and even knowledgeable about sex."

Pamela Regan, an assistant professor of social psychology at Albion College in Michigan, and Susan Sprecher of Illinois State University are studying male and female college students who say they are virgins.

"Much of the change in attitude has to do with the rise in AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases," Regan said. Thus, "it's more acceptable for young men and women to say, 'Hey, I'm going to wait.' And being a virgin no longer means religiosity, nor does it connote coldness or frigidity."

A Sprecher-Regan study of 200 college virgins found that the primary reason both men and women were abstaining was "I haven't been in love or been in a relationship long enough." Fears about pregnancy and AIDS were close behind. On average, religious beliefs rated about seventh on the list of reasons for women, ninth for men.

"Saying no to sex is no longer a



Olivia Newton-John, left, went after her man in "Grease."



Noted TV virgins include the characters played by Tori Spelling, above, on "Beverly Hills, 90210" and Mayim Bialik on "Blossom."



laughable, uncool idea," Regan said.

Of course, not every virgin is shouting about it from the rooftops.

"Yes, yes, I'm a member of the club," said Estee Pierce, 18, who is entering her sophomore year at Vassar College. "I know one guy, my friend's boyfriend, who really wants to wait until marriage."

"My girlfriend finds it wonderful. She felt she sexually compromised herself in high school. So he's perfect for her, in the sense that sex isn't an issue between them."

"She's a reborn virgin."