



'YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE THE SEXIEST PERSON ALIVE AFTER A FLARE-UP'

NEW RELATIONSHIPS COME WITH EXTRA CHALLENGES WHEN YOU'RE LIVING WITH IBD, AS KATIE AND MAT EXPLAIN

WORDS JULIE PENFOLD
PHOTOGRAPHS GEORGE ARCHER



When you have IBD, there are additional considerations that can make entering new relationships daunting. There's the worry around how much of an impact IBD could have on your relationship and there's also the question of how you would go about explaining your condition to someone who may have little understanding of IBD.

For Katie Cheema, 29, and Mat Neill, 32, uncomfortable conversations about how they are feeling are a thing of the past, as they both have partners who uniquely understand their condition – each other. Katie and Mat have been together for almost two years and met via dating app Tinder. They quickly discovered within a couple of days of text messaging one another that they had a Crohn's Disease diagnosis in common. Mat was diagnosed when he was 16, while Katie was diagnosed in 2011. Katie and her family were scared when she received her diagnosis due to the experiences of Katie's dad, who has a severe form of Crohn's. He was admitted to hospital to have part of his intestine removed, which

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WE FILL OUR POTS UP ON A SUNDAY AND TAKE OUR MEDICATION TOGETHER

resulted in him being placed in a medically induced coma due to the development of peritonitis.

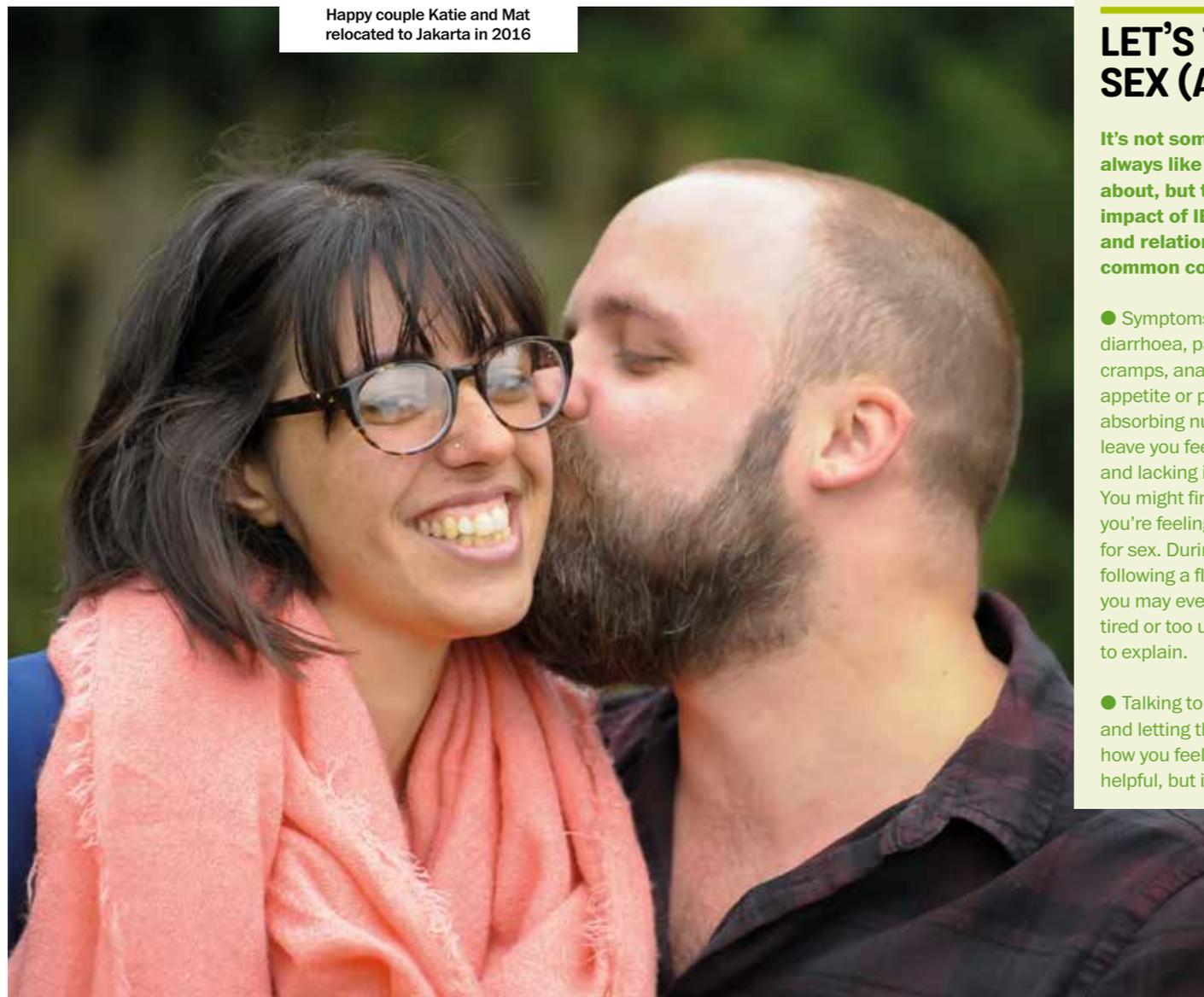
“My first dealings of IBD were through that traumatic experience with my dad,” says Katie. “So, when I was diagnosed, that was all we knew of Crohn’s Disease. I didn’t know it was a disease that can be managed and that it’s something that can be okay to deal with.”

It’s the first relationship that Katie and Mat have had with another person who has IBD. Both say it makes talking about and dealing with flare-ups easier. “We have this shorthand where if one of us is feeling tired or has an upset stomach, we just go ‘I’ve got Crohn’s Disease today’ and we both instantly know what that means,” says Mat.

“Having that understanding between us does help massively,” adds Katie.

The common symptoms of IBD – such as extreme tiredness, chronic diarrhoea and painful cramps – can mean sex isn’t the first thing on your mind when you’re in a relationship. In fact, sex could be the last thing you’re considering, as worries about a flare-up occurring overtake every other thought. This has certainly been the case for Mat in past relationships.

“It’s difficult for me to get comfortable with someone,” he says. “There isn’t that impulsiveness or spontaneity because you can’t suddenly decide to stay overnight, as there are always worries in the back of your mind such as ‘what if I’m ill in the morning?’. Crohn’s does really affect intimacy because you can’t act instinctively. After a flare-up, there’s also the issue that you don’t quite feel clean. You certainly don’t feel like the sexiest person alive.”



Happy couple Katie and Mat relocated to Jakarta in 2016

“You don’t want to be approached sometimes either,” adds Katie. “If you’ve had a bit of a bad flare-up then showered and changed, you feel a little more refreshed and chilled. But you don’t feel comfortable going beyond the snuggling-up stage with someone as all you can think about is how your stomach still hurts.”

Another aspect that Mat finds easier now is eating out and avoiding trigger foods. “There’s such a contrast now in terms of anxiety with Katie,” explains Mat. “It can be difficult to get across to someone who doesn’t have IBD that certain foods can make you unwell. They may think what you

have is just a slightly upset stomach and can’t understand why you won’t give something a try. When you’re in a new relationship, it’s hard to have that dialogue early on, as you can’t really verbalise everything about your condition because there are so many different aspects to it.”

Being open about your symptoms and how IBD can affect you can help your partner recognise the signs and be on hand to help, but it’s not always that easy to talk about. It’s something Mat knows from personal experience.

“At the start of a past relationship, I’d gone round to my then-girlfriend’s

house to see her,” he recalls. “We were talking in her room upstairs when I needed to use the toilet, which was situated downstairs. Excruciating cramps suddenly came on and I became ill very quickly. I couldn’t pretend everything was okay, as I was still in a lot of discomfort, so I ended up leaving without explaining. I think it’s been more a case of how I’ve handled situations with IBD in relationships than how past partners have responded to me having Crohn’s.”

Mat has also experienced episodes of anxiety and depression, and stress is a major trigger for him. He feels his

anxiety and depression can be exacerbated at times by Crohn’s. “I’ve lost jobs because of IBD while I’ve been in a relationship and it can leave you feeling worthless, which in turn can set off anxiety and depression.”

When Katie has a flare-up, this can lead to frightening panic attacks and anxiety. The attacks are usually triggered by the emergence of a new symptom and fear of her condition worsening. Having Mat to talk to and discuss concerns with has helped her to deal with her condition better. She says: “When I go into a panic, my head fills with worst-case scenarios and Mat is really good at helping me

LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX (AND IBD)

It’s not something we always like to talk about, but the potential impact of IBD on sex and relationships is a common concern.

- Symptoms such as diarrhoea, painful cramps, anaemia, poor appetite or problems absorbing nutrients can leave you feeling weak and lacking in energy. You might find at times you’re feeling too tired for sex. During or following a flare-up you may even feel too tired or too unwell to explain.

- Talking to your partner and letting them know how you feel can be helpful, but it isn’t always

easy for people in good health to understand just how exhausting IBD can be.

- Many couples find having a sense of humour can be a real help. Seeing the funny side of things can be a welcome relief when life doesn’t quite go to plan at times.

- If you’re having a chat about your condition with a new partner for the first time, try to be clear and concise in your explanations of your illness, and avoid being apologetic.

Further reading at crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/sexualrelationships

IT’S HARD TO HAVE THAT DIALOGUE EARLY ON

to slow down and better manage my illness. I used to have frequent colds due to low immunity, but I now take a daily zinc supplement and that has made a real difference.”

Making changes together also helps. Katie can sometimes forget to take her IBD medication so the couple now have individual pill pots that highlight whether daily medication has been taken or not. “We fill our pots up on a Sunday and take our medication together so I’m much better with that now,” she says. “Also, if we decide we’re going to cut out a certain food, if it’s causing issues for one of us, for example, then we’ll do that together.”

Additionally, Katie and Mat moved from Kent to Jakarta, Indonesia, in August and credit their move with the good health they’re both currently experiencing. Consuming the plant-based, fruit- and vegetable-focused diet favoured in Jakarta has led to Katie and Mat eating better and consuming fewer of the processed foods and sweet snacks that can make them ill. It also helps that processed foods are more difficult to get hold of there. The change in temperature also means the couple are drinking a lot more water now to stay cool.

What the future may hold is something Katie and Mat have already discussed. They hope to get married and have children, but the issue of whether they would be more likely to have a child who develops IBD isn’t something that is a real cause for concern for them.

“I’ve got Crohn’s, my dad has Crohn’s, my mum has IBS, Mat has Crohn’s and his sister also has Crohn’s – it’s just one of those things,” says Katie. “If it happens, it happens.”

Mat shares a similar viewpoint. “When I was diagnosed with Crohn’s at 16, my mum was amazing and she had no idea, none of the family did, about my condition,” he says. “You’re going to get instances where your children have conditions or health problems, and you can only equip yourself so much. If our children did have IBD, there’s no one better qualified to support them than us.”