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Shame on checkout line

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First published: Sunday, November 8, 2009

A couple of months ago, I was in line behind a 20-something guy who was buying a gallon of milk, a small bottle of Purell and condoms -- three boxes of condoms.

I'm guessing the milk and hand sanitizer were decoys -- items he hoped would detract from his prophylactic purchase. But, as someone who was a grocery cashier for six years, I can tell you no amount of food and other "innocent" items (including baby food or formula) keeps a bored clerk from noticing what you buy -- especially when she is 16 and the customer is your best friend's dad. But that's another story.

Despite the fact that we know the person on the other side of the conveyer belt is making judgements based on what items we pull out of our carts, you have to wonder why, as adults, we allow purchases that are completely in the realm of proper decorum to embarrass us. Should we care what cashiers -- and other customers -- think?

The simple answer: No, of course not.

Adults have sex, bodily function issues, and rashes and itches in places we'd rather not discuss. And any cashier who snickers, even inwardly, is immature.

Yet mentally, it's hard to get past the stigma associated with purchases that make children giggle and adults blush, and that have us scoping out a cashier -- preferably one of the same sex -- who looks the least likely to typecast.

I was talking with Debbie Mandel, a Long-Island-based stress-management specialist and the author of several self-help books. She was saying that we grow up with these tribal beliefs that make us feel self-conscious. Basically, we are taught to be good little girls and boys. Does a good little girl buy hemorrhoid cream, she asks, or a good little boy buy a condom?

Society says "no way." She goes on to say that many Americans grew up with self-consciousness about bodily functions and sex because of parents, school or religion. There is this contradictory view toward sex as beautiful yet nasty, she says.

Mandel points out that idealized images of what we should be like are powerful, and when you don't have a strong sense of self, you want to present well to others -- a symptom of people-pleasing.

"This is most probably an evolutionary skill set," says Mandel. "If you present well to others, you will be liked. If you are liked, you will be accepted by the group and survive on the savannah, as opposed to being isolated and killed by a saber-tooth tiger."

While that's a strong analogy, she's got a point. We don't argue with our spouses in public or let our yards get overgrown, which are attempts to keep up appearances.

If, though, you can't get past that feeling of embarrassment, there's always shopinprivate.com -- an e-tailer devoted to selling things like prophylactics, ointments and creams, and other items that make you avoid certain cashiers or stores where you may run into your boss.

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