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Speaking OUT: Understanding Sexuality and Diversity in LGBTQ+ Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

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“Why isn’t there a straight pride day?” is a statement that is sometimes made by people who oppose the idea that the LGBTQ+ community speaks of pride in difference, and have ‘claimed’ a day for that pride to be celebrated. The adoption of pride in response to oppression and bigotry is not a new idea. Black is Beautiful! Woman Power! are slogans that come from other previous civil liberties movements. Pride is a healthy response to a culture or a society that attaches shame to what it sees as different, frightening or weaker. In fact, the disability community had also adopted the idea of Pride and there are an increasing number of Disability Pride marches around the world. The idea of pride is healthy and healing, and within the LGBTQ+ community, Pride Day has evolved into one of the most important days in the calendar. So why isn’t there a straight pride day? Because heterosexuality has never been outlawed, punished, or considered a mental illness and being heterosexual has never been cause for a child to be thrown out of a family, or for someone to lose their job or their home.

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Did you know

- ⇒ That 74% of people with developmental disabilities do not have knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues, and that 70% have been shown to have negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as LGBTQ+¹
- ⇒ That 33% of gay men with developmental disabilities have reported sexual abuse¹
- ⇒ That 75% of gay men with developmental disabilities have reported they had “risky” sex¹
- ⇒ Many people with developmental disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ have difficulty accepting their identify¹
- ⇒ Many staff supporting people with developmental disabilities do not feel comfortable or equipped in discussing sexuality¹
- ⇒ Many staff still assume people with developmental disabilities are asexual¹

⇒ Suicidality and mental health issues are seen more commonly in LGBTQ+ youth than heterosexual youth^{1,2}

Sexuality and developmental disability: Why is it important to understand and respect sexual diversity in our field?

There is a growing acceptance that people with developmental disabilities have sexual rights which must be respected and upheld by those supporting them. Just like anyone else, people with developmental disabilities have the right to:

- Sexuality and sexual expression
- Dignity and respect
- Privacy, confidentiality and freedom of association
- Access sexual education reflective of their cultural, religious and moral values

In upholding the sexual rights of those with developmental disabilities, whether they are LGBTQ+ identifying or not, we should aim to support factors related to their health and well-being, gender identity, friendships and social behaviours. This can help to minimize their risk of sexual victimization, and improve their understanding of LGBTQ+ lifestyles so it is easier for them to get access to the services and supports they need.

Let's talk about John

John has always been attracted to other men but didn't know how to talk about it with anyone. He discovered a park where he could meet with other men, and some of these men were very nice to him. Other men figured out quickly that, in addition to having sex with John (and John didn't insist on using condoms when he had sex), they could also get him to pay for things, like food and drinks after he got his disability payment check. John was confused about which of these men was really his boyfriend, and who may be taking advantage of him. He didn't want to get upset with them because he was afraid, if he did, he might lose them as his friends. He didn't want to talk about this with his staff because he thought his staff would think it was wrong for him to like other men, and not women.

Perhaps because of some of the early beliefs that people with developmental disabilities are nonsexual, they have not had access to appropriate and adequate sexual education. Sex education, within the typical population, is gradually shifting from being based on the assumption of heterosexuality to being more inclusive. But even the discussions around these shifts have not occurred to the same extent in the service-providing sector for people with developmental disabilities.

Today we see that sexual education is becoming more common for people with developmental disabilities as we begin to have a better understanding and more discussion around how we can support their sexual health. As part of meeting sexual rights as staff, we need to promote equality, which means empowering LGBTQ+ identifying people with developmental disabilities, and being inclusive of them.

What you can learn from this article as a direct support professional:

- What are some sexual vulnerabilities related to developmental disability and those in the LGBTQ+ community?
- How can your language be used to promote healthy attitudes around sexuality in general, as well as to promote inclusion and respect for those from the LGBTQ+ community?
- How can Pride as an event help to spark positive discussions?

Meet Cameron

Cameron is a young adult with a developmental disability who is beginning to question his gender status. Cameron, a name chosen and used only in fantasy, was born female but feels like he identifies as a man, likes to feel masculine, not feminine, and has a desire to live as a man. Cameron is feeling lost and alone. He suspects his parents will not be accepting because he's heard them make fun of transgender people on television, and his brother calls a famous transgender woman 'a freak.' At his day program, he hears similar things from staff. Staff have no idea he is listening and hearing their jokes, and feels desperately hurt by them. Cameron doesn't feel he has anyone in his life that he can talk to about what's going on. He becomes depressed but refuses to open up to staff. One day at work, a new staff overhearing someone making a joke about an article regarding a transgender man interrupted, and said that being publicly disrespectful of people wasn't okay, and it was particularly wrong at work. Cameron had never heard anyone defend someone like him ever in his life. Two days later, his life changed when he sought out that staff and spoke his truth for the first time.

As in the scenario above, how can promoting respect create and maintain a safe space for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals both mentally and physically?

As staff we may not be responsible for providing education, but we can spark discussion and act as a resource for those we support. Depending on how we talk about sex, we can be teaching a "hidden curriculum," sharing ideas or viewpoints about what types of relationships we consider to be good or bad. It is so important to recognize what our own values are about sexuality, and to own them. Our values might be right for us, but they are not right for everyone.

A big part of what we can do as staff is consider how we speak about sexuality with the people we support, and with each other. Through promoting safe sexual practices, respecting sexual orientation and freedom of expression, discussing pregnancy and risks of sexually transmitted infections, and, most of all, consent and sexual abuse, we can better support sexual health and promote diversity.

In general, some crucial items of discussion to promote healthy sexuality in those with a developmental disability should include:

- Menstruation
- Masturbation
- Relationships
- Protection/contraception and pregnancy
- STIs and screening for sexual health

- Strategies for recognizing manipulation and exploitation, and the means to prevent those things from happening

1. Why is it important to be sensitive about the language you use?

Use language that the individual understands, and check that they've understood you. You may use a word that they have never heard before; don't assume that, because a woman with a disability likes other women, she knows the term 'lesbian.' It's okay to be uncomfortable answering questions but say that you are. Your discomfort may come across as disapproval.

Never ever joke about someone's sexuality or sexual information that has been shared with you. That can have long-lasting, damaging effects on an individual.

2. Why should we celebrate everyone's diversity?

There may be fellow staff working with you who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. Have you, through your language or through your actions, demonstrated that you are an ally, or that you may disagree but would never hurt or harm them? Do you promote a sense of welcome for all diversity at work? It's easy – just be kind to everyone. It sounds simple but it isn't, kindness often results from inner struggles with prejudice and assumption.

3. How can you directly support and promote respect in the community?

If you have the opportunity to educate others who have less understanding of these issues, take the time to say something. You can also be an advocate for individuals whose families and peers lack understanding about their sexual diversity.

It's important to recognize what you know and what you don't know you know. If there's something you don't know, how can you learn more about it? Own your attitude. It's okay to have a certain attitude – you're not required to change your attitude for your job – but recognize it. You need to realize that you have power as staff and, therefore, your attitude can hurt or help. Know that what you feel on issues around diversity are not only important to the people we support but to the staff with whom we are working. Try to create an attitude of welcome around yourself.

Tough Discussions for a Staff Meeting

- How to approach a fellow staff who does not respect or defend an individual's sexual diversity or the people around them?
- What do you do to assist someone to advocate for themselves when their social circle does not respect their sexual orientation/disposition?
- How can we use language that promotes inclusion and respect in our interactions with those we support, good or bad?
- How do you deal with limited perspectives on sexuality and boundaries with individuals or staff?

Resources

Check out this useful [resource list](#) from the UK on LGBTQ+ identifying individuals with developmental disability

[Rainbow Health Ontario](#) - [Trans Language Glossary](#)

Sources

Supporting the sexual and social development of individuals with intellectual disability - <https://aaDevelopmentalDisability.org/events-landing/2014/03/12/default-calendar/supporting-the-sexual-and-social-development-of-individuals-with-intellectual-disability#.WRTGF1UrKUI>

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