

Myths and Misperceptions of Disability and Sexuality

“Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of everyone: man, woman, and child. It is a basic need and an aspect of human life.”

(World Health Organization)

Myth: People with disabilities are asexual.

Fact: All humans are sexual, regardless of how we express our sexuality. People with disabilities are sexual and express their sexuality in ways as diverse as everyone else.¹ A study by the center for research on women with disabilities showed that women with and without disabilities reported the same level of sexual desire.² All people—including people with developmental disabilities—are sexual.³

Myth: People with physical disabilities are unable to have sex.

Fact: The ability to have intercourse varies depending on the disability and it is important to note that sex can involve kissing, massaging, touching, tasting and other activities. Depending on the specific disability, intercourse may require creativity, patience and specific planning.⁴ People with breathing difficulties may find it uncomfortable to have someone lying on top of them. Pain, fatigue and medications may decrease one’s sex drive, even as genital sensations continue. Uncontrollable movements can lead to moments that are either humorous or distressing, depending on how each partner views them. A spastic tongue can make kissing an exciting experience. People living with Multiple Sclerosis many need to communicate frequently with partners about what feels good today as opposed to yesterday due to the unpredictable nature of the disease. The key is learning what works for each person and communicating with your partner.⁵

Myth: People with disabilities have more important things than sex to worry about

Fact: We all value sex differently, and for some people it’s the most important thing in their life. If you live with a disability or chronic illness you will likely have people around you telling you that you’ve got more important things to deal with that sex is a luxury you can’t afford.¹

¹ http://sexuality.about.com/od/disability/p/disability_sex1.htm

² http://www.bcm.edu/crowd/national_study/SEXFUNC.htm

³ http://www.plannedparenthood.org/ppnne/files/Northern-New-England/developmental_disability.pdf

⁴ <http://www.ppfca.ca/ppfc/content.asp?articleid=409>

⁵ Kaufman, M., Silverburg, C., & Odette, F. (2003). *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: For all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain, and illness.*

Myth: People with disabilities don't get sexually assaulted.

Fact: People with physical disabilities are far more likely to be victims of sexual assault, statistics suggest between 2 to 10 times more likely.¹ People with developmental disabilities are at risk of being sexually abused because they are frequently taught to comply with what others are asking them to do, and they often want to please others.³

Myth: People with disabilities don't need sex education.

Fact: We're all sexual, and we all need education. Sexual ignorance is an enormous obstacle for all of us when trying to figure ourselves out sexually.¹ When people with disabilities are not given adequate sex education they are at increased risk of being taken advantage of sexually. It is important to communicate sex information in a way that meets the individualized needs of people with various disabilities.

Myth: People with disabilities should only marry and have sexual relationships with other people with disabilities.

Fact: This attitude limits the possibilities of developing relationships and defines someone as disabled and not as a person. The non-disabled person in a relationship with a person with a disability may be seen as wonderful, caring, self-sacrificing, or as not capable of having a relationship with a non-disabled person. This reflects a negative attitude towards disability and suggests that a disabled person is less worthy than a non-disabled person.⁶

Myth: People with disabilities should not have children.

Fact: Creating a family is a natural part of human existence and many people with disabilities chose to have children of their own. Depending on the disability, children may or may not have the same disability as their parents. Some people may want to get genetic testing before making the decision about whether to have children or adopt.

⁶ <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/echoes/echoes-19-08.html>