



## Let's Talk About SexAbility

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Meeting the sexes category, level 400, the contestant chose.

Being able to be yourself, feeling good about yourself, feeling good about your partner, having fun, are all signs of this, the mock Jeopardy host posed the answer.

What is a healthy relationship.

No buzzers went off. Just a knock on the table and rapid-fire answers.

Ten people huddled around a long table at the far corner of a white walled meeting room, deep in concentration. They were all seated, but only one in a plastic chair.

The others lounged in wheelchairs black and formidable. Some were powered by battery, others by hand.

Maddalena Lippis and Christina Raccipo, both in their 20s, played out the role of Alex Trebek in a game of SexAbility Jeopardy. A study in opposites, Raccipo stood while Lippis wheeled toward the flipchart to write down how many points people received.

The game was a way for SexAbility facilitators to prepare for their workshops on sexuality with a mobility disability. SexAbility, a unique program whose primary audience is young people, was started in partnership with Planned Parenthood and the Anne Johnston Health Station in 2000.

We meet every month with disabled people, says SexAbility coordinator, Ann Kennedy. The participants pick a topic and then we do a Dine and Discuss.

Some of the myths prevalent amongst those with limited exposure to disability issues are that people with a disability don't think about sex, don't have sex and if they did, their babies would automatically have a disability. These myths persist especially because of the segregation between non-disabled and disabled people when it comes to subjects like sexuality.

Lynda Roy, a 30-something brunette whose personality springs out of her wheelchair, knits her dark eyebrows together as she remembers a particularly annoying example of that myth being played out.

Some co-workers were looking at a male calendar. I commented that one of the guys was cute, and one of them said that she didn't think I was interested in that stuff.

Having a disability doesn't make a person sexually inactive. Different definitions about what sex is permeates through society, but when it comes to disability, sex isn't just about intercourse.

Kennedy says things will become much less complicated when two very important concepts sink in.

The most important sex organ is the brain, and the largest sex organ is the skin, she says.

Julie Beach, health educator at Gage Transition to Independent Living, describes how different parts of the body can become sexualized.

If they have an acquired spinal cord injury often the areas above the level of injury will become more sensitive. Earlobes can become very sexy. One guy wanted his teeth brushed all the time and that was a big turn on for him. They have to rediscover their bodies, she says.

Even disabled people themselves need to learn this, for navigating your way through sexuality can be a difficult challenge to do on your own with no information.

Beach works with young people with disabilities in order to prepare them for living on their own. She explains that learning about sexuality makes people with disabilities more comfortable and confident when approaching sex and relationships.

A lot of young people can sometimes go about their day feeling (that they're) not a sexual being because of the lack of knowledge and society's view of them. Not giving this information doesn't mean these kids aren't going to do anything, she says.

They have questions about whether they can have children, how their disability affects them sexually, how can they work around their disability so that they can enjoy a healthy sexual life.

Tony Diamanti, in his 30s, is frustrated by the assumption that he's asexual just because he has cerebral palsy. Using a head pointer and keyboard, he carefully types out

Sexuality is what is our humanity, no matter how distorted or disabled our bodies are.

Diamanti doesn't let his disability get in the way of his libido these days, but he remembers the air of secrecy and taboo around sexuality when he was younger.

As a teen I felt really sexually unattractive, so I never really approached a girl. The only time the topic of sex ever came up with my parents was when I was 12 and my dad asked if I ever got hard between the legs. I said, Yes and he simply replied, That's good.

I had to go to a sex therapist to talk about the natural sexual feelings I was having.

Another problem can be having the private time to explore your sexuality, says Beach.

People who receive attendant care, they're unable to do some things for themselves. How do you have a romantic time with someone when you need an attendant to put you to bed?

The Gage program and SexAbility are trying to provide an answer to that question, as well as many others, in order for people with a disability to have a healthy sex life.

Educating people with disabilities is the first step, but once knowledge is spread out to the general community, the old stereotypes, fears and myths will be subdued.

Roy is hopeful for the future.

There's no reason why you can't go into a classroom with non-disabled students and talk about this stuff. It would help disabled and non-disabled kids break down the barriers between them.

*Brian, 21, is a contributor to Young People's Press. He is also interested in bringing awareness to disability issues.*

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