



Dating Violence Vulnerabilities among the Disabled
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Dating violence, especially among the young and vulnerable has marched its way to the forefront of the media to begin to demand attention long overdue. One subpopulation of individuals vulnerable to dating violence that often gets overlooked are those with disabilities. A study by Brownridge (2006) found that individuals with disabilities were 40% more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence in the previous 5 years in comparison to women without disabilities (Powers et al, 2011). Research suggests 83% of female and 36% of developmentally disabled males report a history of sexual assault (Sigler, 2000). As many are aware, sexual abuse is most likely to be inflicted by someone known to the victim, and in some cases, the abuser is the dating or marital partner. The Canada Centre for Justice (1995) found the 38% of disabled women who had been married reported experiencing sexual violence by their partner.

As a clinician, I have heard devastating personal accounts of developmentally disabled (DD) individuals who have unknowingly had pictures taken of them while they were naked or while engaging in sexual activity with their partner and these private pictures were then distributed throughout their schools and the Internet. I have heard women who were coerced into having sexual relationships with multiple partners or same sex same individuals by their "partners" despite their own discomfort. Sometimes, their abuser has been their direct care worker who abused their position of authority and manipulated the client into thinking they were "in love" so he/ she could sexually abuse them and ensure their silence. Common reactions by the victim may vary from reports to feeling uncomfortable, confused, or "weird" or she/he will remain altogether silent, however body language or behavior may change significantly highlighting the internal distress caused by the incident(s).

Several factors contribute to dating violence vulnerability among the disabled community. The common approach is to deny their sexuality and autonomy. Disabled individuals tend to be seen as asexual (Sobsey & Mansell, 1997). People see them as small children, incapable of sexual desire despite the changing hormones in their body comparable with other growing adolescents and adults. As such, they are denied opportunities to learn appropriate boundaries while dating or have appropriate awareness of their own sexual development. They are over-protected from the sexual realities of the world. Similarly, many DD children are placed into behavioral modification programs that stress compliance and obedience to an adult or caretaker, where they learn to “sit still” and “be silent” (Randall et al., 2000; Sobsey & Mansell, 1997). Such programs are well meaning and highly effective in a positive learning environment, but it can also be a mechanism for exploitation in the dating world. David Hingsburger (1995) succinctly states, "If you can't say no to peas, how can you say no to PENIS?" Obedience training may facilitate learned helplessness for victims because they have been trained to ignore their natural instincts and to obey others, even when a task is unpleasant or uncomfortable (Sobsey & Mansell, 1997). Over time, a victim may become passive and resigned to their fate, a particularly disastrous situation in the interpersonal violence world.

Another vulnerability for the disabled community to dating violence is their lack of economic independence. Their heavy reliance on caretakers or others to meet their basic needs may predispose them to quid pro quo sexual harassment, or make them vulnerable to sex traffickers with whom they may be required to perform sexual favors in exchange for basic needs. Such instances of exploitation and abuse are well documented among women, disabled, and impoverished populations (Aiello, 1986).

One final vulnerability for the disabled community to abuse is related to reporting and re-victimization. Many in the disabled community live in institutional or group settings where the victim may have restricted access to individuals who may act on abuse disclosures between two consumers or between a consumer and staff because the agency has a desire to protect itself, its reputation, and its friends and co-workers (Wescott, 1984; Randall et al., 2000). If no one is willing to step-forward, the painful silence of abuse and the cycle of revictimization will continue. As frontline workers, policy makers, advocates, and family members engaging in the partnership to end interpersonal violence, it is imperative that that we continue to move the discussion further in the area of dating violence and be the voice for the often unheard.

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