



This Is How We Do It: Disability, Dating, and Sex

Youth with disabilities can have a hard time finding information about topics like dating, relationships, and sex. NYLN members wrote this document because we believe that we have the right to know about these things, and it is dangerous to be uninformed. Being informed helps you build the kind of social life you want. Find someone you can trust, talk with, and from whom you can learn what you need to know!

Dating



IMAGE: Two people are sitting at a restaurant table. A candle is on the table.

People with disabilities date and have relationships. Dating when you have a disability is not a lot different than dating when you don't have a disability. It is important to know what you need, what you like, and what you don't like. It is important to talk about these things with your partner(s). Although there may be a few extra things you may need to think about because of your disability, relationships for all people require these things.

Deciding Who to Date

Dating is something we do with other people, but it is also an activity where we can learn a lot about ourselves. We learn what we act like around other people, what we need, what we enjoy, and whom we like to be around. It is important to think about who you are and what kind of person you are interested in dating. Oftentimes, people who are very passionate about something date people who have that same passion. A good place to meet people is in places you love to be. You will find better partners when you know more about yourself and know what you enjoy.



IMAGE: People are playing. One person is using a wheelchair.

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Internet Dating

Some people try to meet others using the Internet. The Internet can help you find others who share your interests. Some websites are for people with and without disabilities, like match.com or eharmony.com. These sites don't ask about disability as part of your identity. Some people with disabilities find this difficult because they are not sure when to share that detail. Other people with disabilities appreciate it because it feels more inclusive.



IMAGE: A girl is typing on a computer and sitting in a green chair.

Then there are dating sites that are specifically made for people with disabilities, like dating4disabled.com, specialsinglesonline.com, and miclecafe.com. Some people with disabilities like these sites because disability identity is out in the open. Others don't like these sites because they consider it segregated. Just like other details with dating, we all have our personal preferences, so do what is right for you.

Many people consider on-line dating easier since there isn't face-to-face interaction right away, which makes a lot of people nervous. At the same time, we need to remember that there are additional cautions that come along with on-line dating. Sometimes people take on different identities that aren't truly who they are. They could pretend to be one thing, but really are another. So, if you use on-line dating, use caution. Don't give out your personal information right away. People would have no reason to ask for your phone number – at least not before you really know someone. They would have no reason to ask for your address because usually people would meet in public places until they know one another really well. And they would never have a reason to ask for your social security number or other private information. So, use good judgment, and if you're not sure, ask a friend, a parent, or a mentor for advice.



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Telling Someone You Have A Disability

People with disabilities also face a special question when it comes to dating. We have to decide whether to date someone else with a disability. This question has no right or wrong answer. Some people with disabilities don't care if their partner has a disability. Other people want to date someone with similar life experiences and identities. Everyone has different feelings about this. This is something that you can only decide for yourself and something you might not even know until you meet someone you like. You should do what feels right for you.



IMAGE: A student with a visual impairment is using a cane.

Not everyone's disability is obvious and sometimes people have to decide when they want to tell someone they have a disability. If you choose to date someone without a disability, there may come a time when you have to decide if and when to tell your partner about your disability. This is a very personal decision.

Honesty is often the best policy, but there are many reasons why people find it difficult to share their disability with their partner. If you decide to tell the person you are dating about your disability, you also need to decide *when* to tell that person. Some people decide to tell the other person about their disability as soon as possible. Other people choose to wait until they trust the other person and know them better. This decision can be different with every relationship.

When you decide to tell your partner about your disability, be sure that you leave enough time to really talk about it. You should also make sure that you find a space that feels safe for both of you and one where you won't be interrupted. If you think it would be helpful, you can bring materials or information that you think might help explain your disability. Again, this is a personal decision and you should do what feels right for you. This might be an ongoing conversation between the two of you as each of you continues to negotiate (talk about) your relationship as time passes.



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Gender and Sexual Orientation

Gender is another way of identifying yourself. Some people identify their gender as man, woman, gender non-conforming [not fitting one gender], and in other ways.

Sexual orientation involves who you tend to be sexually attracted to. Here are some other basic definitions:

- Heterosexual: A person who only likes someone of the opposite gender
- Homosexual: Person who is gay or lesbian
- Gay: Men who like men
- Lesbian: Women who like women
- Bisexual/Pansexual: People who like people of all genders



IMAGE: Two men holding each other.

- Transgender: A person who identifies as having a gender that is different from the physical body he/she was born with
- GLBTQ: A reference for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
- Queer: A word to describe people who identify with the GLBTQ community. In the past, it used to be a bad way to say gay. Many GLBTQ people, especially older people, think of bad experiences when they hear this reference. However, some people use it proudly to mark their difference.

Coming Out

Recognizing that you are GLBTQ, whether to yourself or to another person, is often called "coming out." GLBTQ people have to be careful deciding who to come out to. People in our society can still be judgmental and violent toward GLBTQ people.

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Here are three things to think about with coming out:

1. "Coming out" takes place at different times. Some people know they are GLBTQ when they are in their teens, maybe younger. Some do not realize it until they are adults.
2. Many young people have a hard time when they decide to come out. When coming out, people are often afraid of how people will react.
3. Support and safety are valuable to people "coming out." There are many groups available that offer support during this process.

Identifying as GLBTQ is hard in itself, but there are even more issues associated with being a GLBTQ person with a disability. Some of these issues can include:

1. Not having your sexuality respected. Some people feel that people with disabilities are not interested in sexuality, but we have feelings just like everyone else in this regard. Others might not feel that this is a "choice" you are able to make for yourself. It is important to know that this is not something someone else can determine for you.
2. The GLBTQ community is not always the most accessible environment. A lot of social events happen in spaces that don't always meet accessibility standards.
3. A person that identifies both as a disabled and GLBTQ can often experience more discrimination than others. One example of this is a GLBTQ person with a disability who has to stay in the hospital. Not only might the doctor not listen to them because they have a disability, the doctors might not let their partner come in.

Two women holding each other.



IMAGE: Two women holding one another.

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Activities:

- If you think you might be GLBTQ, try to find a safe space and someone you can talk to.
- Remember that there is no one right way to go about “coming out.”

Resources:

- The Safe Schools Coalition’s list of resources for GLBTQ youth with disabilities: http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-glb你_youth_with_disabilities.html

Dating Safely



IMAGE: Two people touching each other on a sunny day.

Safe Sex

Sex is when people use their bodies together to share love with one another and to share pleasure. It is important to be safe when having sex so that you stay healthy. Safe sex means doing things during or before sex that can keep you from getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or from giving an STD to your partner. Practicing safe sex can also help someone not get pregnant.

Safe Sex Steps

- **Know your partner, know your surroundings, know yourself.** Make sure you can trust the person you are being intimate / having sex with. If you decide that you don’t want to have sex with that person, say “Stop!” at any time. You should never feel forced to have sex. Know what you like and what you don’t like. If something makes you feel bad (like if it brings up a certain bad memory) or if it just doesn’t feel right, you don’t have to do it. Tell the other person to stop.

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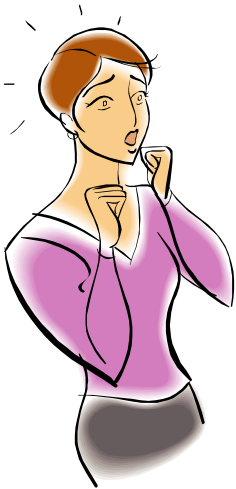
Have a clear mind. Alcohol and drugs can cause you to make bad decisions.

- **Use protection.** There are things that people can put on their bodies to keep them from getting STDs. They are called condoms, and they are used by men. There are female condoms, but they are not as safe as male condoms.

Activities

- If you're going to have sex, make sure you have protection available. You can get condoms at a drugstore, a sex-positive health center, or a campus clinic.
- Practice open communication with your partner. Be truthful.
- Know that there are different kinds of pleasure that don't involve sex or intercourse. Cuddling and kissing are things you can do in place of, or in addition to, sex. You can also masturbate [touch yourself or one another to have pleasure].

Stay Safe



Having a disability can bring up some special concerns when it comes to dating and safety. Some people will take advantage of [use another person in a hurtful way] people with disabilities. These people know that it is sometimes hard for people with disabilities to communicate with others, report crimes to the police, or independently [on your own] manage their money or homes. Abuse can happen in many different ways and on many different levels. It can be domestic, physical, sexual, emotional, or financial. Even though a lot of times we can avoid abuse, there are ways to protect yourself and others.

IMAGE: A woman who is scared.



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Domestic Abuse



IMAGE: A sad eye with tears.

People with disabilities, especially women, are more likely to be victims of domestic violence than anyone else. Domestic violence is when someone is hurt, attacked, abused, or taken advantage of by their partner. Domestic violence can happen in many different ways and on many different levels.

The person who hurts someone is called an abuser. The abuser usually wants to gain control over his/her partner. The abuser will often use threats, force, or guilt to get what he/she wants. A lot of times after they are violent, they will apologize and say they won't do it again, but most times violence happens more than just once.

A few examples of domestic violence:

- An abuser controlling the partner's money
- An abuser calling the partner bad names or putting him or her down
- An abuser threatening the partner
- An abuser physically hurting the partner
- An abuser controlling who the partner talks to or socializes with

Physical Violence: Physical violence usually happens behind closed doors, so it is important to tell family, friends, or the police if this happens to you. Hitting, kicking, or threats of violence are against the law. If you are hurt, take pictures or write down what happens to you so you have a record. Remember that abusers can check computers and phones to see what you are looking at so it is important to be careful and to keep some things private.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse can be done by using physical violence. This type of abuse usually means that the abuser is touching another person in a way that the person did not agree to and does not like. Sometimes abusers will say or write things to other people about sex that will make a person feel uncomfortable. This could also be a form of sexual abuse. Tell someone you trust if you don't feel comfortable. When someone is doing this in a way that makes you uncomfortable, it is not because they like you, it is about control and power. It is wrong.

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Emotional Abuse: Sometimes an abuser might say or do things to make another person do something that they don't want to do. This is a type of mental abuse. They may try to make their partner feel guilty, or they can try to confuse them with words or threats. You should tell someone you trust if you feel like this is happening to you. You can also think about taking some time off from your relationship if you don't feel comfortable.

Financial Abuse: Some people try to gain financial power over others. It is important to keep your bank accounts, medical insurance, and other private information locked up away from others until you know them well.

Reproductive Justice:



IMAGE: This is a symbol that means "woman."

Many disabled people have been sterilized without their permission. [Sterilization makes women unable to have children.] This was done because some people thought that disabled people were not supposed to have children, thinking that this would only create more disabled people, and society wanted to get rid of them by not allowing them to have children.

People often try to control disabled people's bodies. Recently there was a case about a little girl named Ashley. Her parents asked the doctors to give her medicine and surgery that stopped her from growing into a woman.

That's why reproductive justice is so important. Reproductive justice happens when all people have the power and resources to make healthy decisions.

Resources:

- Feminist Response in Disability Activism: www.ourfrida.org
- Sister Song: www.sistersong.net
- Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment: www.cwpe.net

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The Importance of Communication: Sometimes disabilities make it difficult to get out of a violent or abusive situation. An example of this is a nonverbal person needing a communication device or a wheelchair user needing a ride. It is important to have a plan to communicate with friends, family, and the police if you ever need them. Before you go on a date or plan a meeting, it is important to know the area. Don't be afraid to ask your date to change the location if it doesn't work for you.

The Law: If someone physically hurts you, sexually abuses you, or threatens you, one option is to report it to the police. You can ask for a protective order. A protective order is a rule that says that person cannot contact you. If they do, the police will take action. That person may also go to jail. You can also work with your community to figure out how to be safe. Be prepared to tell your story. It can help to write down what happens to you in a journal. This process can sometimes be long and hard. Ask your family and friends for help and support. Everyone should be able to feel safe, capable, and loved in relationships. No one deserves abuse.



IMAGE: A brown sign that reads HELP!

Helping Someone Who Has Been Abused:

- Be supportive
- Listen
- Don't judge
- Encourage them to do what is safe
- Respect decisions they make
- Help them get help

Resources You May Need:

- Support groups
- Domestic violence shelters
- Doctors/Hospitals
- Social workers
- Websites/Internet resources
- Police department offices and public safety programs

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**This document was written by the
National Youth Leadership Network.**

This information was created for youth, by youth. The information is based primarily on first-hand life experiences. We value direct youth-to-youth communications. We wrote this document to be as inclusive as possible. However, we also know that there may be additional information or different perspectives to what is shared here. Let us know if you have ideas on this subject.

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) works to build power among young leaders with disabilities. We are a national non-profit organization led by and for youth with disabilities ages 16-28 years old. We live across the United States and its territories.

We believe that youth with disabilities can be great leaders. We work to promote youth leadership and education. Our goal is to make sure youth with disabilities have the chance to set and reach their own goals. Anyone can become a member of our organization for free. Please visit our website and register today!

**For more information:
National Youth Leadership Network
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