

## Lets Talk About **Sex**



*Love is the answer, but while you're waiting for the answer, sex raises some pretty interesting questions...*

*Woody Allen. Tony Pape of SCOVO explores some of these 'questions'.*

When I think about sex it conjures up all sorts of terrors as well as pleasures. As a young catholic schoolboy it was something that petrified and excited me in equal measures. Masturbation I was informed by well meaning relatives and friendly priests was a one way ticket to eternal damnation. A sobering thought when one arrives at that point in life when what's located in your trousers starts to become more important and demanding than the next episode of scoobydoo or an innocent game of football with your mates on the local green. Now I know that things have moved on in society for better or worse, and that we are now bombarded by sex through all forms of the media, and that sex education is provided more widely in schools than it ever was in my day. But what effect does this have on people with a learning disability? For me it raises some fundamental questions and issues that warrant exploration.

- 1 Is sex important to people with learning disabilities?
- 2 How does society perceive sex in relation to learning disabilities?
- 3 What are the difficulties with this issue and how can they be resolved?

### **Important**

I have purposefully only posed three questions because it will make it easier for me to finish this article and in some ways I feel that sex can be overcomplicated enough anyway. So the first question. Is sex important to people with learning disabilities? Some of the people I talk to with a learning disability including some of their carers, paid and unpaid, say 'yes it is'. And I'm afraid that, to me, that is all that counts. There will be some of you out there apoplectic with rage already at my audacity in raising this issue and to you I apologise. It is not my intention to shock or offend but rather to bring this issue out in to the open

where I feel it belongs. In my experience things that are left unsaid or unexplored usually lead to a negative outcome that comes back to haunt you at a later date.

### **Have sex?**

So do people with learning disabilities have sex? Some people say that they do. Do they masturbate? Most paid carers that I have spoken to have experience of some people masturbating. Do people with learning disabilities have children? Some do most definitely. Do people with learning disabilities talk about sex and show an interest in the subject? Yes they do. I have supported many people during my career who talk about their frustrations and fears and their desire to start a loving relationship and all that entails, including sex and starting a family or at least the possibility of that happening for them at some future date.

# Llais

# SEX

What interests me when posing this question of whether people with learning disabilities see sex as being important is the fact that I even have to ask?

Objectively the assumption must be that for some it is hugely important just as it is for everyone in society. Having a learning disability does not mean that you are denied basic human feelings does it? It does not mean that the laws of nature pass you by because of your disability does it? Do you lack the same drives and capacity to dream that others do? Therefore, why are you treated so differently to me and to millions of other people for whom this debate is not even an issue?

## Horror

I think part of the answer lies in understanding how society views sex in relation to people with a learning disability? For some, 'WITH HORROR' would probably be a good description. Having worked for several voluntary sector organisations that provide support for people with learning disabilities, I know all too well

about the difficulties that this issue poses for people. It is usually something that is deliberately ignored or pushed under the carpet because of a fear that parents or relatives or social services will look unfavourably on your organisation and that as a result you will lose business and prestige. Please write in and tell me I am wrong and that things have changed and that this issue is no longer relevant. I will be delighted to be proved wrong.

Of course for some people this issue is not relevant, but I'm guessing that this applies to those people who are considered to be the most able people because they are more vociferous and empowered than others to assert their rights? Or that the nature of their disability is such that capacity and consent are the primary considerations in relation to a duty of care? Organisations admittedly have a duty of care to those they support and this has to be recognised and respected. My own feeling is that people with learning disabilities are still greatly misunderstood in our society.

## Change

We have undergone a major paradigm shift in the last twenty five years or so in relation to how we treat people with learning disabilities. Gone, or almost gone, are the large institutions and with them the paternal, medical model of care that flourished in that climate of ignorance and fear. Gone are some of the misconceptions and scandalous abuses of human rights that were the every day lot of people with learning disabilities. These changes are to be welcomed in a modern democracy, but in themselves they are not enough.

We need to wrestle more effectively with our underlying prejudices that in part can probably be traced to living within a functionalist society with shared norms and values. Our society is very Eurocentric and focused primarily on what white healthy middle class people want or need. As such our media reflects an unhealthy skewed view of the world. We are bombarded with images of wealth, beauty, status symbols and perfect people. This surely subconsciously must have a bearing on how we perceive people who look or sound different, or are not perceived as contributing to society? How often do you see positive images of people with a learning disability in magazines or on television? How often do you meet these people in gainful employment at your place of work? So given this, can we even begin to see these people as sexual human beings?



# Llais

## Exploring the issue

To answer this question lets explore some of the possible difficulties and how they might be resolved. Firstly I think it is crucial to put people with learning disabilities at the centre of any work that may be undertaken to fully explore this issue. This may take the form of a joint piece of funded research between people with learning disabilities and an experienced research unit? It could be funded by the national assembly or the department of health. Or, if that fails, it could be partnership funded by the statutory sector and voluntary sectors within Wales. After all, this issue affects all of us in some form or other. At least the research may shed some much needed light on what people with learning disabilities really think and feel about sex and how it affects their lives. As for relatives and concerned carers, I feel that more open and frank dialogue is needed. Health and education in partnership with people first groups could help with this, as could voluntary sector groups such as Mencap who have a long history of working closely with parents and carers. People's fears are not to be taken lightly but nor should they impede progress. Fear in our society has often caused suffering and prejudice and blighted the lives of many people including: women, people of different ethnicity, disabled people and others whose sexuality does not fit a stereotypical norm. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that we learn the lessons of the past and

not just see this issue as something relatively minor or as a luxury afforded a more enlightened society.

## Relationships

Sex is not just about masturbation or penetrative sex with a man or woman, or any combination of the two, or three if that's what tickles your fancy. It contributes to defining who we are. It can lead to the development of loving consensual relationships, it can relieve stress, and it acts as a form

---

to deny a section of society the opportunity to explore their feelings about something so fundamental seems to me almost indecent.

---

of expression and is a way of communicating. It can be lovely, deep and meaningful and downright horrible in equal measure. But for most of us it something that we take for granted and that we are surrounded by every day, to deny a section of society the opportunity to explore their feelings about something so fundamental seems to me almost indecent. Now there's an interesting word. It's a word I once heard used to describe two consenting adults with learning disabilities enjoying a kiss at a Christmas party. Indecent? No, just two human beings doing what comes naturally to us all, communicating their love and affection for each other with a kiss.

*Tony Pape*

