

Believe in yourself. -`GET SEXY

(This article appeared in Greater Manchester of Disabled People's Magazine 'Coalition: (1996) Special Edition on Disability and Sexuality (pp 7-9).

Here's an old chestnut for you...

You're in a social setting, the wine's flowing, the conversation turns to partners, maybe sex, then an almost complete stranger turns to you and says

"Now I hope you don't mind me asking but..."

Personally at this point I want to slip away before I hear anymore - this prelude is usually followed by a very personal question or remark, and I know I will very much "mind" what I'm about to be asked by this person.

Then my neck tingles as I shift uncomfortably waiting for the question.
"How do you manage to do IT then?"

"IT" refers to sex. Now those that know me will verify that I'm no prude, or virgin, nor am I easily embarrassed, but this line of questioning from a non-disabled person makes me go red... red with rage and embarrassment One day I will slip my hand into my pocket and reveal a series of explicit polaroids of myself and a partner in a variety of sexual positions, then turn to the questioner and calmly say.

"Like this!"

I shall enjoy watching them squirm. One day I shall have my revenge.

This scenario comes about due to assumptions, myths and ignorance that non-disabled people hold about the sexuality of disabled people. There is a section of society which assumes that disabled people just don't do it! We are seen as sexless objects of pity, and some go further

and believe that disabled people shouldn't have relationships because they might produce babies... disabled babies! Scary, huh? This view is confirmed by the medical profession's determined efforts to wipe out disabled babies through genetic engineering. I have also heard of stories of parents having their adult daughters go through sterilisation and abortion, as they are seen as unfit to be parents. There are, in fact, very few disabled people who could not cope with parenthood if they were given the support they needed.

Medical professionals focus so intently on our bodies and what is wrong with them (and how to make us "normal") that we feel awkward and ashamed of our own bodies, to the extent that we try to disguise our impairments. From my own personal experience of being looked at, talked about, tested, operated upon, photographed and observed, I felt very awkward about myself, and still feel very shy about being photographed or video'd, and I've noticed that many other disabled people have shared this violation; it's a form of torture and abuse. I strongly urge disabled people to refuse this punishment, and we won't hide our bodies, rather be proud of them and show them off.

There are also those in society who accept that disabled people have rights, that we are intelligent, creative people... but we are just not sexy. The myth is perpetuated by the media's view of what is deemed sexy - i.e. the body beautiful, tanned, tall, strong. A fully functioning muscle-bound hunk or leggy blonde is sexy. How does a disabled person with the odd hump or missing limb fit into this view of "sexy"? Well, we just don't, do we?

In my more immoral (younger) days I may have inadvertently seen a male stripper. I can't remember ever seeing a visibly disabled stripper of either sex! As a teenager I felt inferior to my taller girlfriends, felt isolated as they began dating. My self-esteem plummeted. I imagine that many young disabled men and women are experiencing the same despair that I felt 16 years ago.

How little has changed for disabled people in terms of acceptance. What I needed then were good role models, and someone to talk to

who understood how I felt, someone who could offer advice, build my confidence. I needed training so I could deal with all those "cough, I hope-you-don't-mind-me-asking-but" questions.

There are still too few young disabled people in their own media, in the pop charts, in teenage magazines and on teenage television programmes. We need to encourage our young disabled people to get in there, get seen, be visible, be proud and not ashamed of our impairments.

How are we going to develop our own sense of sexuality when non-disabled society will not accept that we have sex lives, that we have babies, relationships, affairs, flirtations... we have as much right to these as the rest of society.

We need to offer young disabled people courses which address these issues, offering practical advice, counselling, accurate information on contraception, family planning, HIV and AIDS and other health risks associated with sexual intercourse. We need to provide a safe place where young disabled people can discuss issues, ask questions and receive confidential counselling. There are too many young disabled people who have already been sexually abused and harassed. How can they identify what this is and how to deal with it unless they have the awareness and skills to stop it happening to them. Young disabled people need assertiveness training so they can make choices about which partners they want to form relationships with, and what kind of relationship they want.

Parents and guardians can offer their sons or daughters opportunities for developing relationships by allowing and encouraging social contact with their peers. All too often parents become overprotective, and monitor too closely what their offspring are doing. It's hard to develop social contact when your dad picks you up at 7pm when you're 19 or 20 years old. This over-protectiveness also rears its ugly head when parents pull their young disabled people away from courses or parts of courses which deal with sex issues, thinking they may be "corrupted" by such knowledge. Other parents allow their sons or daughters to participate, but then "grill" them when they get home on

exactly what's been said. Surely we want all young disabled people to understand how to avoid unwanted pregnancies, abuse, how to stay clear of sexually transmitted diseases.

Parents of disabled children see sexual development in their offspring - starting of periods, breasts etc - but often don't accept that these are signs of young adults "growing up". They continue to treat them as children. This has a very damaging and confusing effect at a time when young bodies are saying "we are nearly adult, and yet we don't get treated as such". It's hard enough trying to convince the rest of society that we have sexual needs, desires, fantasies and rights, without having to persuade our parents too.

We need to offer explanations, information advice, and build their self-esteem. Through social mixing, young disabled people can learn to form relationships and learn to respect each other, to accept the sexual preferences of others and come to terms with their own. This way, as adults entering relationships, we are equals and can make the right choices and decisions within them. There are many disabled adults enter doomed relationships, or unequal ones where a non-disabled partner becomes "carer". Sometimes we simply stay in bad relationships too long because of our lack of confidence and self-esteem, believing we won't find someone else for ages (if ever!). Sound familiar?

So my message is: get out there and flaunt it. Believe in yourself- GET SEXY!!!