

Showing love on Valentine's Day by embracing disability

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Valentine's Day is a time when love and intimacy are celebrated with fervor. Yet, the challenges some face in this regard are not often recognized. In particular, people with disabilities face discrimination and obstacles when seeking love, affection and sexual fulfillment.

People with disabilities often contend with persistent stereotypes when it comes to their love lives. A lack of comprehensive and accessible sex education also leaves people with disabilities ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of relationships and intimacy.

At the University of Calgary's [Disability and Sexuality Lab](#), we are

working to address these challenges. Our team has undertaken a comprehensive series of interviews with individuals living with disabilities, delving into their personal journeys with love, romance and sexuality.

These conversations reveal the complex realities they face in their quest for intimate connections and underscore the urgent need for greater awareness, and inclusivity within the intersection of disability and sexuality.

Stereotypes about disability and sexuality

Individuals with disabilities frequently confront a multitude of stereotypes that limit their opportunities to form intimate relationships and have sex. These perceptions can deeply affect their experiences and how society treats the topic of disability and sexuality.

Initially, there's a [pervasive stereotype](#) that portrays disabled people as lacking sexual desires or being incapable of making good decisions regarding their intimate lives. This view unfairly categorizes people with disability as a "danger" to the community, fostering unnecessary fear and discrimination. Such a narrative not only marginalizes their experiences but also unjustly strips them of their rights to make personal decisions about their bodies and relationships.

Simultaneously, they are subjected to [infantilization and de-sexualization](#). This process where their capacity for adult relationships and sexuality is either ignored or denied, undermines their autonomy and contributes to a broader societal narrative. It fails to recognize disabled people as fully rounded individuals with the same spectrum of desires and needs for intimacy as anyone else.

Being told to wait

Infantilization often means people with disabilities are told to wait and delay their engagement in any romantic or sexual experiences.

[Our comprehensive interviews with 46 adults who have intellectual disabilities](#) in Ontario highlighted how participants were often advised that they should defer [sexual activity](#) until their late 30s, 40s, and in some cases, even their 50s.

This guidance, ostensibly for their protection, underscores a broader societal issue where people with disabilities are not afforded the same autonomy to explore their sexuality compared to those without disabilities.

For instance, Randy, a 39-year-old man with a mental disability, told us he was advised not to pursue [intimate relationships](#). "My mother told me I am not ready," he said. Often, people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, are told to wait.

This represents further the perceived notion that [people with disabilities are not knowledgeable](#) about their own sexuality and intimate lives. For instance [Priscilla, a 43-year-old bisexual woman, said,](#)

"When you have a developmental disability, people think that you don't know what you're talking about. Or when you say I'm bisexual or gay, whatever, they think that you don't actually know what it means."

Sex education inaccessible and inadequate

In ensuring individuals are informed about their options in terms of sex, sexuality and gender, sex education is often where these conversations

begin. Unfortunately sex education is often delivered in [inaccessible and ineffective ways](#) to people with disabilities, particularly those who are 2SLGBTQ+. This is what we found in our other research project about the intimate lives of 31 2SLGBTQ+ individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in Alberta, Canada.

Sex education is often delivered in ways that focus on heterosexual and cisgender experiences. [Aubrey, a 30-year-old queer trans man said:](#)

"You know, for myself as a gender diverse person, I really would have benefited from that [[sex education](#)], because I hadn't even known about that possibility until much later in my life."

Partly due to this lack of education, studies have shown that people with disabilities experience greater vulnerability. The [rates of sexual abuse](#) are higher among disabled people compared to non-disabled people.

2SLGBTQ+ disabled people being left behind

Individuals with disabilities who are also 2SLGBTQ+ often find themselves facing multiple forms of discrimination, including ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

Yet, our interviews with 2SLGBTQ+ adults with developmental and/or [intellectual disabilities](#) reveal not just the barriers these individuals face but also their profound resilience and desire for love. For instance [Tracey, a 19-year-old gender fluid person, said:](#)

"I just wish there were more like spaces where disabled people could also enter because you know, when you also think of like, people who are physically disabled, they can't go out clubbing. They physically can't, then so it's like, there's not many activities, there's not many ways for us to engage in our own community."

Our research shows significant gaps in information and conversations about disability and romance, emphasizing the necessity for accessible education, resources and spaces. Recent 2SLGBTQ+ rights challenges, like Alberta's parental rights policies, underscore the urgency of challenging new transphobic policies.

Disabled activists push back

Valentine's Day, with its emphasis on love and connection, brings to light the importance of inclusivity. It's a fitting moment to reflect on how everyone desires to love and be loved. The work of disabled activists like Andrew Gurza, host of the podcast [Disability after Dark](#), and Eva Sweeney, creator of [Crippling up Sex with Eva](#), is particularly illuminating. They courageously open up conversations about disability and [sexuality](#), challenging norms and pushing the boundaries of what's often considered a taboo subject.

In a simple yet profound expression, a young man with Down Syndrome shared his insight, saying, "[love is natural, we all love.](#)" This statement serves as a powerful reminder, especially on Valentine's Day—a time often saturated with conversations about sex, intimacy and romantic connections. It's a period that underscores the significance of making sure everyone feels seen and included.

Their efforts highlight a critical message: The more we talk about it, the less of a taboo topic it becomes.

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