

# Speak Up

Safeguarding People who use  
Augmentative Communication from  
Sexual Abuse/Victimization

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# What's Your Pleasure?

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## What's Your Pleasure?

We all have it. We all need to express it.

Sexuality is one of the fundamentals of being alive.

But sometimes a disability can throw a few complications in the mix.

For instance, what do you do about sexual satisfaction if you can't touch yourself?

Lisa Bendall  
Abilities Magazine, May 2001

## What's Your Pleasure?

An attendant might be available to assist you with washing and dressing - in essence, act as your arms and legs - but does that extend to helping you get ready for an intimate encounter?

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Abilities Magazine, May 2001

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Sex is never very simple at the best of times.

But there are strategies and solutions for managing your sex life with the least amount of interference from your disability.

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As many people know, one of the down sides to having a disability is that your privacy is often compromised. You may need assistance with certain personal tasks that most people manage to get done behind a locked bathroom door!

Attendants with whom you are not intimate, nor want to be, may see you naked on a daily basis.

A hired person might wash your clothes, or change your bed linens. Maybe you even need someone else's help to use contraceptives.

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Abilities Magazine, May 2001

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If you are in a steady relationship with someone who does not have a physical disability, your partner can often provide any assistance you need that borders on intimate.

It can even be fun: Part of the foreplay.

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But what if you are single, and want to engage in sexual exploration without someone's help?

What if you have a variety of partners, or a new partner, and don't feel comfortable asking them for physical help?

Or perhaps you are dating someone who has a disability too, who would love to tear off your clothes and explore your body... but simply isn't able?

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The first time my now-husband ever got out of his wheelchair to snuggle with me, he didn't say a thing about needing to straighten his clothes afterwards.

But I know now it is very important to him that he gets assistance to ensure he has no wrinkles in his clothing. This helps him to feel comfortable and maintain healthy skin.

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So, after driving me home that day, my husband must have hurried to his apartment to call an attendant to help him adjust his clothes, rather than ask me to do it. He put up with this temporary discomfort because he didn't want to scare me off by telling me his needs too early!

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"Just imagine being asked to go out on a date and immediately being asked if you mind feeding your date," says Sam Savona of Toronto, who has cerebral palsy and is single.

"If it's a person who hasn't been in contact with the disability community, it could be a strange experience for them."

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Sam adds that "the way I deal with it, I try and meet people through friends or social events. This way the person can see I can interact intelligently."

Sam has personal experience using the help from attendants to prepare for intimate activities. He stresses some key points for making it work as smoothly as possible.

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"If an attendant is required, I would first talk it over with my partner to ensure she is comfortable with my asking the attendant," he says.

"Then I'll talk with the attendant and find out if he is comfortable with assisting us. After that I'll introduce them, if they haven't met before. I think this should be done well before having the attendant assist in a sexual way. I really feel all parties should be comfortable in the situation in order to have a pleasant time."

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Sometimes, even if an attendant is not needed, it can still feel intrusive, says Sam.

"Attendants who provide service to me know my routine, so if I were to cancel my booking, they would know something was up - especially if they saw me with someone earlier."

Other times, Sam says, "my partner and I will be getting into the mood and we have to stop and look at the time to make sure no one is going to be knocking on the door."

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In general, Sam has a positive, solutions-oriented attitude about dealing with these issues.

And, as someone who has had satisfying relationships with other people with disabilities, he questions those who won't even consider dating a fellow person with a disability - just because they prefer someone who will be able to offer them physical assistance.

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"I sometimes wonder if we put too much expectation on our sexual needs so that we loose out big-time on our emotional needs," he comments.

Sam is not the only person with a disability to receive sex related assistance from attendants.

George Clark is the Support Service Coordinator with the Simcoe County Association for the Physically Disabled, in Barrie, Ontario.

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George's organization operates attendant services at four apartment buildings and also provides outreach attendant services.

George's association recently found a need to develop a policy regarding attendants and sex related services.

Consumers in the apartments had been requesting "positioning assistance" from the attendants - specifically, help to get into bed and get undressed in preparation for sexual activity.

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The attendants were worried about claims of abuse, were unclear about how this fit into their job description, and wanted a policy dictating how far they should go to assist someone in this way.

The new policy gives attendants the option to provide this kind of assistance or not.

And consumers are required to request this kind of help in their written "service plans," which are outlines of the assistance they routinely need, and which are updated regularly.

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To come up with this policy, George received input at an Ontario Federation for Cerebral Palsy workshop he attended. He does not know of any similar written policies with other attendant service providers, "but they are still providing this [sex related] service," he says.

George is aware of only one problem so far. It seems that the attendants in one of the four buildings had interpreted the new policy to mean they would be performing sexual acts on the tenants!

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George is currently working on a revision of the wording to make the policy's meaning more clear.

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Anne Abbott, who lives in Toronto, married her husband, Rob Warendt, last January.

Anne, like Sam Savona, has cerebral palsy. But while she does use attendant services, she says that the only assistance pertaining to sex which she requests from them is occasionally to "put a sexy, revealing nightgown on me at bedtime."

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However, support from other people has factored into her sex life in other ways.

When Anne first began dating Rob, she decided to go on the pill. But only close friends and family can understand her speech, which made it difficult for her to access birth control.

"I had to ask my mother to take me to the doctor," Anne says.

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"Back then, I didn't have a speech synthesizer, so my mother had to act as interpreter between the doctor and myself."

Her mother provided Anne with this assistance, despite not being completely comfortable with her daughter's relationship with an able-bodied man - she had always maintained that a man with a disability would be more cognizant of Anne's needs.

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"My mother understood that I was a grown woman and could make this decision for myself," Anne says.

Anne's disability affected the physical manner in which she could have sex.

"It was absolutely impossible to do the typical missionary position" but that has not prevented her from establishing a satisfying sex life with Rob.

"Where there's a will there's a way," says Anne "and Rob and I developed new and different ways to make love."

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Interestingly, although Anne's mother had theorized that a man without a disability would not be interested or understanding enough to become romantically involved with her daughter, the men with disabilities whom Anne knew "were only interested in dating non-disabled women." So she refused to rule out relationships with able-bodied people, despite her mother's fear that she would end up hurt.

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She adds, "If you get rejected, accept it graciously - that person just wasn't meant for you. But always remember, there is someone out there for you."

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For those individuals who are interested in exploring their own sexuality further, there are many devices and products on the market that have been designed for use by someone with a disability.

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Susan Wheeler, who publishes "It's Okay," says that fewer sex tools have been made accessible compared to other kinds of household items. Manufacturers are "less likely to enter that arena," she says. Perhaps they are more likely to expect a person with a disability to want a change a light bulb independently than engage in sexual activity.

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However, awareness about disability and sexuality is growing, and whatever your pleasure, there are many resources and ideas out there that can help you to have a satisfying sex life. Above all, communication seems to be the key to a good sex life - whether it is with your partner, your attendant, or other people with disabilities who may have stimulating ideas.

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