

# Opening the door to love

## New program looks to assist people with disabilities in experiencing love

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WORKSHOP FACILITATOR, SAIPA

In today's world, there are several ways to seek intimacy and relationships. Being set up by a friend, going to a party, speed dating, or trying your luck online are all methods people use when attempting to find that special someone.

While mastering the language of love can be a challenge for anyone, it can be especially tough for people with disabilities. Lack of knowledge about healthy relationships, societal stigmas, and attitudinal barriers all play a role in this group's ability to fulfil a natural need.

Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association (SAIPA) has partnered with ARCHES (formerly Lethbridge HIV Connection) to open the dialogue around people with disabilities and relationships through an exciting initiative called "Right To Love."

Beginning in February, "Right To Love" is a free group where people with disabilities of all kinds can come together to discuss their feelings on love, relationships, sex and sexuality. The group will meet at SAIPA one Monday per month.

"Right To Love" began in Calgary in 2010 through the work of Disability Action Hall: a group of self-advocates with disabilities, the SCOPE Society and the Calgary Sexual Health Centre. Along with monthly meetings, the group provides education and awareness around people with disabilities and the right to meaningful

relationships.

Although new to Lethbridge, SAIPA's advocacy co-ordinator, Anna Olson, says there is a need for this type of group in our community.

"People with disabilities have been told that they're asexual, or they haven't been allowed to explore healthy sexual relationships," says Olson.

Offering support to people with developmental disabilities through advocacy, workshops and resources, this initiative is another key aspect in SAIPA's mandate to promote inclusion.

"We've been looking at 'Right To Love for a while,'" says Olson. "We just needed to have the right people in play. We knew that we couldn't do this on our own; we need the community to be able to offer something like this."

SAIPA forged a partnership with ARCHES, which provides support to people affected by HIV and Hepatitis C, outreach to street-involved populations, a harm reduction program and much more.

Olson will share co-facilitation of the group with Tannia Los, client services and counselling co-ordinator for ARCHES. Los will bring knowledge around group facilitation, safe sex and STI prevention while Olson will contribute knowledge regarding people with disabilities and the challenges they face.

Unlike a structured workshop, Olson and Los will develop a loose baseline curriculum that is flexible to allow the group to discuss topics that they wish. Examples could include how to have a safe relationship, consent, how to say no, safe masturbation or how to put on a condom.

"I think knowledge is power," says Los. "It might have to be adapted knowledge so it's better understood, but at the end of the day, people are hard-wired for connection. Everybody has the right to healthy relationships."

Despite the progress made when it comes to the rights of those with disabilities, when it

comes to sex and relationships, attitudes are still a significant barrier.

"[There's an] attitude that people with disabilities aren't capable of having families and having successful sexual relationships."

Olson says these attitudes perhaps stem from Alberta's eugenics movement. The Sexual Sterilization Act was passed in 1928, and in turn, the Alberta Eugenics Board was created. Between 1928 and 1972, the board approved 99 per cent of its nearly 5,000 cases to sterilize adults with mental illness or disability. An increasing number of these cases did not have the individual's consent.

Today, barriers to relationships may include lack of knowledge, lack of support from parents, guardians or other authority figures, as well as a lack of privacy.

Olson feels knowledge regarding healthy relationships is vital to keep people with disabilities safe.

"People with disabilities are typically more vulnerable than the general population," says Olson. "When people know about sex and sexuality, what healthy relationships look like and what consent is, it keeps them safe."

According to 2007 statistics from the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre, women with disabilities are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women without disabilities. Of adults with developmental disabilities, 83 per cent of women and 32 per cent of men with will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime.

Keeping an open dialogue regarding relationships is key, and when people with disabilities lead that dialogue, powerful things can happen.

"I hope that people are able to just be open in the group, really get in there and ask the hard questions that they've never felt comfortable asking."

There is a maximum of 15 people per group. To register, contact Anna Olson at 403-320-1515 or [anna.olson@saipa.info](mailto:anna.olson@saipa.info).