

Talking about Close Relationships

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) can help the individuals they support understand how to navigate forming healthy close relationships with others.

Having “the Talk”

1. **Recognize your comfort level** – If you don’t feel comfortable answering questions about relationships, that is OK. Find other ways for the person you support to get answers if they have questions.
2. **You don’t have to wait to be asked a question** - Sometimes individuals feel uncomfortable asking questions about relationships. Don’t be afraid to break the ice and find out what they know by asking a few simple open-ended questions.
3. **Be receptive to questions** - If you are asked a question that takes you off-guard, take a breath before responding. Show the person you support that you are receptive to their question by listening to them without judgment.
4. **Always use the correct terminology** for body parts, intimate acts, and relationship-related terms. Using “pet names” for body parts or actions can make it difficult for an individual to communicate if they have experienced abuse, and it can impede communication between them and their doctor.
5. **Don’t make up information, if you don’t know the answer**– always take the time to find an appropriate resource.
6. **Help model appropriate social skills** - Use your position to model appropriate touch and interactions with the people you support.
7. **Use media as a tool** - If you pay attention, you’ll find that messages about relationships are everywhere, such as magazines, movies, and TV. Use these opportunities to start conversations about relationships.

Dating

Dating can be a great way for individuals to get to know people they may be romantically interested in. One way to meet new people the person you support might like could be through a social group, like a singing group, walking club, or through volunteering. Some successful dating relationships start off as friendships.

Online Dating

Online dating can be a great way to meet people with similar interests, but individuals need to know how to avoid pitfalls. DSPs can help individuals create dating profiles and share these tips for staying safe while dating online:

- **Don’t disclose any personal facts** like addresses, phone numbers, passwords, or financial information in a username, profile, or on a first date.
- **Take it slow.** Make sure the other person’s conversations are consistent and that they have revealed their true identity.
- **Trust your instincts!** If there’s a bad vibe, end the connection immediately.

- On a first date, **always meet at a public, well-trafficked location.** If possible, meet somewhere close to home or have reliable transportation. Don't ride with your date or be caught waiting for the bus or paratransit if you need to leave in a hurry.
- **Let your date know if you will need assistance** eating or with other activities.
- **Tell someone you trust the details of the planned date.** Keep your phone with you. Have an escape plan if the date goes bad or you feel unsafe.
- **Consider bringing along a friend.** Meeting someone new for the first time can be scary. This wingman doesn't necessarily need to join the date but can remain nearby for additional support.
- **Maintain good judgment throughout the date by limiting your alcohol consumption.**

Do's and Don'ts of Dating

Talk to the individual you support about these basic do's and don'ts for dating:

Do

- ✓ Be yourself, relax and have fun!
- ✓ Know that you have many awesome qualities and aren't defined by other people's opinions.
- ✓ Always respect your date's personal boundaries. Learn how they communicate and obtain consent before engaging in any sexual activity.
- ✓ Realize that every relationship needs a foundation of respect and acceptance.
- ✓ Be honest about your capabilities and support needs.

Don't

- ✗ Don't try to force someone to like you or accept your disability.
- ✗ Don't settle for someone who will never make your heart happy.
- ✗ Never go into a relationship expecting to fix someone's abilities or personality. Know your deal breakers.
- ✗ Don't ask someone to stay in a relationship when they want to leave.

Additional Resources:

- Relias: <https://www.relias.com/blog/7-tips-for-talking-about-sexuality-and-relationships>
- Office of Developmental Primary Care, University of California, San Francisco: <https://odpc.ucsf.edu/advocacy/sexuality-sexual-health/our-sexuality-our-health-a-disabled-advocates-guide-to#dating>