

Caring and Consent: Navigating Sexuality with Caregiver Support

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Colonialism impacts all areas of social justice, our societies, and much more.

In particular, sexual health, sexuality, and disability, all have complicated historical and current relationships with Indigenous knowledge and experiences, due to historical and ongoing anti-Indigenous racism.

Thyra

- Sex and Relational Therapist
- Educator & social justice activist
- MSc, Couple & Family Therapy
- 41, settler, queer, non-binary, visibly disabled, neurodivergent, divorced, human and pet parent
- Collector of neglected hobbies
- Deep dependence on condiments



TK

Together

- Queer, genderwild dreamers
- Accessible travel enthusiasts
- Lovers of live music
- Sex + disability consultants
- Event accessibility guide creators
- Real weird at parties



Please keep in mind...

- Our experiences are not universal
- Disability is a wide and varied reality, we actively know we will leave experiences out, make mistakes, and that the tools/resources and information cannot be universally applied
- Sex means different things to different people, while we try to speak to this, we will mess it up!
- This project serves a specific purpose, but we know there is so much more to be done
- Please be kind, give space to learn, and ask questions!

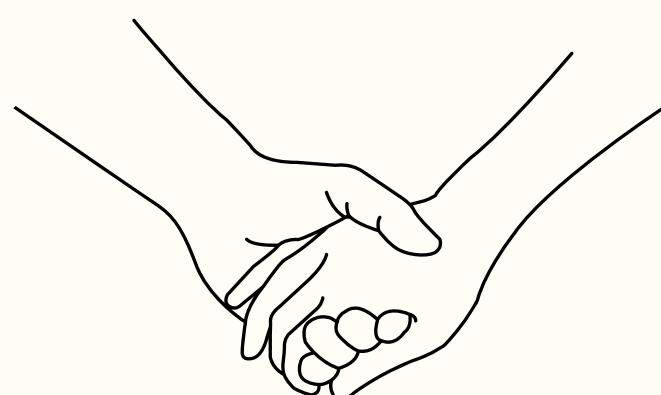
How did we get here?

- In 2011, Cory Silverberg and Fran Odette published their Sexuality and Access Project where they surveyed over 400 people- attendant care users, and attendants
- In 2023 T6 Talk, University of Guelph (CESI), and SHORE Centre, recreated and released the survey again
- Curriculum is the next step in addressing the gaps found in both rounds of surveys

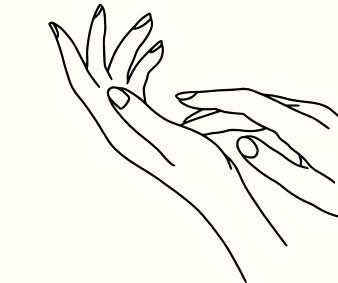
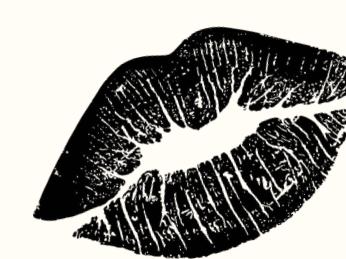
How can we ensure that disabled individuals experience non-judgemental, un-biased supportive care, and that attendants have the tools, resources, and information needed?

Why is this is important?

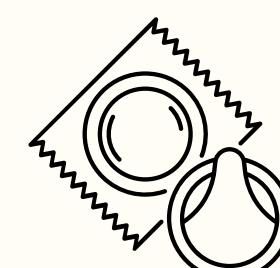
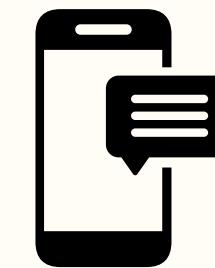
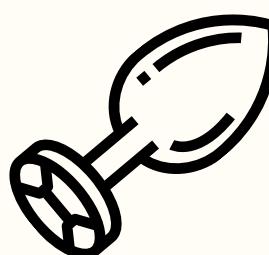
- Disabled people deserve to engage in consensual sex and sexuality in the ways we want to, when we want to and in environments we feel safe in
- Attendants often don't receive training or support and agencies have inconsistent policies/practices (if any)
- Disabled individual/caregiver dynamics can include a significant amount of power
- Talking about sex can be new and/or uncomfortable for many people



What do we mean by sex?



- We don't need to define sex for one another
- It could include anything from masturbation, engaging with another person/people, kissing, touching, oral, penetration (anal/vaginal), cuddling, hiring a sexual partner, sexting, using sex toys, verbal stimulation (aka "dirty talk"), dressing up, taking photos etc.
- All kinds of consensual sex can be exciting, fulfilling, and fun!

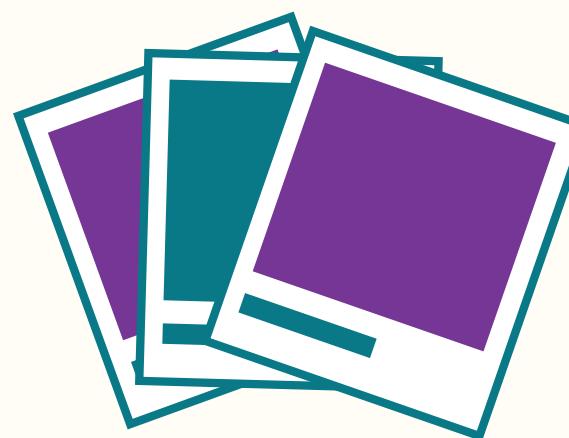


Getting more comfortable talking about sex

- It's okay to feel awkward, embarrassed, unsure what to say - and also fine if you feel totally confident about it!
- We live in a world which often shames sex, queerness, sex toy use and of course disabled sex - working through all of this is hard stuff
- Finding your medium- individual needs as well as comfort levels may dictate the best method for communicating: verbal, written, with supportive technology, using images etc. - no one option is better than the other

Getting more comfortable talking about sex

- What language do you want to use (if using words)?
- Are there pictures or visual aids that could help?
- Spend time thinking about the kinds of experiences you are open to and interested in
- Practice saying, thinking about, writing, typing etc. the words on your own or with a person you already trust

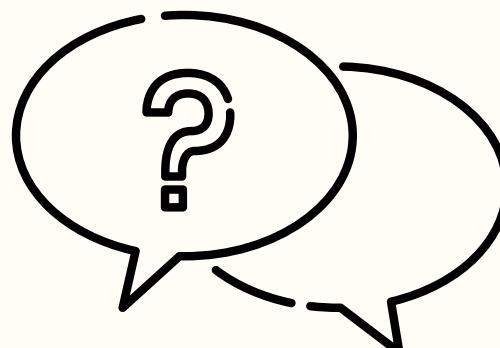


Checking your values and assumptions



If you are a caregiver/attendant ask yourself:

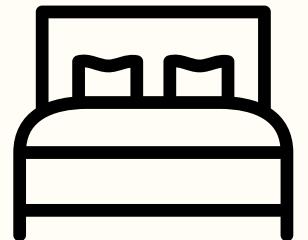
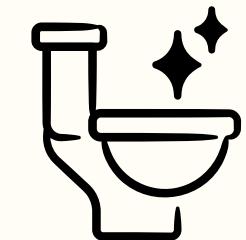
- When you picture people on a date, are they able-bodied?
- Do you believe that all people deserve to access their sexuality (if wanted)?
- Do you believe that disabled people need to be “protected?”
- Do you believe that disabled people can consent to sex?



Checking your values and assumptions

If you are a caregiver/attendant ask yourself:

- How do you feel when you see who appears to be a disabled person on a date with a non-disabled person? What about two disabled people?
- Do you view sexuality/sex as an essential, or non-essential part of people's lives?
- Are there kinds of relationships or sex you feel are more "acceptable?"
- What is your reaction when considering supporting a client in the washroom vs cleaning up after a sexual experience?



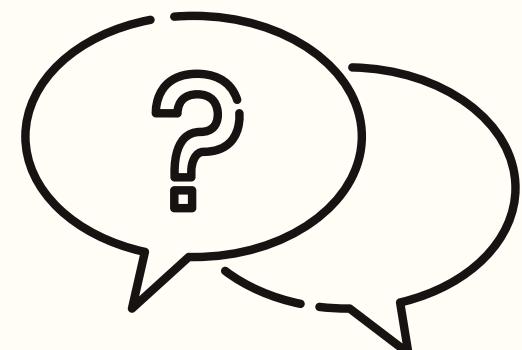
Hiring, contracts, and interviews

- Clear communication is key!
- Including support for sexual health and experiences, with agreed upon boundaries in recruitment/contracts
- Addressing boundaries- coming to the table with an idea of what you might be comfortable with and what kinds of support you would be asking about
- Differentiating sexual support vs sexual activity/engagement



Hiring, contracts, and interviews

- Consider asking direct questions such as:
 - Sex and sexuality are part of my life. Will you be able to support me with _____?
 - How would you let me know about a boundary for you, or if you have concerns about one being crossed?
 - Do you have any prior experience supporting people around sex and sexuality?
 - How would you respond if my family member asked about my dating/sex life?

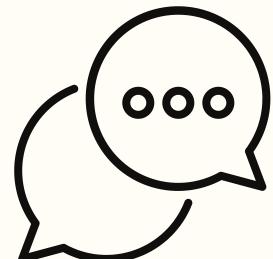


What if the attendant is already in place or is a family member/friend?

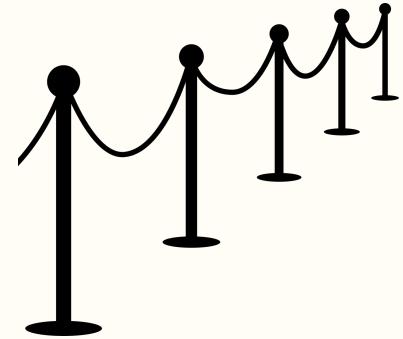
- It can sometimes be helpful to pose questions with distance if you aren't sure how someone will respond.
 - Ex. "My friend Sam told me they are going on a date tomorrow! They aren't sure though if their support worker is going to be helpful if things start headed towards the bedroom - they need some help getting things set up."
 - Ex. "Oh my gosh, I saw a reel on Instagram the other day where this person said their attendant helped them to set up a vibrator. That's kinda wild hey?"
- It's okay (good, even!) to recognize you aren't comfortable with a particular person supporting you.
- Explore your options where possible - is there anyone who could sub-in?

Communication and Confidentiality

- Sex means many different things to different people, don't assume you know what a client is asking/what an attendant thinks you mean
- Respecting consent, boundaries, personal autonomy
- Understanding the attendant role/relation/interactions with sexual partner(s), dates etc.
- Learning what words/terminologies folks want to use when referring to their bodies/activities/sex toys/partners etc



Communication and Confidentiality

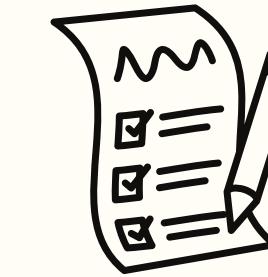
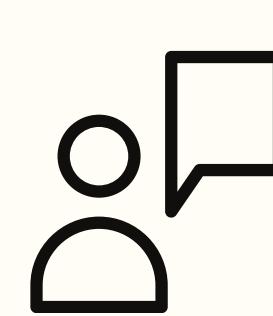


- Confidentiality- important all around!
- Are you/is a client okay with their other attendants knowing or not
- What do you/a client want if containing information from other support staff is difficult (for example in a communal living setting)
- Ensuring information isn't being shared on behalf of the client with family, others - the client gets to be in control of who knows and when

Using our tools

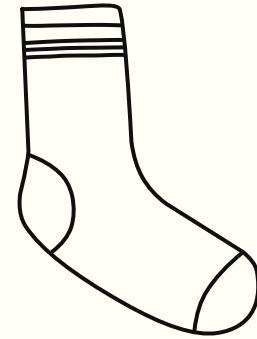
- **Lists!**

- What kind of support do I want?
- What specific tasks would I be asking for support on
- What feels clearly in the realm of attendant care?
- What might be comfortable for a partner(s) to engage with?



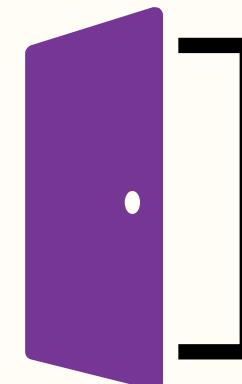
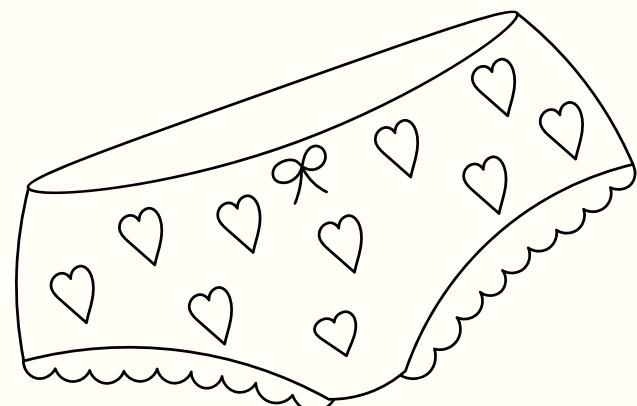
- What activities am I comfortable supporting with?
- What information do I need to know vs. want to know?

Using our tools



- **Visual/auditory/tactile indicators**

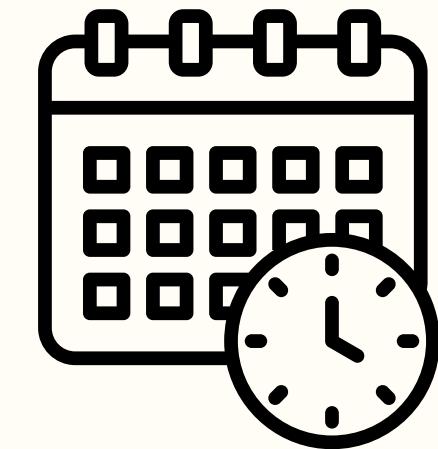
- a closed bedroom door, an item on the door, an item left out in the common area, playing a certain song, light above the door, communicating it's a time to change into lingerie or date clothes etc.
- They may also be used to communicate when it's time to clean up- ex turning off music



Using our tools

- **Scheduling**

- Some folks may prefer sex (partnered/solo etc.) at particular times or on particular days.
- Setting up times when attendants may follow certain boundaries/not come over/ not in room/ know they are likely to provide support etc may be helpful for some



Questions:

- Why are there no communities and/or peer support groups for folks with disabilities?
- Ways for people with disabilities to safely explore their sexuality, when they do not have a partner but are wanting to explore intimacy

Alice Wong

"Similar to how queer people expand and upend notions of family and sex, disabled people push and create our own ideas of intimacy."

"It is thanks to the love and generosity of disabled people that I have opened up to new ways of being, thinking, and moving in the world."

