

A relationship and sex education guide for disabled young people

This resource is intended to support disabled young people in finding the knowledge and guidance they need to navigate the world of sex and relationships. It's aimed at those who are aged 14 and up. It has been created by sex-ed social enterprise [Split Banana](#), and disability awareness charity [Enhance the UK](#).

Are you curious about sex? Wondering about relationships and what they're like? Feeling like you're not getting the information you need? We're here to help. This guide will walk through some of the common questions you might have, and point you towards some great resources to go away and look at.

Liking yourself

It may sound weird or it may sound obvious, but having a happy relationship with someone else starts with having a positive relationship with yourself.

This doesn't mean you have to love every part of your body or feel amazing all of the time - that's impossible. But it means seeing your good bits, being in tune with what you think and feel and trying to feel grateful for the skin you're in.

If we don't feel this, sometimes we can feel worthless, like we're not important or not good enough.

These feelings can make us feel down, depressed, and can mean that we rely on other people to make us feel confident or happy.

Checking in

Checking in with yourself helps you to be in tune with how you're feeling and what you need. This can be as low key as you want.

We find 'free-writing' helps us to reflect and get all our thoughts and feelings out of our minds.

The aim is to finish the sentences below. You can do this by writing, drawing or speaking - the ONLY RULE is that you have to keep going for at least 1 full minute, so time yourself.

Don't overthink it - no one is going to see or hear these!

1. Right now I am feeling...
2. I'm feeling anxious about...
3. What I'm liking about myself is...
4. What I'm not liking about myself is...
5. I'm feeling grateful for...

We try and do this once a week - even if it's just taking a second to think about them.

Relationships with others

Okay so you're getting to know yourself a bit more, but what you actually came here to find out about is liking other people.

So - liking other people can look different to different people. You might be sexually attracted to someone, romantically attracted or just kind of curious to know more about the person. You might like boys, girls, non-binary people - [you might still be figuring it out](#).

Beginning to fancy people can be weird, exciting, terrifying and confusing. And that's totally fine.

What to look for - the positives

Although we don't see enough of it in TV shows and films, disabled people also have romantic lives which are just as exciting, messy, complicated and fulfilling.

And whatever your identity or experience, what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy remains the same.

A healthy relationship is one that makes you and your partner both feel good in yourselves.

This doesn't mean that you'll feel good 100% of the time - again, that's impossible. But it does mean that your relationship gives you more happiness and goodness than sadness and badness.



To give you some specifics, we think that [this is a great list](#) of what makes a healthy relationship:

Comfortable pace

The relationship moves at a speed that feels enjoyable for each person.

Honesty

You can be truthful without fearing how the other person will respond.

Respect

You value one another's beliefs and opinions, and like one another for who you are as a person.

Kindness

You are caring and kind to one another, and provide comfort and support.

Taking responsibility

Owning your actions and words.

Healthy conflict

Openly and respectfully discussing issues and confront disagreements non-judgmentally.

Trust

You have confidence that your partner won't do anything to hurt you or ruin the relationship.

Independence

You have the space to be yourself outside of the relationship.

Equality

The relationship feels balanced and everyone puts the same effort into the success of the relationship.

Fun

You enjoy spending time together and bring out the best in each other

What to look out for - the negatives

Unfortunately, as we've said before, relationships can also be messy and complicated. We can find ourselves with people who don't make us feel great, or make us feel actively bad about ourselves.

In films and TV these people are often easy to spot - they might look 'off' or act in a clearly mean or hurtful way.

It can actually be much harder to spot negative behaviour or toxic relationships in real life.

Whilst unhealthy behaviours can occur occasionally in any relationship, it's important to think about how often these are occurring.

[Here's another list](#) of some specific things to look out for in relationships:

Deflecting responsibility

When someone repeatedly makes excuses for their unhealthy behaviour.

Manipulation

When someone tries to control your decisions, actions or emotions .

Intensity

When someone expresses very extreme feelings and over the top behaviour that can feel overwhelming.

Sabotage

When someone purposely ruins your reputation, achievements, or success.

Guilt

When someone makes you feel responsible for their actions or makes you feel like it's your job to keep them happy.



Possessiveness

When someone is jealous to a point where they try to control who you spend time with and what you do

Isolation

When someone keeps you away from your friends, family, or other people.

Belittling

when someone does and says things to make you feel bad about yourself.

Volatility

When someone has a really strong unpredictable reaction that makes you feel scared, confused or intimidated.

Betrayal

When someone is disloyal or acts in an intentionally dishonest way.

If you're ever unsure, trust your gut. If you're still unsure, speak to someone close to you that you trust, see what their gut says.

It's also important to be aware that some people fetishise disabilities and those who have them. This is when someone feels sexual desire specifically for people with disabilities. 'Devotees' are people who seek out relationships - either sexual or romantic - with people who have disabilities.

If the way someone treats you, or talks about your disability makes you feel uncomfortable, definitely treat it as a red flag and talk to someone you trust about it.

There's also helplines which you can phone, message or email. It's always worth playing it safe - you're not being overdramatic.

Okay, so now you know what to look for and what to look out for. You've bagged yourself a lovely partner and you're ready to get intimate. Well, read on for some more info on what to expect.



Intimacy + Sex

Again, even though it's hugely underrepresented in our culture and on our screens, disabled people enjoy positive and safe sex lives.

Before we get into it, just a note that we talk about this stuff in detail as we think it's important that people have all the facts, and receive real talk about sex.

Because we're not used to having these kinds of conversations you might feel awkward or embarrassed to read about this stuff. That's totally fine! Cringe, laugh, giggle - you do you.

What is sex?

Let's dive straight in.

It's helpful to think of sex as both outercourse and intercourse. Outercourse is any sexual activity which isn't penetrative, such as kissing, touching, oral sex (mouths on genitals) and masturbation (touching your own genitals) - either on your own or with your partner.

Intercourse is penetrative sexual activity, where the vagina or anus is penetrated. This includes with fingers, penises, sex toys - anything you can think of! The key bit is that something enters the vagina or anus.

We normally just see or talk about sex as if it's just penis-in-vagina. This is problematic. Lots of people don't have penis-in-vagina sex. This might be because they're in a same sex relationship, one person might not enjoy it, someone might have an impairment which makes it difficult. The list is endless.

It's also important to remember that just as all of this sex is valid so is the choice to not engage in sexual activity. You might not want to. You might follow a religion or culture which waits until after marriage. You might be asexual: meaning you biologically don't have sexual feelings or associations.

All of these choices are valid.

Consent

Key to understanding sex and intimacy, is understanding that it all requires consent. Consent is about freedom and choice, and saying an enthusiastic 'yes' to a sexual experience - either vocally or through body language. Whether it's kissing or penetrative, consent is crucial.

A safe and healthy intimate experience **MUST** have consent - from all of the people involved in it. You might have heard of the phrases 'no means no' and [active consent](#): affirmative, honest, conscious, voluntary, sober and ongoing agreement to participate in sexual activity.

[Here is a great little video](#) that explains consent through a cup of tea.

It's really important to get used to having conversations about what you and your partner find comfortable, from early on.

Again, mainstream culture isn't very good at showing sex scenes where people are asking things like "does this feel nice?" or saying, "actually this isn't great for me, could we try this?" or just "I'd really rather actually watch Netflix". Checking in like this is a really important habit to get into, and doesn't have to be a mood killer.

[This is a great article](#) about how to navigate sex and consent if you or your partner are non-verbal.

Sexual health

If sexual intimacy is on your horizon, it's really important that you look into sexual health. Even if you're not planning on having penis-in-vagina sex.

We recommend checking out the STI (Sexually Transmitted Infection) [section of the Sexwise website](#), which answers pretty much all of the questions you might have about STI's and how to keep yourself safe and healthy.

If you do expect to engage in penis-in-vagina sex, then it's also important to think about you and your partners' contraception options. Luckily in the UK we have a range of free contraception options available - from the pill to the implant.

Again, [Sexwise has a great section on contraception choices](#) which we really recommend.

It's also good to remember that you do not need parental permission to access contraception.

Pleasure

It's super important to remember that sex and intimacy should feel good. However this may work for you, sex should be enjoyable.

The key to getting there is first getting to know what you like, and then learning how to communicate that to your partner.

Telling your partner what you like, what makes you comfortable, what makes you uncomfortable, and experimenting are all ways of improving sexual pleasure.

Case study:

'I lost my virginity when I was 19. Before this, I'd been terrified of sex - not necessarily the act, but how I would get into certain positions, and whether my muscles would relax enough for me to enjoy the experience. I'm a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy, and at that time, ten years ago, was unable to find any resources or pieces of advice to educate me around sex and disability. I come from a family where open, frank and honest discussions are the norm, but no amount of talking around the subject was calming my fears. One Sunday afternoon, my auntie, sister and I just tried out some possible positions, so I could figure out for myself what was possible and what wasn't. There were plenty of giggles and some tears too, but it was the best bit of sex education I ever had.'

Emily, 28.

It's a good idea to spend some time exploring your body, to find out what makes you feel good, and what might be comfortable and uncomfortable. If you get to know your body in this way, you might find it easier communicating with your partner what you want.



Common questions you might have

Am I normal?

This is one of the most frequent questions we come across. Unfortunately, we live in a society that tells us that there is a way to look and a way to behave, every single day. Which is why it's important to know that - actually - there is no normal.

No normal bodies, relationships, sex, orientations, teenage years and experiences etc. Many insecurities and anxieties are born out of the idea that we, or others, are somehow defaulting from a normal or 'right' way of existing. This can lead us to be disgusted or ashamed at ourselves and our bodies, and to judge others.

Position yourself in front of a mirror and give this a go. Repeat this 3 times, either out loud or in your head: *"Yes, it is true, no-one will ever be you-er than you."* Because it's TRUE! You are your own completely unique and wonderful person. We love Dr Seuss.

When will I have sex?

There is no 'right' time to have sex. The law states that the age of consent is 16 years old. But this does not mean you will necessarily feel ready by then. Everyone is different.

Some people have sex later. Some people have sex earlier. Some people only have sex after marriage. Some people never have sex. Some people choose only to have outcourse sex, not intercourse sex.

As long as you are safe, consenting and happy, then the choice is yours, no-one elses.

Relationships between disabled people and non-disabled people

As with any relationship, people's different backgrounds, lifestyles and cultures and experiences impact how we think about sex and relationships. The lived experience of a disabled person and a non-disabled person may be quite different.

Again, as with any relationship, practising open communication is key to developing a relationship based on trust and equality.

Vocalising a preference when it comes to dates or sex, for example, should be possible in any



Relationships between disabled people and non-disabled people

As with any relationship, people's different backgrounds, lifestyles and cultures and experiences impact how we think about sex and relationships. The lived experience of a disabled person and a non-disabled person may be quite different.

Again, as with any relationship, practising open communication is key to developing a relationship based on trust and equality.

Vocalising a preference when it comes to dates or sex, for example, should be possible in any healthy relationship. For example, if you're deaf on one side, you might want to explain to a partner that they should position themselves on your right, so that you can hear them. And if you have a physical impairment and certain positions are more comfortable than others, it's important that you feel comfortable expressing this before you get it on; anyone who doesn't respect this really shouldn't be having sex with you.

We really enjoyed reading [this article written by Marisa Krause](#), about the dating advice she wished she had as a teenager.

Still curious? Check out these people and pages for more info:

General sex-ed:

[Fumble UK](#). A digital media platform for young people to learn about relationships and sex.

[Yes, People With Disabilities Are Having Sex \(And Loving It\)](#)

[Disability Visibility](#)

[Sexwise](#) is a great place to go to find out about sexual health.

[Salty](#). An unapologetic newsletter and website filled with brilliant articles by and for women, trans and non-binary people.

Salty article: [‘Eight Tips For Meeting New Partners When You’re Living With A Disability’](#)

Salty article: [How to Find Sex-Positive, Queer-Friendly Disability Aides](#)

[Them](#). A publication that provides news and culture through the lens of today’s LGBTQ+ community.

[URevolution](#) is a content platform that describes itself as body positivity without the ableism. Also has a great sex and dating section.

[Disability Visibility](#) is a platform created by disability activist Alice Wong. Alice also hosts an amazing [podcast](#) and has just released a [book](#).

Inspiring pages and people to follow on social media:

[Hannah Witton](#). Talks frankly about sex and relationships with a stoma, and is a podcaster and author.

[Aaron Phillip](#) is the first black, transgender and physically disabled model to be signed to a major agency, and is an advocate for disability and queer rights.

[Chellaman](#) is a deaf, trans, genderqueer artist and model. He’s also a major advocate disability and queer rights.

[Lucy Edwards](#). The first blind Cover Girl partner. Lucy is also a BBC reporter, YouTuber and author.

[Voices4Ldn](#) are a direct action group for the LGBTIQ+ community. They make excellent content including a lot of disability advocacy.

[Lauren 'Lolo' Spencer](#) is a model, actress and disability influencer.

[SimplyEmma](#). The UK's leading disability and travel blogger, Emma writes about moving around the world in a wheelchair.

[Dis-sexuality](#). A Mumbai-based platform for women with disabilities to share their experiences of sexualitand connect with others.

[Gynaegeek](#) (Dr Anita Mitra). An NHS doctor committed to spreading the word about sexual health.

[Andrew Gurza](#). A queer activist, disability awareness consultant and [Disability after Dark](#) podcaster.

If you want to think about sex and relationships in more depth:

[Sex, Power, Money](#) by Sara Pascoe. Sara explores the sex industry, objectification and the allure of wealth in relation to them.

[The Curious History of Sex](#) by Kate Lister. A fun, informative read that uncovers the root of some of the language and practices used today.

[Undressing Disability](#) is an ebook, made by Enhance the UK, that you can download. It proudly lifts the taboo on sex and relationships for those with disabilities and analyses the restrictions put on sex-ed for disabled young people.