

Friendships and relationships

Information resources

Introduction

We all have relationships with other people throughout our lives. Relationships matter. When they work well they are a vital source of support and protection against life's stresses and strains. But all relationships go through periods of change and challenge. This information sheet is designed to reassure you and help you understand the different aspects of developing social interactions, making friends and having relationships.

Does hemiplegia make it more difficult to make friends or have a relationship?

Making and keeping relationships can present challenges for people with hemiplegia. Over 60% of the people who

completed the HemiHelp survey in 2008 felt that their condition affected their social life – it came second, after education, on the list of areas in which they had encountered barriers. The majority of people who completed the survey were single. For many people with hemiplegia it is other people's attitudes that limit their choices, although on the positive side some people reported that things are now better than when they were younger.

"I feel that older teens and adults are less focused on the disability and more focused on the person."

Some people with hemiplegia have similar difficulties to those with autism spectrum disorders in reading other people's reactions and feelings, a common enough aspect of hemiplegia that affects the ability to make and keep friends. Nevertheless, the typical answers in the survey suggest that many people with hemiplegia do have a social life, friends, a partner and a family.

"If you don't try and hide your disability it will help you make friends. People may be suspicious if you try and hide it and it might make them think you're ashamed of it. Don't be. If you talk about your disability when you meet people it helps them relax".



There is nothing unusual in young adults feeling anxious about couple relationships, but having hemiplegia can add an extra layer of uncertainty, whether it is a question of worrying about appearance or lack of social confidence. Having confidence in yourself helps you to be positive about what you want and what you can bring to a relationship. It also helps you to be positive about the decisions you make. Being confident means you like who you are and are comfortable with different aspects of yourself, like your gender, your sexuality, your body, your thoughts, your feelings, your desires and your disability.

"In my mid-twenties I got a little more relaxed around men of my own age, learned gradually how to joke with them."

Certain things can undermine your confidence, such as the pressure to look or behave in a particular way to 'fit in', or feeling that you are different to everyone else. It is important to remember everyone is unique and that you have the right to feel happy with who you are and how you look. If you are always feeling down about yourself it may be helpful to speak about these feelings with someone you trust or with a professional (see useful contacts).

"My poor body image hasn't helped. I've always compared myself to other women and was convinced that my limp, and my arm with its contracture, were the first things a man would notice and that they were a turn-off. It truly was a revelation to hear otherwise and I'm surprised that I didn't float to the ceiling the first time I was given a physical compliment; the exact wording of which I will remember till my dying day."

How do I meet someone?

You may find it difficult to go out and meet new people but there are a variety of ways you can – either for friendships or relationships, whatever your sexual orientation. There are different websites that specialise in arranging meetings for people with disabilities (see useful contacts). You could also use other dating websites and agencies. There are adverts in papers, speed dating, Facebook, chat rooms etc. You need to stay safe if you do eventually meet someone this way – the Suzy Lamplugh Trust website has some really good tips (www.suzylamplugh.org).

"I met my previous partner at uni and my current one on www.match.com. My decision to go online was much more to do with having just turned 30, come out of a 10-year relationship and never having been on a proper date, and generally wanting an easy way to 'get back out there and test the water'. I was not meant to end up in a lovely, wonderful, awesome relationship with the second boy I met!"



You could also meet other people with hemiplegia by coming to an event organised by HemiHelp or by visiting our Facebook group.

"I have non-hemi/non-disabled friends that are in loving relationships from online sites and other various means too!"

"Since most of my friends have met their spouses or partners through friends, I hope that if I spend time in their company, keep lively and involved in the world, that someday I'll be introduced to or just bump into (say at the theatre, or an art gallery, or heaven forbid, at the swimming pool) the man of my dreams."

Taking part in sports and other group activities can provide a good opportunity to meet people with similar interests.

"I found a good way of making friends was to get out and join an outdoor activity club. I like walking, sailing and kayaking. I was nervous the first time I went to the club but once I started taking part in activities people got to know me and weren't bothered about my disability. If you like sports have a look on the internet to see if there is any local club that runs activities you'd like to do and find out about joining."

"I met my wife through a party organised by the outdoor activities club I joined. We both got chatting about things we had in common. We both liked kayaking. It can be very scary when you chat to someone for the first time. As I know people notice my disability almost immediately I'm happy to tell them about it. Don't be scared to talk about your disability. I told my wife about how I went tall ship sailing and what things I enjoyed while at university. I went because a charity chose me because I'm disabled. I told her that and we got talking about sailing."

What about sexual relationships?

Sooner or later friendship might develop into something else. Intimate or sexual relationships can take many forms including: casual, dating, 'going steady', living together, marriage, civil partnerships and many others. No two relationships are the same. They are shaped by the people in them and their personal experiences, sexual orientation, culture, religion and social background. The best way to make sure that things go well in a relationship is by talking with your partner.

"Doubts and fears are bound to come up surrounding sex. Talking your worries over with your partner is a great start – there are always ways round things – adaptation is the key."

Trust is very important in a relationship. Being honest and being yourself from the start is the best way for someone to really get to know you. You should feel confident enough in your relationships to talk about how you are feeling and how the relationship is going for you. Respect is really important and means having the right to be listened to and your views appreciated. This also means that you offer the same to your partner. If you ever feel you are being taken advantage of, or suffering abuse, you need to do something about it. Talk to someone you trust like a parent or carer, family member, close friend or an advice service.

"Until recently I didn't see myself as sexually attractive to men – so wouldn't even look at them as I was convinced they'd think my arm and leg were a turn-off."

Sex is an intimate act and something that you should enjoy and feel in control of. It is legal once you both reach the age of 16, the age of consent, and it is your choice if and when you want to have sex. It is important when deciding to have sex that you feel certain that you are ready. If you choose to have sex make sure that it is for the right reasons and not that you feel pressured.

If you are sexually active, or your relationship feels like it's going in that direction, you should speak openly about what you're comfortable with and what you are expecting. It's worth deciding your options for preventing an unplanned pregnancy and for safe sex. The discussion also needs to include what to do if things don't go according to plan. Contraception is free for most people in the UK, and there are many types to choose from. You can find out what is available on the NHS here: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/contraception-guide For more information and sexual health advice please look at the 'useful contacts section'.

Think about your personal safety as well, both physically and online. Think twice about sending sexualised images of yourself to anyone – they would be out of your control forever and it could be dangerous if they fell into the wrong hands. It's also important to remember that it is illegal to make, send or keep a sexualised image of someone under the age of 18 – even if you're under 18 yourself, and even if the image is of you! The law has recently changed in this area so you should think very carefully about any kind of intimate images or messages that you may be tempted to send or exchange.

What about me?

The most important thing to remember is that each relationship is unique and there is not one way to be in a relationship; different things work for different people – it's about figuring out what works for you. Whatever your relationship, it should make you feel good about yourself.

Relationships are central to self-identity. Personal identity and self-esteem often have social origins, and the belief that relationships define the self and that being on one's own is a sign of personal failure adds pressure to be in relationships.

Friendship is important. And the desire to love and be loved, whether as a friend or an intimate companion, is a drive that defines a person in a way that no disability ever can. Relationships shift and change throughout your life. Not every relationship is ideal and staying in a relationship that is not working for you can be miserable. It is hard to break off a relationship especially if the other person doesn't want to. However, if you are at the point where you are no longer happy then it is best to end it as kindly as possible.



Useful contacts

Personal relationships and sexual health advice

BISHuk.com

Website that provides information on sexuality, safer sex, relationships and self esteem. Aimed at young people 14+ it also provides balanced information around issues such as porn and body image.

Brook

www.brook.org.uk

Network of advisory centres and outreach services working across the UK offering free and confidential sexual health advice and contraception to young people under 25. You can also get information on topics like your rights, your body, STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and pregnancy on the website.

Switchboard – the LGBT+ helpline

www.switchboard.lgbt

Tel: 0300 330 0630

Switchboard provides a one-stop listening service for LGBT+ people on the phone, by email and through Instant Messaging.

Relate

www.relate.org.uk

Tel: 0300 100 1234

Offers advice, relationship counselling, sex therapy, workshops, support groups, mediation, consultations and support – face-to-face, by phone and through their website – to anyone who is worried about personal relationships.

Sex. Worth talking about

www.nhs.uk/worhtalkingabout

Information and advice from NHS Choices on contraceptive choices, STIs (sexually transmitted infections), coping with emotions and understanding your body.

FPA (Family Planning Association)

www.fpa.org.uk

Nationwide information and education services on all aspects of contraception and sexual health. They can also give details of your nearest source of family planning help and advice and have an online enquiry service. FPA also operates their new 'FPA Pleasure' microsite (www.fpapleasure.co.uk), accessible through their main website, which hosts a frank and honest forum about the importance of pleasure for everyone, and has an online store for those interested in exploring sexual pleasure and wellbeing either with a partner or alone.

Personal relationships and disabled people

Focus on Disability

www.focusondisability.org.uk/relationships.html

Directory of disability-related information and resources to help you with your sex life, sexual problems and relationships.

Outsiders

www.outsiders.org.uk

Social, peer support and dating club run by and for socially and physically disabled people

Sex and disability helpline: 0707 499 3527 07074 993527 and by email on sexdis@outsiders.org.uk. It is open 11am to 5pm weekdays.

Online dating and friendship communities

DisabilityMatch.co.uk

www.disabilitymatch.co.uk

Online dating community for disabled people.

Disableddates4u.co.uk

www.disableddates4u.co.uk

Online dating community for disabled people that is part of a major dating network called Dating Factory.

Match.com

www.uk.match.com

One of the leading online dating sites.

Other useful resources

BPAS

(British Pregnancy Advisory Service)

www.bpas.org

Tel: 08457 30 40 30 Email: info@bpas

Provides information and help to young people and women with an unplanned pregnancy, or a pregnancy that they choose not to continue.

ChildLine

www.childline.org.uk

Tel: 0800 1111

Free 24-hour counselling service for children and young people up to their 19th birthday that deals with any issue that causes distress or concern, including child abuse, bullying, parental separation or divorce, pregnancy and substance misuse.

Suzy Lamplugh Trust

www.suzylamplugh.org

Tel: 020 7091 0014

Campaigns, educates and supports people to help reduce the risk of violence and aggression for everyone. It has useful resources, provides training sessions and runs community projects at school or work.

YoungMinds

www.youngminds.org.uk

Tel: 0808 802 5544

Helpline for parents or carers worried about the mental health of a child or young person. Also provides information on organisations that can help children and young people.

Useful resources in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales

Scotland

Sexual Health Scotland

www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk

Tel: 0800 22 44 88

Offers information and advice about sex and relationships.

Relationships Scotland

www.relationships-scotland.org.uk

Tel: 0845 119 2020

Email: enquiries@relationships-scotland.org.uk

Network of affiliated local services that provide relationship counselling, family mediation, child contact centres and other family support services across all of mainland and island Scotland.

The Spark (formerly known as SMC – Scottish Marriage Care)

www.thespark.org

Free relationship helpline: 0808 802 2088

A relationship support charity whose services include counselling service, relationship and a step- family helpline or early intervention programmes.

Disabled United

www.disabledunited.com/friends

Dating and friendship section of a website designed specifically for disabled people.

Whispers4u

www.whispers4u.com

Dating community for disabled men and women.

Northern Ireland

Relate Northern Ireland

www.relateni.org Tel: 928 9032 3454

Assists in developing and supporting healthy relationships by helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better. Offers counselling and therapeutic services.

Wales

NHS Direct Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Tel: 0845 46 47

All types of sexual health information, from contraception to pregnancy as well as tips on how to discuss sex.

HemiHelp makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information in its publications but cannot be held liable for any actions taken based on this information.

Helpline: **0345 123 2372**

(Mon-Fri 10am-1pm)

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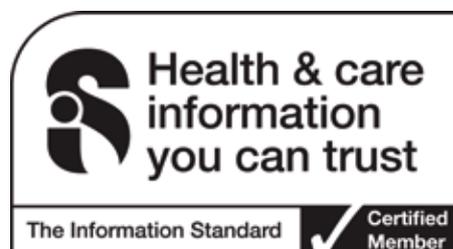
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