

## **Does Having A Learning Difficulty Entitle Me To Get Married?**

In my journey as a Psychologist through the world of disability, I often meet such questions and many others which are rather challenging in nature. The reason is simply because they are shadowed with a disability label.

Trying to understand intellectual disability from a professional point of view, one might oscillate from an extreme of pure arrogance to another end of total ignorance if I may. My position is neither that of a parent nor of a person with disability. This might have assimilation to someone who speaks about loss without ever having been through it in a way. Sheltered by a lot of reading, but having the poverty of the missing appropriate emotions which accompany it.

This is a bit how I felt, till early this year. I accompanied a group of persons with intellectual disability to London, where we all met a similar group who ran their own organization. It was not until the director himself asked the group a simple question: "How were your parents informed about your disability?". With such simplicity, the group I had been working with for about 3 years, just opened up like never before. Like a bottle of wine which you've been shelving for all these years, knowing that it would mature eventually and be opened, but never have the right opening code for it.

It was as simple as that. How arrogant could I have been to expect that they would share their deepest worlds with me, without realizing what stories they might have been fed since they were young! This is especially if they were told things like: "Your daughter will be good for nothing, will not walk, will not talk, will not live like any other". How would such statements being spelled out of professionals' mouths shape your life forever? And yes there it was in front of me.

I do not blame medical staff for this. On the one hand they are immersed in loads of work. On the other hand they would have been very preoccupied during university years to struggle with the university syllabus. Thus little may have been offered as basic knowledge how to deliver such news to parents and how to be supportive to them. Most probably no relevant personnel such as psychologists were recruited or even existent at the time. What about the knowledge and education lacking in parents to be. What kind of support does society really offer to parents? We talk a lot about educated chances and choices in disability, but what about the system at large?

In the past few years, the situation has improved especially through more education and awareness. However, our current adults with intellectual disability just emerge from such background along with their parents/carers lacking information and support, which they also require.

This made me seriously question about our commitments as persons, as a society at large and as professionals to this field. Do we really ask about the needs of these people? On this grounds I took a head start myself as a way of working, and always ask "What would I need in this situation, what are my needs and how do I full fill them?".

Such question really takes us to basics. We need love, affection, attention, achievement, recognition, validation, friendships, happiness and every other source which fills our life on a daily basis. Probably with such mechanic lives we lead, we never bother to think about till we lack or loose one of them. Then only we start questioning. All this we

achieve mostly through our family, our loved one, our work and our peers. Well many adults with intellectual disability might have parents, but rarely work. They lack the companionship of a loved one and have scarce support system of their peers, since its not as simple as going to Paceville and socialize in the weekends for them as it may seem.

So what is really different when it comes to persons with intellectual disability? Nothing really, nothing at all. They have the same exact needs like you and me, from simply love to the extent of all sexual needs. At this point you may go back to the title. So are you saying they can get married? I am saying that everyone deserves the same opportunities, and as we were educated to make our choices and sometimes not, so are they.

Suggested above I introduced the concept of 'educated choices'. Same applies here. How could I tell my disabled son or daughter: "no you cannot get married", when he has never learnt the phases of relationships or the difference between private and public places and parts? They might have not learnt who they can hug and who they have to shake hands with. It all starts from the basic, which you and me learn directly and indirectly as we grow. Still, all this is mostly missed in case of persons with learning difficulties. So then how can we even correct them when we did not bother to teach them in the first place? How many opportunities do they really have to socialize and meet people?

It's a matter of language really. Me and you can communicate by means of complex language which carries along the understanding and meaning of different concepts. Persons with leaning difficulties carry most of their understanding in concrete things, which they can touch, see or measure. Thus it's our job to provide and understand different means of communication. For one person a hug might mean, I love you, for the other a touch on the hand might be enough. For the other just acknowledging his/her presence in a room, might make their day. Others need pictures or a consistent routine to create and fulfill their safety. They do not ask much really, but if we consider most of what we provide to them is 'command statements' really. "Do this, do not do that, we have to go here etc". This is mostly what constitutes their day and little of "how are you's" is ever much present.

On a concluding note it would be positive to start reflecting on little differences which we might make around us. All of us in one way or another might have a connection from near or far with a person with learning difficulties. What will you be doing to cater for at least one of their needs?

### **Day Centres for Persons with Disability**

There are 9 Day Centres for Persons with a Disability in Malta. The aim of these centres is to help persons with a disability to continue developing their potential through different types of activities while at the same time supporting their families so that such persons can continue living within the community without being socially isolated, thus empowering them to live independently. Currently, around 400 adults with disability attend the day centres. These centers are managed by SAPPOR Agency.

For more information about the Day Centres, one can call on tel: 2388 5000.

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