Chapter 10
Diverse Disabilities and Dating Online

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ABSTRACT

Although research indicates that almost all emerging adults in the U.S. use the internet, little is known about the online dating experiences of persons with disabilities. Particularly in developed countries, online dating currently accounts for a substantial proportion of the initiation of romantic relationships and promises numerous advantages for persons with disabilities. Online dating includes a way to escape disability stigma, at least initially, access to a wide network of potential partners, and a convenient, private, and efficient method of meeting them. Online daters can be strategic in how they present both themselves and their disabilities, the manner in which they communicate with potential partners, and whether they join a large, popular dating site or a specialized disability-oriented one. The chapter discusses how the nine-step process of online dating might differ for or challenge emerging adults with various types of disabilities, sharing relevant research and media examples when available.

INTRODUCTION

Online dating is hard enough. Try doing it with a disability. (Sykes, 2014, p. 1)

According to the Census Bureau in 2010, approximately 10.2 percent of Americans ages 15 to 24 had some type of disability, and about 5.3% reported a severe disability (Brault, 2012). Much research suggests that in Western nations emerging adults with disabilities have more difficulty dating and finding romantic and sexual partners than do their peers without disabilities (Miller, Chen, Glover-Graf, & Kranz, 2009; Wiegerink, Roebroeck, Donkervoort, Stam, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006). This is distressing and unfortunately ironic because the quality of close relationships strongly contributes to happiness, health, and longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Myers, 1999). College students in committed romantic relationships experience fewer mental health problems (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010);

furthermore, emerging adults report spending more time with romantic partners than with friends, and they are significantly more likely than adolescents to consider their partner a source of influence and reference (Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008).

The challenges for people with disabilities (PWDs) in forming long-term romantic relationship are demonstrated by their low marriage rates. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, the marriage rate for emerging adults with disabilities (13%) during the first eight years after high school is significantly lower than that of their peers (19%) without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). For people between ages 18 and 34, the percent never married among those with disabilities is 74%, compared to 65% for those without disabilities (Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013). The marriage rate for PWDs never reaches a similar percent as that for individuals without disabilities; according to the 2010 U.S. Census, just 41% of U.S. adults ages 18 and older with disabilities are married as compared to 52% of U.S. adults without disabilities (Schur et al., 2013).

Not all types of disabilities have a similar influence on people's chances of getting married. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, MacInnes (2011) found that among individuals between the ages of 24 and 32 in the U.S., 43% of individuals with learning disabilities, 37% of those with mental disabilities, and 21% of those with multiple disabilities reported having experienced a first marriage as compared to 53% of their peers with physical disabilities and 50% of those without disabilities. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, marriage rates eight years after high school graduation ranged from 1% for U.S. emerging adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or multiple disabilities to 11% for those with mental retardation, emotional disturbances, hearing impairment, or traumatic brain injury, 13% for those with speech/language impairment, and 15% for those with other health impairments and with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2011).

PWDs in Western nations are also less likely than those without disabilities to socialize with friends, relatives, or neighbors (McDonald, 2010, Pfeiffer & Pinquart, 2011; Wiegerink et al., 2006). Children and adolescents with disabilities are less likely than their peers without disabilities to engage in developmentally appropriate social endeavors outside of school, such as organized and informal peer group activities and dating (Nosek, Howland, Rintala, Young, & Chanpong, 2001; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2012). These activities create opportunities for adolescents and emerging adults to develop romantic relationships and learn helpful social skills, such as flirting (Shuttleworth, 2000; Wiegerink, Roebroeck, Van Der Slot, Stam, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010). In addition, people without disabilities are often reluctant or unwilling to engage in a meaningful or intimate manner with PWDs and appear to hold negative attitudes and stereotypes, especially when the disability is severe or includes cognitive or psychiatric impairments (Miller et al., 2009).

Women with disabilities are much more likely to have problems finding and keeping partners than men with disabilities and women without disabilities (Gill, 1996; Howland & Rintala, 2001; Nosek et al., 2001). Gender and disability stereotypes interact in unique ways, especially when forming social judgments of women. According to traditional societal stereotypes, women with physical disabilities do not, and should not, engage in dating behavior, and they are typically considered asexual and ineligible for the attentions of those who desire a romantic relationship (Gill,1996; Howland & Rintala, 2001; Olkin, 1999). However, the type of disability matters in terms of this desire. For example, research with American undergraduates found that they viewed women with intellectual disabilities as more physically attractive than those with physical disabilities, although students felt more comfortable with the idea

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