

The Top Ten Things I'd like to tell Disability Service Providers about Sexual Assault

By Shirley Pacey

As a survivor of childhood sexual violence and a professional in the disability services world for over thirty-five years, I have a passion for understanding sexual violence against people with disabilities. I have been honored to hear many stories and to support people at the hospital following an assault, as well as during court proceedings to pursue justice and through the twists and turns of the recovery process. I have learned so much from the brave individuals who have let me walk beside them and I want to share the 'top ten' lessons in hopes of empowering others. In the words of those deeply affected by sexual violence, we honor their voices.

1. We have been hurt. Sexual violence is a very real part of our lives. We feel shame and guilt and fear and confusion. It may not be in our record. No one may know that we suffer. It most likely happened many times and by more than one person. For some of us, it has been so common, we think it is just a part of life. If you work with people with disabilities, you know survivors of sexual violence, and probably many of them. The person in front of you today may be a survivor. If I choose to tell you what has happened to me, please

2. Believe me. My healing begins with how you respond when I tell you what happened. Don't tell me I am lying. Don't say the person wouldn't do something like that. The person most likely to cause sexual violence is someone I know and trust and you may know and trust them too. Believe me. Listen to my story. Help me to feel safe. Help me understand my choices. If I decide to go to the hospital or call the police, please

3. Don't tell people my "mental age". They will think I am a child and I am not a child. It is impossible to live as long as I have lived and still be a child. Don't let others believe myths about me. They may look to you for the truth and I need you to believe in my abilities. Please educate them and tell them that if they take their time, I can show them that

4. I am more than my labels. My diagnosis does not tell you anything about me. I want you to know my abilities and talents and contributions. I want you to know my deepest dreams and even my purpose. When you know my strengths, you can help me to expand my life possibilities. You can balance out what has been taken from me. You can see me as a person, very much like yourself, doing the best I can. As you recognize that we are more alike than different, please know that

5. My 'behavior problems' may be a response to trauma. What you view as 'inappropriate' or my 'need for attention', may actually be my way of coping with the trauma I have experienced. Certain smells, sounds, sights, tastes, and feelings can trigger my memories of the terror I felt when I was being assaulted. What you see and hear is behavior, so please look closer and listen with your heart. You may discover that

6. I need your support to move forward. I need you to listen and be patient. I need to know that it wasn't my fault. I need to know that I am not alone. I need you to help me understand what has happened and how I can be strong again. Recovery is not a straight path, and I need you to help me when I stumble. I need you to help me find the right people who can best assist me. As we walk through this together, it would be good for us both to know that

7. Sexual violence is not about sexual attraction. A lot of people think that sexual violence is about a person who can't control their sexual urges when they are attracted to someone. But that is a lie. It is a way for someone to dominate another person-to use power to control another person. People who are taught to do what they are told are at higher risk for sexual violence. Don't teach me to be compliant, empower me. I need to be able to say no to the safe people in my life if I am to say no to others. You might think I am especially vulnerable to violence but

8. I am at greater risk for sexual violence because of others' attitudes and actions towards me than because of my disability. Now that's a mouthful! But it's true. When I am not given critical information because you think I can't understand-I am at risk. When systems cover up allegations, I am at greater risk. When people touch me all the time without permission, I am at greater risk. One lady said, "I've been seen naked by hundreds of people and no one has ever asked permission". Now that's a problem so please ask before you help. Some of my friends aren't able to talk the way that you and I do, so please

9. Learn the indicators for sexual violence. If you know the indicators and observe closely, you may be able to help us even if we don't talk very well. You may be the one who gives us the gift of safety. Or you may be the one who gives us the gift of unloading our burdens. Or you may be the one who helps us to heal. And for all of these things we say

10. Thank you. Thank you for learning what you can about sexual violence. Thank you for recognizing that my 'behaviors' may be a response to trauma. Thanks for being patient with me as I try to recover from what has happened to me. Thank you so very much for believing me and helping me to express myself. You are there for me in so many ways. Thanks for being here for me in this way too.