Special Considerations in Counseling Clients with Cerebral Palsy

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ABSTRACT: Written from a professional and personal perspective, this article describes some of the key social and sexual issues facing people with cerebral palsy. Clients with cerebral palsy, disabled from birth and thus likely to have been socialized into a disabled, asexual role, often struggle with putting their disability into its proper perspective, demystifying sexuality, developing a positive body image, mastering essential social skills, and understanding their own sexual functioning. To be helpful, psychotherapists and counselors must sensitively address these issues while dealing with their own stereotypes and attitudes. Although the discussion focuses on cerebral palsy, there is considerable overlap and applicability to clients with other types of disabilities as well.

One of the most important tasks of psychotherapy is to help people develop an open curiosity about themselves, about all of their thoughts, feelings and experiences, so that nothing is taboo. In this way, self-exploration, with resulting growth and change, can continue beyond the therapy hour, beyond the weeks, months or years spent in psychotherapy and counseling.

As a psychotherapist and as a woman with cerebral palsy, who has sat on both sides of the desk in psychotherapy, I have found that people with cerebral palsy often show a surprising lack of curiosity and knowledge about the sexual aspects of their lives. Too often, societal attitudes, family attitudes, and self-doubts have conspired to prevent this curiosity from developing. Since cerebral palsy is a lifelong disability beginning in infancy, an important aspect of this conspiracy is the fact that the individual has been socialized from childhood.
onward into the disabled role, which is, in essence, an asexual role. It is often not until the age of 20, 30, 40 or later that curiosity begins to develop, and many times this brings people with cerebral palsy into psychotherapy. The following is an example of a first session in therapy with a 28-year-old woman with cerebral palsy employed as a management intern:

**Therapist:** What brings you to therapy?

**Client:** I'm 28 years old and I'm finally beginning to realize that maybe I am a woman, but I'm not sure what that means. The thought is a bit frightening.

**Therapist:** What frightens you?

**Client:** For all of my life, I simply assumed that I couldn't make it socially, so I never bothered trying. Would you believe I've never had a date in my life? Then about a month ago it suddenly occurred to me that maybe I could have more, that maybe work wasn't all of it. So I began looking into social clubs and the singles' scene. Last week I took this risk and went to a singles' dance. To my amazement, people were friendly and a couple of men actually came up and talked to me. I panicked and left early—I didn't know what to say. I felt like an adolescent at her first dance. I guess I was. It made me wonder, though, where I'd been for 28 years; why I waited so long.

Counselors and therapists can provide an important counterbalance to the societal pressures which have served to discourage the person with cerebral palsy from exploring his or her sexuality. To be effective, helping professionals themselves must be curious about the kinds of questions and issues which emerge for people with cerebral palsy as they begin discovering their sexuality.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the issues that people with cerebral palsy face as they discover their sexuality. While the diversity of this disability and of different individuals' experiences preclude simple, single answers, the joint curiosity of client and therapist will hopefully enable them to move in their own directions, toward their own unique solutions.

**CEREBRAL PALSY: TOTALLY DISABLING OR TOTALLY DENIED?**

**Example 1**

**John:** My social life is no place, I can't seem to get close to people.

**Therapist:** How do you think your disability plays a part in this?

**John:** I honestly don't know. I've never thought about it.