



Love is in the air...

Emma Bowler explores
the pleasures and pitfalls
of starting a new
romantic relationship





// They'd realise I had a physical impairment and disappear //

It's almost that time of year where cupids are firing their arrows, florists are selling out of red roses, pink envelopes are plopping onto doormats and tables for two are fully booked...

Yes, love it or loathe it, we're talking about Valentine's Day. A day that momentarily splits the nation into singletons and 'smug marrieds' – loved-up pairs who've found their Little Ms Perfect or Mr Right. Let's face it, dating, romance and relationships are a minefield for anyone, so what are the issues when you throw disability into the mix?

One person who has experience of this, Adele Hoskison-Clark, says: "One of the hardest aspects of looking for a relationship or developing romance is the fact that the social environments such as pubs and clubs are often inaccessible, so places where you can potentially meet new people are limited."

Access was also an issue for Penny Jenkins: "I had to make sure the date venue was accessible because having to ask a new date for help getting up steps wasn't the alluring image I wanted to project!"

Choose a venue

While pubs and clubs are more

traditional places to meet a date, James Lee says that people are getting more adventurous in their choice of venue: "I liked meeting in museums, libraries and places that were a bit different. I think the issue now is if you make plans to go to some trendy pop-up gallery or restaurant – but it's up three flights of stairs!"

Feeling accepted

Confidence, or rather lack of it, is also a big factor for many disabled people playing the dating game. "I worried about people accepting me as I am, not seeing my impairment as an issue and about being 'left on the shelf'," says Adele. "I also worried about how someone would view my body, particularly my scars from the surgery I had as a child."

James ranks confidence as the number one thing that disabled people struggle with: "Disabled men I know tend to do one of two things – get paralytic, which comes with its own problems, or they become introverted and shy away from the issue of being confident. I've had to work hard to overcome low confidence."

The issue of confidence can be exacerbated for men because they are often still expected to 'make the first move'. Once they've done that, another issue pops up. "If you are a male wheelchair user, at some point in the chatting up stage you get to a point where the person is trying to ascertain if all your 'equipment' is in working order," says James. "For some it is, for some there are difficulties. So that can be an issue if you are already struggling with your confidence or if you don't think you have anything to offer."

But Kelly Perks-Bevington says that she found the more she got herself 'out there' the more her confidence grew: "I met people at parties, at the park or local meeting places. As time went on I didn't do online dating as such but started chatting to people online. My

confidence grew because I realised that personality was important and that guys did like my personality."

Penny found coming into contact with other disabled women helped. "It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I met other disabled women who were happily paired up," she says. "I realised if other disabled women had found love, then why couldn't I?"

Dating game

Between them, Adele, James, Penny and Kelly tried all the usual dating routes – going to parties, pubs, clubs, social networking, meeting with like-minded people, as well as speed dating and online dating. Like most people they had a few set backs along the way. Adele recalls: "I'd get talking to guys and then as soon as I got up to go to the bar or the loo they'd realise I had a physical impairment or was 'wobble queen' and they'd disappear."

Penny recalls a speed-dating event in which one man said absolutely nothing:

"I've never experienced a longer three minutes in my life. I asked a few polite questions to break the silence but got only one-syllable answers. Disaster."

But even though there were setbacks there were also plenty of successes. Indeed, Kelly's success rate on the dating scene caused surprise amongst her peers. "If I was going on a date or going out with someone it used to make me laugh that everyone was so interested," she says. "There was one girl who was very popular, she wanted to see a photo of who I was going out with – she couldn't believe I was dating someone attractive."

Penny says: "I was once dating a non-disabled guy for about four months and at the stage things got intimate he said 'Oh, you're good in bed' – that seemed to come as a shock somehow!" For James, social networking proved a successful avenue: "I mainly dated people I knew through social networking. Because I already knew them as friends they were fully aware of my disability so I didn't have to sell myself so hard, which you have to do with online dating."

Going steady

Kelly, Adele, James and Penny met their respective partners at college, through work, through social networking and through friends. But when it comes to being in relationship, what part does disability have to play?

Adele met her husband Laurence via disability activism. "We both have physical impairments so in terms of how disability features in our relationship it's not an issue, it's just a fact," she says. "It means we don't have hang-ups about each others bodies and we're open about what works for us both."

Kelly met her husband Jaz at college. "I just felt so comfortable with him, if there were any awkward moments in our day-to-day life they were just dealt with. Jaz is amazing because he won't let me say no to things, doesn't let me shy away, and that gives me confidence. At our wedding I really didn't want to do the first dance, I thought it would be boring

for others to watch but Jaz said it was an important part of the wedding, he gave me a pep talk and we did it. It was the best experience of my life."

Most successful relationships are based on a sense of partnership and relationships that include disability are no different. "I'm not sure if it's because I'm lazy, disabled or a man but apparently I'm useless at housework," says James. "I do try and help out but there are things I just can't do so I try and make up for it by doing what I can. I feel my partner gets a raw deal so I try to be extra loving and kinder."

A complementary partnership also forms the basis of Penny's relationship, "My husband does all the physical work in the house, whilst I do the financial management, organising and driving. We just love and accept each other the way that we are. I think when you find 'the one' it doesn't matter whether or not they're disabled." ■



Rules for a blossoming new romance

1 Talk. That doesn't mean shouting and being inflexible or stubborn. It means communicating your needs calmly but ensuring the message is heard and understood.

2 Listen. The other side of the equation. Listen, and listen carefully, then think about what the other person is saying and what they need.

3 Adapt. The person you bring into your life will have an effect. Accepting that change is coming your way is part of the fun of being in a relationship. Things won't stay the same.

4 Create space. We all need space. Ensure both you and your partner have space for your own feelings, time for reflection and to do things personal to you.

5 Slow down. Whether it's you or your partner who physically goes at a slower pace, or if it's just taking time to be clear about your needs, slowing down might even get things achieved quicker in the long run.

6 Be honest. However difficult it is, there's little point covering up feelings and skirting around issues. But break news gently, don't be harsh.

7 Remember you're both different. Disabled and non-disabled, or simply two different people, being individual is what it's all about, so let your partner be themselves.

8 Accept being scared. Anything new can cause feelings of unease and it takes time to build trust. It's perfectly natural to feel scared at times, but don't let that put you off.

9 Don't feel guilty. Always ask if you need help, don't suffer in silence.

10 Have fun! Be playful! Laugh! It's what it's all about.

11 Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Some things don't work out. That goes for all of us, not just you. If your romance doesn't end as a fairytale it doesn't mean you're a failure.

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So you want to find love?

Here are some dating tips from those who've done it...

"Someone once said to me it's great to go after the most beautiful people but eventually beauty fades – you want a companion rather than a trophy. So I'd say look for love and companionship rather than lust." **James**

"When doing online dating, feature a few pictures of yourself, including one where you can see your disability, if it's visible! Otherwise put something in your profile. When I did that I found I got more genuine enquiries and spoke to nicer people. It also eliminates the awkwardness of having the 'disability' conversation further down the line." **Kelly**

"Don't be constrained by having a 'type'. Just be yourself, put yourself out there and enjoy flirting. If you get rejected don't automatically assume it's because of your disability. It might be but mostly it will be because, to quote *Sex and the City*, "he's just not that into you" – just as you might not be into them." **Penny**

"Don't sell yourself short: there's someone out there for everyone." **Adele**

More information

Scope

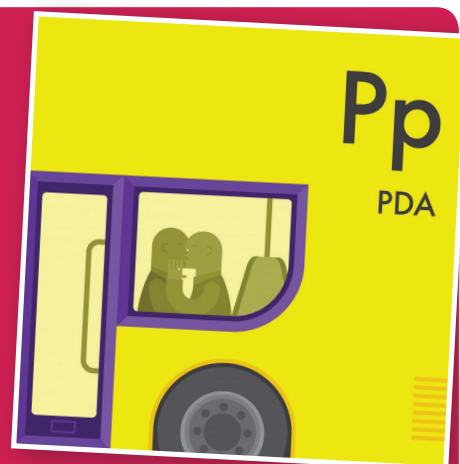
Scope's phased 'End the Awkward' campaign aims to change attitudes towards disability. The campaign has included a national advertising campaign, fronted by comedian Alex Brooker, and an online A-Z of sex and disability – 'a raunchy and light-hearted look at the loves and lusts of disabled people'.

scope.org.uk/awkward

Trailblazers

Part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, Trailblazers is a national network of young disabled people. "It's complicated" – Trailblazers' investigation into disability and relationships.

www.mdctrailblazers.org



Enhance the UK

Website includes a section on sex and disability
enhancetheuk.org

For a round-up of online dating websites
disabilityhorizons.com

