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Friendship, romance and possibly more

Chris Jones tells the story of Mates'nDates, an Oxfordshire dating and friendship agency for people with learning disabilities that puts one lonely person in touch with another. Establishing the agency raised challenges to attitudes and practice

We live in a society where markers of success are constantly paraded in every medium. To be a valued adult it seems you need to be good-looking, clever, employed, have a disposable income and be in an active sexual partnership. It is not surprising that people with learning disabilities often compare themselves badly against these indicators (for example, Edgerton 1993) and referrals to clinical psychology very often have their origins in low self-esteem and a feeling of difference.

There has been great investment in recent years in services to find people with learning disabilities valued employment and there is still a long way to go (Department of Work and Pensions 2006), but few services focus

on improving personal and intimate relationships. Yet when listening to people talking about their lives, the things that make the biggest difference to happiness or unhappiness usually involve the success or failure of significant personal relationships (Morentin *et al* 2008). It is not that people with learning disabilities are literally alone; often they spend time surrounded by other friendly people in day services and clubs. It is the sense of 'being chosen', of 'being special to one other' that is commonly lacking.

Working mostly with men, I had heard many stories of sheer desperation in attempts to find sex and/or love, most of which had unhappy endings. They included spending huge amounts of money on mainstream

dating agencies or telephone chatlines, getting out of their depth with sex workers or internet predators, harassing and abusing women who were not interested, or inappropriately befriending children. It is well known that many women with learning disabilities will tolerate significant abuse from men in exchange for the status of having a partnership (McCarthy 1999), and that many others just give up and feel depressed.

Keywords

- Learning disabilities: rights
- Relationships
- Sexual behaviour

These keywords are based on the subject headings from the British Nursing Index. This article has been subject to a double-blind review.

It was for these reasons that the first proposal for a friendship and dating agency in Oxfordshire was written in early 2005, and links made with other projects developing at the same time.

Dating agency movement

The first specialist dating agency in the UK was run by Consent in Hertfordshire, funded by the Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Trust and local branches of Mencap. It was a pilot project running for a year from 2004. Called the Relationship Support Service, it concentrated on pairing individuals for chaperoned dates and subsequent support. Despite limited resources, it enabled 68 people to try dating. It confirmed that there was huge support for the project from people with learning disabilities, their families and their carers. It also provided a wealth of information and guidance on setting up the service (Jenner *et al* 2005, Jenner and Gale 2006).

Around the same time, but separately, Stars in the Sky was formed in London (see website resources). This was an exciting idea supported by Haringey Association for Independent Living and set up as a social enterprise company directed by employees with learning disabilities (Jones L 2005). It has been successful and to date has matched up about 200 people (Fairman 2008). It reached a huge audience through the Channel 4 TV documentary *Truly Madly Deeply* in 2006. There are now fledgling Stars in the Sky franchises in Birmingham, Leeds, Essex, Bristol and the Isle of Wight.

The initial proposal for Oxfordshire was written in January 2005 (Jones C 2005), and was discussed by people attending a variety of conferences and focus groups (McKenny 2005) including potential service users, families and professionals. By the end of the year, management partnership had been formed consisting of representatives from six service providers and three people with learning disabilities. During 2006 the group chose a name and logo, secured funding from the Oxfordshire Partnership Board and a charity, appointed a development worker, promoted the brand and established policies and procedures.

There is an arrangement with Oxford Brookes University to employ social work students on placement to mutual advantage. From January 2007, Mates'nDates ran monthly social events, and was officially launched at a grand ball in October 2007. The lead employer is Guideposts Trust.

How Mates'nDates works

Applications

Mates'nDates is advertised through leaflets, a website, the Oxfordshire Partnership Board, a presence at local conferences and health promotion events, and by word of mouth.

Once it is known that someone wishes to join Mates'nDates, an individual interview is arranged. This is an important part of the process. The applicant is asked about their lives and key likes and dislikes. They are asked questions such as: What sort of person are you looking to meet? Are you looking to meet a man or a woman? Are you more comfortable meeting in a group, or are you looking for a one-to-one date?

It is explained that only people who are known to learning disability services can join and that people who have hurt others in the past cannot become members. Applicants need to give names of two people who can provide references. Often applicants choose to be interviewed with a supporter who may also supply a reference.

'Men and women tend to want different things from the service. Keenest interest to join initially came from men, who tended to be looking to women for sexual partnerships'

If agreed by the applicant, information and a photograph are entered into a database. There is a payment of £5 a year to join and members then receive regular newsletters inviting them to social events.

Management

There is a bi-monthly meeting between partnership organisations, including representatives with learning disabilities. This group considers finances, employment, publicity and the general direction of the project. There is a monthly meeting with the key

employees of the lead organisation to review applications and consider safety issues and risk related to certain individuals or events.

Meeting people

Mates'nDates organises a monthly large group social event at different venues around the county to bring people together. These have included dances and parties, a quiz night and speed-dating (see box p12). It supports regular nightclub evenings in Oxford called Stingray, run by the local self-advocacy group (see website resources p13).

Dating between individuals has just begun. Possible matches are proposed by Mates'nDates employees. If both parties are keen to proceed, a suitable meeting is arranged. This usually requires co-operation from family or carers to facilitate transport. A discreet chaperone can be provided on a first date. Feedback about the date is then sought from each individual and future dates planned (or not) on this basis.

Some people pair up on their own initiative having met at Mates'nDates events (especially speed-dating). The organisation takes an interest in these relationships and tries to support and advise if asked. Workshops on dating, personal safety, sustaining relationships and sexual health are provided as demand and interest arises.

Mingle is a special group within Mates'nDates for people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, transgendered or bisexual (LGTB). It meets once a month, but Mingle members also join in the large social activities as they wish.

Challenges and barriers

Gender matters

Men and women tend to want different things from the service. Keenest interest to join initially came from men, who tended to be looking for sexual partnerships. Women,

practice & research



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Speed dating slowly

Mates'nDates speed dating is all about getting to know someone you have not met before. Or maybe finding out things about people you thought you knew but didn't.

ASSEMBLE: Background music initially, refreshments available throughout.

Everyone is greeted and helped to make a name badge.

GAMES: Based on party games, all designed to mix people up, find out names and communicate. Prizes!

GETTING TO KNOW YOU:

- Two rows of chairs, people sit opposite others. One row mostly women, one row mostly men... but does not need to be precise. A good message (for lots of reasons) is that men can be interested in men and women interested in women.
- Ask and listen for about five minutes. Helpers are available to model and assist the flow. Cards prompt people with ideas for things to find out.
- Time to move on. Music plays and people walk round the chairs and sit opposite someone when the music stops. Ask and listen. As the evening proceeds, the length of conversation tends to increase.

PHOTO TIME Anyone who would like a photo taken finds at least one other person who they would like to be photographed with. Can be big (and silly) groups.

SEE YOU AGAIN? Anyone who would like to meet someone again, one to one, tells one of the organisers. No promises (it will be up to the other person), but we will see what we can do.

FAREWELLS!

who were the minority, tended to be looking for 'soul mates' rather than sex, and would sometimes ask to meet other women. This was not a surprise, given extensive research already carried out into gender difference (McCarthy 2001, Thompson 2001), but clearly posed logistical problems.

Some men were only looking for physical sex and were not interested in a relationship at all. Others were exacting in their requirements ('Must look like Jennifer Lopez'). It transpired that some men had a history of abusing or dominating vulnerable women. All these applications were considered individually and most were told that Mates'nDates would not be able to serve them, although some are welcomed to group social events where there is a degree of supervision.

Other men are helped to think more about the importance of making friendships first, and then see how the relationship develops. One men's group produced a leaflet called *20 Steps to Making a Date ... and Then Some More!* and participants were amazed and daunted to discover how much work they might have to put in to getting to know someone before (consensually) getting into bed with them.

A parallel group for women developed a different agenda based on feelings, assertiveness and rights, and permission to be sexual (or not). A women-only 'pampering' evening was so popular that the venue was overwhelmed by the numbers attending.

There are strong messages about gender difference that need to be acknowledged. Nine months into the project, with 160 members signed up, the gender balance is more even thanks to positive targeting of groups of women.

Social inclusion or exclusion?

Valuing People Now (Department of Health 2009) acknowledges the importance to people with learning disabilities of making and sustaining personal and sexual relationships. However, the overarching policy framework is one of 'social inclusion' – that is, helping people with disabilities to use the same community structures as any other citizen. The specialist dating agencies are not doing

this. They have listened to stories of repeated failures to access mainstream dating agencies, sex workers, nightclubs and other social outlets, and have determined to set up services that achieve social aims through parallel structures. Indeed, an important safety rule for Mates'nDates is to exclude anyone from membership who is 'not known to learning disability services'. Of course, people with and without learning disabilities can and do form successful and intimate relationships with each other, but Mates'nDates cannot be a vehicle for predators without learning disabilities to access vulnerable people.

The Special Night Club movement, started in London by Heart and Soul many years ago (see website resources), tells a similar story of a hugely successful enterprise. It responded to demands from people with learning disabilities and is now replicated all over the country.

'Special' and 'mainstream' services need not be mutually exclusive. People who feel better and stronger in themselves through Mates'nDates may well feel more confident to access ordinary community outlets and expect to be accepted.

Challenging heterosexism

Mingle, the group for LGBT members within Mates'nDates, was established at the outset. A study by the Norah Fry Research Centre (Abbot and Howarth 2005) spoke of the need for this 'double minority' to be identified and to have a space where individuals who feel different can be listened to, accepted and unconditionally valued. This is definitely the message from the Oxfordshire group.

Another finding from this research is that gay women with learning disabilities are not represented. Mingle is a group of about ten men plus one woman who used to be a man and changed gender. Some of the men identify as gay and some cross-dress. All feel comfortable with one another, but it is hard to see that Mingle would be attractive to gay women. The way forward will be to strengthen women's groups generally within Mates'nDates and encourage women to support each other regardless of sexual orientation.

A function of Mingle is to challenge heterosexism within Mates'nDates and in services generally. Although not actively homophobic, the background to most social events assumes heterosexuality (speed-dating, for example). The otherwise brilliant poster campaign by FPA, formerly the Family Planning Association (2008), 'People with learning disabilities have sex – it is a fact of life' (modelled by members of Stars in the Sky), failed to show an example of a homosexual couple. Referring to members of Mingle when planning events and publicity helps to unpick the assumptions of heterosexuality that are otherwise so pervasive that they go undetected.

Adult protection

It is widely accepted that people with learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. The issue of making partnerships with parents is contentious, given that members are all adults with rights to confidentiality and independence. However, what parents think does matter to most people, especially those still living in the family home. The reality is that life will run more smoothly working with parents, rather than against them. Recent research into parental attitudes in Oxfordshire (McKenny 2007) found that most parents surveyed wanted their sons and daughters to enjoy relationships, including sexual ones. Most attitudes were fairly liberal about sexual rights, and have obviously changed over recent decades. However, the biggest worries are about vulnerability to exploitation and most parents have strong views against their sons and daughters becoming parents themselves.

Many parents have been enthusiastic about Mates'nDates and see that their sons and daughters are more likely to make safe and successful relationships through the agency than by taking their chances in the general community.

Service inertia

Oxfordshire is largely a rural area and public transport links bear no comparison to those of a large city. There are problems with getting people together across the county

and especially in the evenings, when most romantic assignments are likely to happen. Added to this, many services are constrained by shift patterns, despite writing in person-centred plans about the importance of a social life around the needs of the individual. There needs to be a radical shift in priority about what is essential for people and at present social and sexual needs seem often to be dispensable. Mates'nDates supports the Stay up Late campaign slogan (see website resources): 'We want to stay up late and we want to have some fun.'

The reality is that Mates'nDates can only work in partnership with other services. Its resources are too slim to do otherwise. The agency is a broker and a catalyst for change, and a provider of particular social opportunities, but sustaining relationships should be a core task for supported living services.

Conclusion

What seemed to be a simple idea has revealed ethical and practical complexities in its execution. Mates'nDates has been enormously popular, and has recruited many enthusiastic members despite minimal resourcing. It has generated lots of fun and friendship, and is especially gratifying to have supported a group for LGTB members. However, the expectation of supporting significant numbers of individual dates safely and successfully is hard to meet, especially in a rural setting. Success will depend on forging partnerships with families and professional carers. Adults with learning disabilities have a right to a better social life, including romantic and sexual relationships. The tide has turned ■

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Useful websites

- Mates'nDates www.matesndates.org.uk
- Stars in the Sky www.starsinthesky.co.uk
- Heart and Soul www.heartnsoul.co.uk
- Stingray www.mylifemychoice.org.uk/events
- Stay up Late campaign www.stayuplate.org
- FPA campaign www.fpa.org.uk/news/campaigns

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