

A close-up photograph of two hands holding each other. The hand on the left is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and a silver watch with a brown leather strap. The hand on the right is wearing a blue denim shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is centered over the hands, containing the text "DATING MADE EASIER".

# DATING MADE EASIER

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[RadiantAbilities.com](http://RadiantAbilities.com)



## What You'll Learn In This Presentation

- Identify the issue of “sexual ableism” while proactively limiting its damaging effects
- Specific methods and techniques that increase dating self esteem and confidence
- Three essentials to make dating easier
- Techniques for teaching and implementing skills for relationship success



First, A little about me...

- Dating and disabilities is a topic I am passionate about for two reasons.
- One, this is because of my background as a counselor and relationships being one of the most common issues my clients are dealing with and trying to work through.

And More Importantly, On The **Personal Level...**



# Kathy

Syracuse

AGE

48

HEIGHT

5'3"



Prev



Upload more photos

Profile

P

## BASICS

### OCCUPATION

rehabilitation  
counselor/consultant

### EDUCATION

Masters

### SCHOOL



### RELIGION

Spiritual, but not religious

### POLITICS



## LIFESTYLE

### SMOKING

What I'm most

## PASSIONATE

I am most passionate  
with the people  
outside.

I typically

## SPEND MY

I LOVE to be outdoors  
hike when I can  
spend a lot of time  
movies. I always

- Long “dating career”

- First date at age 14; wanted more for myself; standard for a healthy relationship

- Was even engaged

- Spent many years alone

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a brown top and skirt, stands in a modern interior space, holding a smartphone. The background features a blue patterned wall and wooden shelving. In the foreground, a blurred man with a beard is visible, looking down. The text "THEN THIS HAPPENED..." is overlaid in white on a dark rectangular background.

THEN THIS HAPPENED...

# Awkward And Intense

- First date
- Tears roll down his face
- NEVER again...





**BUT WAIT!**

- **Just be who you are.**
- **Trust. Breathe.**
- **Take a risk.**

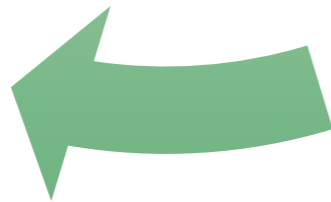
We were  
going  
somewhere.



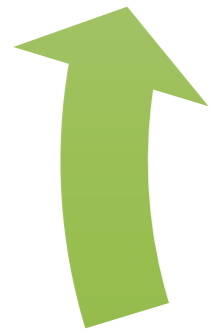
A  
relationship  
developed



Continued  
to check in



“How are  
you doing  
with me?”



Things Began  
Evolving



Through many trials and errors and heartbreak, I learned to succeed in this area and met my husband.

## My Work In Dating, Relationships, And Disability Includes:



- As a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Certified Rehabilitation Counselor to teach insight, skill development, and empowering beliefs in dating, relationships, and sexuality
- Providing staff trainings
- Teaching at Syracuse University's Inclusive U
- Created an online course
- Speaking on dating, relationships and sexuality at conferences
- Developing a dating, relationship, and disability curriculum for schools and organizations

A large, illuminated sculpture of a unicorn, constructed from a white, intricate mesh or wireframe. The unicorn has a long, flowing mane of pinkish-purple fur and a tail of the same color. It is mounted on wooden poles. The background is dark, with strings of warm white and blue lights, suggesting a festive outdoor display at night. The ground appears to be covered in snow or a light-colored material. In the distance, a wooden structure and a few people can be seen.

AND...  
I AM NOT A UNICORN



**THESE PRINCIPLES CAN BE  
UNIVERSALLY APPLIED**

# The Dating, Relationships, and Disability Framework:

*How It Works For ALL People  
With Disabilities*



THE QUESTION TO  
KEEP IN MIND

- I encourage you instead to ask yourself, **“How can I apply this to the people I work with?”** a.k.a. **“How will this work for me?”**



## Dating Essential #1

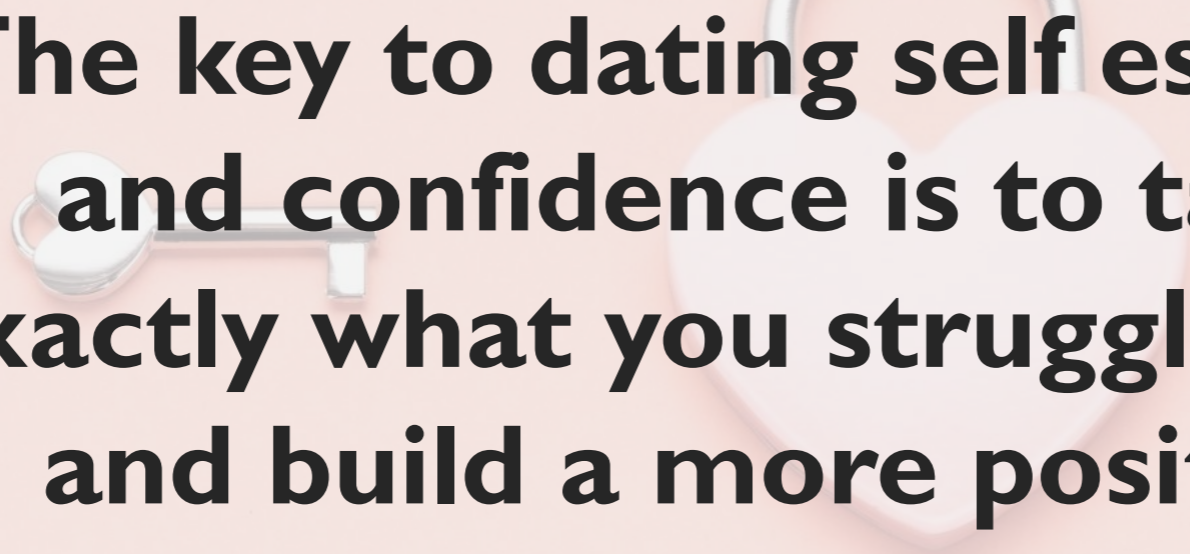
- Dating Self-Esteem and Confidence
- You may be overall confident in your life. I certainly was.



## What People with Disabilities Say:

In a survey about concerns and fears of dating with a disability, people indicate they struggle with these:

- I'll be rejected.
- I don't have enough confidence.
- I'm concerned about someone accepting my disability
- I don't believe I'm attractive enough.
- Is it fair of me to burden another with my disability-related issues?

A silver key is positioned horizontally, with its head pointing left and its shaft extending right. A pink heart-shaped lock is attached to the key's shaft. The lock is open, with the heart's top half slightly raised. The background is a solid light pink color.

**The key to dating self esteem  
and confidence is to take  
exactly what you struggle with  
and build a more positive  
mindset around it.**

A top-down photograph of a white desk. In the top left corner, there is a small potted plant with green leaves in a white pot. In the center, a black smartphone lies next to an open notebook with blank white pages. A dark grey rectangular box is overlaid on the notebook, containing the text 'Dating Essential #2' in white.

## Dating Essential #2

- A dating plan
- Because a dream without a plan is just hope



RESEARCH ON  
DATING AND  
RELATIONSHIP  
CHALLENGES

- In our research with people with disabilities, we found that a common challenge people encounter is how to go about dating such as how to initiate dates/conversations and finding places to meet new people.
- Do you experience similar challenges?

HOW ARE YOU GOING TO TURN YOUR **DESIRES**  
**INTO ACTIONS?**

Often the  
things we  
want the most  
in life require  
a lot of work.



Even when we  
fail.



## WHAT IS YOUR PLAN FOR BEING CONSISTENT ABOUT GETTING OUT THERE AND MEETING PEOPLE?

- Where will you meet people? Online? In person?
- Where are you most comfortable meeting people?
- And equally important, where can you reach out of your comfort zone in order to grow?

ESSENTIAL  
#2 CLEARLY  
LEADS TO  
DATING  
ESSENTIAL  
#3

Follow through and support  
on getting the RESULTS you  
want in dating and  
relationships.



IT CAN BE EASY TO GET  
FRUSTRATED AND GIVE UP

But will you ever find  
your someone that  
way?

IT'S HARD TO GO  
THROUGH IT ALONE  
AND KEEP TRYING  
TO BUILD YOURSELF  
UP

- You need at least 1-3 people you trust who can hold your dream for you and remind you of it when you're discouraged and want to give up
- You need people who can remind you of all your positive traits
- And you need people you can problem solve with because dating is hard





IT'S HARD TO:

- Put yourself out there
- Be vulnerable
- Face rejection

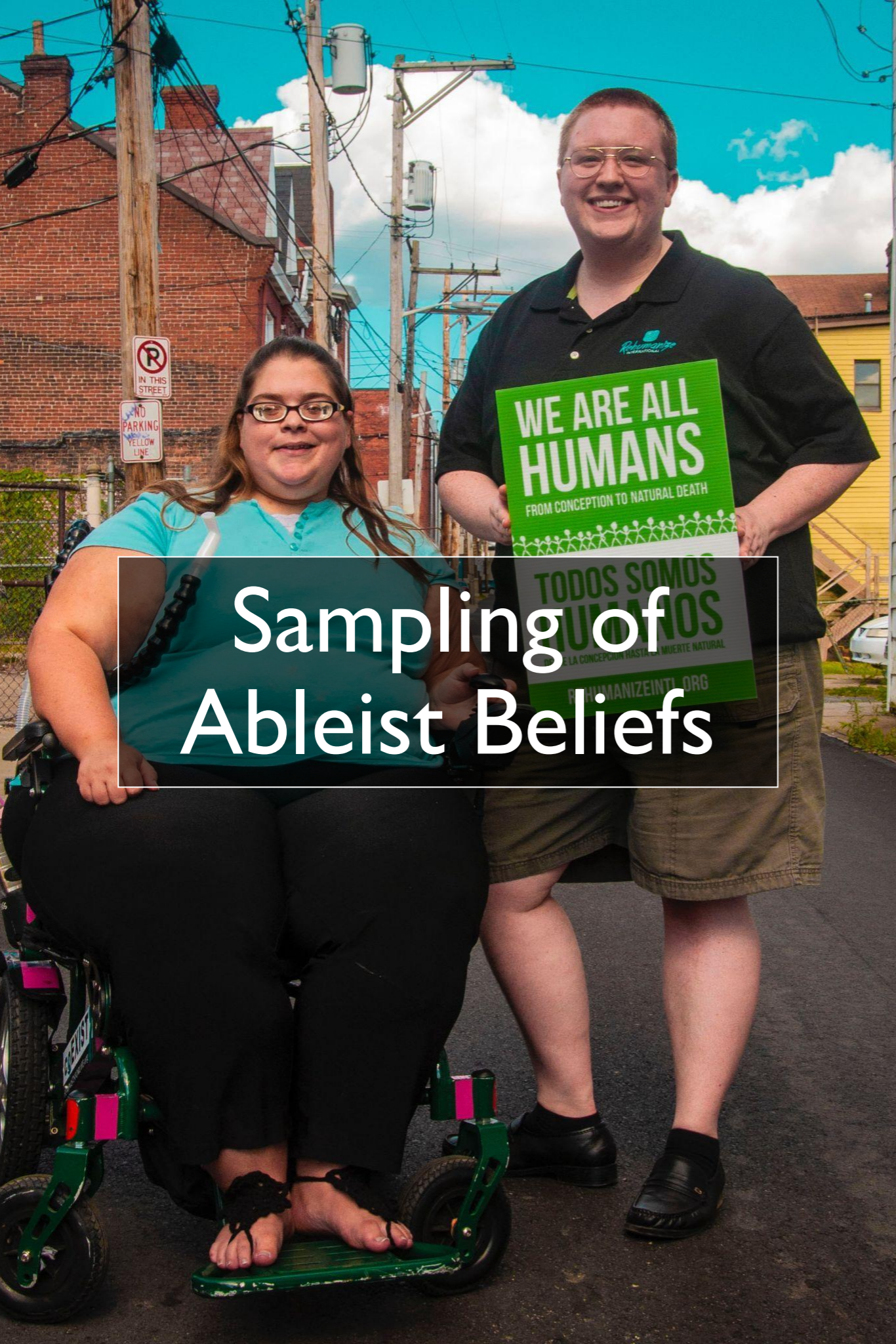
# For Professionals and Families

In some incidences, you may be the only person in someone's life that helps process issues about dating and relationships. You may be the only person someone trusts with their deepest longings, or with difficult, sensitive questions.

The most important thing you can do is keep the window of possibilities open to people.

Sexual Ableism:  
How To Identify It and  
Transform It





# Sampling of Ableist Beliefs

- Projections of people with disabilities as being "fragile" or "a potential victim"
- Perceived need from caregivers to "protect" people from relationships, or at the very least, being "supervised"

## More Ableist Beliefs

- A continued perpetuated myth that people with disabilities are **asexual**
- Mistaken belief that people with disabilities **have less to offer**
- False belief that people with disabilities generally get into **unhealthy and unbalanced relationships**

## SCARY STATS

- According to 2017 US Justice Department statistics, people with intellectual disabilities are **seven times more likely to be sexually assaulted.** (1)
- As many as **83% of women** with developmental disabilities and **32% of men** are victims of sexual assault. (2)
- For most people with developmental disabilities, their first "sexual" (and I use that term loosely) encounter is rape. (3)
- Only about **3% of perpetrators** of people with disabilities serve time. (4)
- **49%** of people with developmental disabilities suffer from chronic sexual abuse. (5)



# Education as Prevention

- At the core of this problem are these **very preventable** reasons.
- People with **low self-esteem** tend to have weaker personal boundaries which can make them more susceptible to abuse.
- People who are **not given information** about sex and sexuality will try to find it out for themselves. Hungry for information, people might find themselves with dangerous people and in dangerous places.
- When people are **denied the opportunity** to develop their social relationships, the result will lead to the above issues.

## Ways To Effectively Counter Sexual Ableism

- Name it; use the phrase
- Educate all people about dating and relationships
- As in any “ism,” it’s the triggers of judgment and fear to teach people to work through
- Heal the pain through supporting increased self esteem and confidence



## Ways To Transform Sexual Ableism

- Answering questions people have about sexuality and relationships
- Encouraging people to pursue desires in this area
- Teaching people how to take responsibility for oneself, i.e., not being a victim and empowering them
- Offer guidance in developing healthy relationships.





# How To Increase Dating Self Esteem and Confidence

*ONE HAS TO CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE ENTIRE  
BODY ALL ITS UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS AND  
BEGIN TO TEACH PEOPLE TO HONOR THEM AS  
DISTINCT PARTS OF ONE'S ATTRACTIVENESS.*



POSITIVE  
BODY  
IMAGE  
EXAMPLES

- **My Cerebral Palsy  
Accent**
- **Hey, I'm Memorable**



## Solution to Increasing Dating Confidence

Developing healthy, positive core beliefs about yourself builds a solid foundation of **confidence** that leads to successful dating and relationships.

# Beliefs That Affirm

- I am a person of great worth.
- My disability adds to my value as a person.
- I have much to offer someone and bring to a relationship.
- I deserve a fun, loving, and healthy relationship.
- There's someone out there who would love to be in relationship with me.



HEALTHY BOUNDARIES AND  
SKILLS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

DATING  
CHALLENGE:  
Finding someone,  
but not being able  
to maintain a  
healthy  
relationship.





## Important to Teach

*Remember the key to success in dating and relationships is finding someone who increases your happiness and sense of meaning.*



TEACH THE IMPORTANCE OF CHECKING IN WITH  
YOURSELF ABOUT HOW YOU'RE FEELING.

IF SOMETHING DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT, *COMMUNICATE*  
ABOUT IT.

Teaching  
people to  
say NO to  
people  
what does  
not feel  
good or  
right.



## Knowing When To Leave

- Any sign of abuse
- When you're generally unhappy in the relationship.
- When you don't feel respected or treated well.
- When you are not on the same page with your partner.





IT'S HARD TO:

- Put yourself out there
- Be vulnerable
- Face rejection



THAT'S WHY WE HAVE  
CREATED

## Dating Made Easier

- A monthly membership that will teach you dating and relationship skills that will transform you and your dating journey in the following areas:
  - Increase Dating Self-Esteem
  - Grow Your Confidence
  - Learn Skills to Keep Relationships

## THE SUPPORT YOU'LL RECEIVE:

Monthly workshops on dating skills and challenges

Monthly brainstorming sessions to work through dating issues you're dealing with

Additional resource guide of the month released with a live video tutorial to help you apply it to your dating experience

Networking meeting for group members to get to know one another and work on communication skills


## Bonus If You Sign Up by 2/1/23:

- The first two months are half off at just \$15 a month. **Use coupon code HALFOFF**
- And annual memberships are 30% off at \$203 for the year. **Use coupon code 30**
- The membership is reimbursable through NYS Self Direct funds.

<https://radiant-abilities.mykajabi.com/DME-membership>

A group of people are seated around a long wooden table in a bright, modern setting, possibly a meeting or workshop. The focus is on the hands of a person in the foreground writing in a yellow notebook. Other people are visible in the background, some looking towards the right. A semi-transparent white box with a black border is overlaid on the center of the image, containing text.

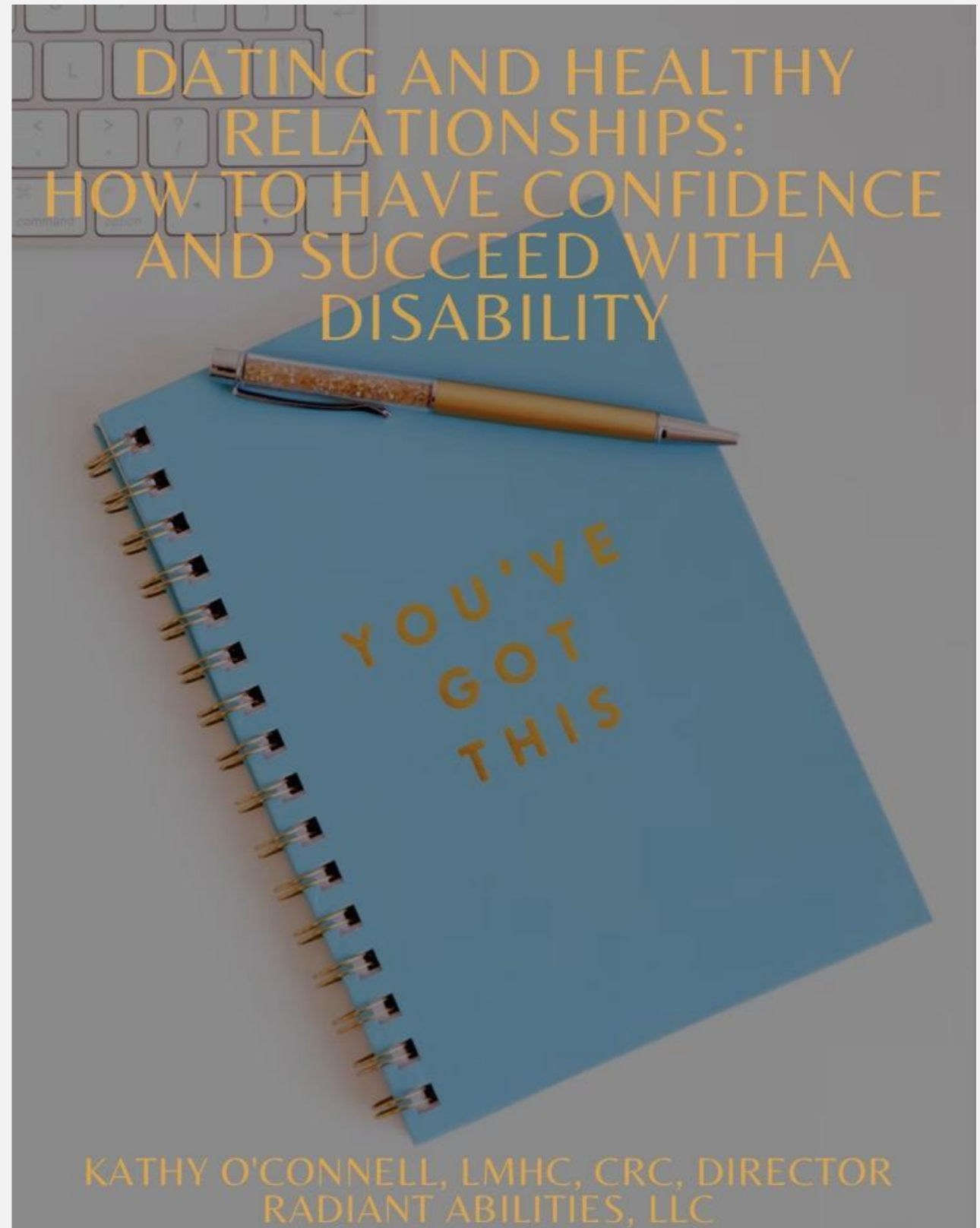
Also we created the Supporting Dating and Relationships membership for **professionals**

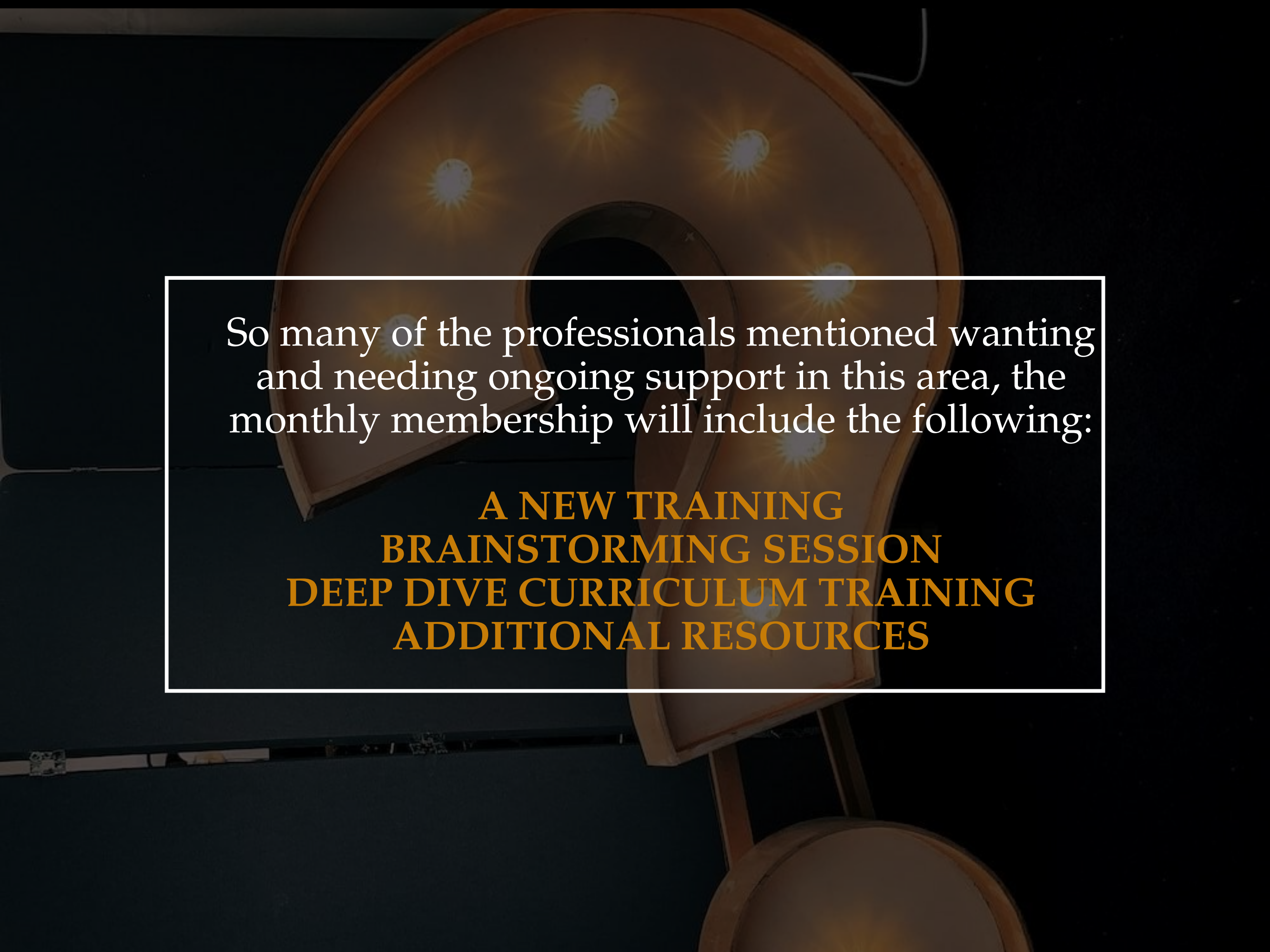
A close-up photograph of several people's hands clasped together in a circle, symbolizing unity and support. The hands are of various skin tones and are wearing different colored sleeves (red, grey, blue, white). The background is dark and out of focus.

To teach and support professionals in how to effectively address and foster dating and relationship skills in the people they work with.

## A LOOK INSIDE

For professionals who join the membership, which is a monthly membership in which every month you get new resources and ongoing support, you get our complete curriculum on supporting dating and relationship skills for people with disabilities.





So many of the professionals mentioned wanting and needing ongoing support in this area, the monthly membership will include the following:

**A NEW TRAINING  
BRAINSTORMING SESSION  
DEEP DIVE CURRICULUM TRAINING  
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**



## Supporting Dating and Relationships

The monthly membership for educators and disability professionals that provides ongoing training and resources to teach and effectively support dating and relationship skills.

JOIN NOW

LINK TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SUPPORTING  
DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS

<https://radiant-abilities.mykajabi.com/SDR-membership>

**BONUS IF YOU SIGN UP BY 2/1/23:**

The initial fee is 50% off at just \$144.50.

**Use coupon code HALFOFF**

Annual memberships are 30% off at \$343.

**Use coupon code 30**

<https://radiant-abilities.mykajabi.com/SDR-membership>



# How was my talk?

Take 2 mins to share your feedback to get a freebie!

Scan this QR code, or go to [talk.ac/kathyoconnell](https://talk.ac/kathyoconnell)



enter code when prompted

DATING

Let's stay in touch!

 @radiantabilities

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 kathyoconnellradiantabilities

PANEL QUESTIONS

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What do you think are the particular challenges for people with disabilities in dating and relationships?

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How do you think services can change to be more supportive for people with disabilities in dating and relationships?

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What do you think is the most helpful advice you can give for someone with a disability in search of dating success and healthy relationships?

# Sources

1. National Public Radio report, NPR Investigation Finds Hidden Epidemic Of Sexual Assault, January 8, 2018.
2. Johnson, I., Sigler, R. 2000 "Forced Sexual Intercourse Among Intimates," Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 15 (1)
3. David Hingsburger sexuality training, Cazenovia College, October 2006.
4. Valenti-Heim, D., Schwartz, L. 1995. The Sexual Abuse Interview for Those with Developmental Disabilities.
5. Valenti-Heim, D., Schwartz, L. 1995. The Sexual Abuse Interview for Those with Developmental Disabilities.
6. Hasson-Ohayon, I., Vilchinsky, N., & Hertz, I. (2014). Attitudes toward the sexuality of persons with physical versus psychiatric disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 59(2), Doi: 10.1037/a0035916.

*Thank You!*

Kathy O'Connell

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## **DATING AND RELATIONSHIP – KATHY O’CONNELL – THURSDAY AT 2PM**

What do you think are the challenges for people with disabilities in dating and relationships?

- It’s very hard to find someone has the same interests as you and has good intentions.
- One of the challenges of that is where do you look?
- People see the wheelchair and the disability first and they run the other way.
- There are consequences both in services and supports available when a person with a disability gets married. The world wants us to have these “normal lives” yet we are adversely affected by making “normal” decisions, like getting married.

How do you think services can change to be more supportive for people with disabilities in dating and relationships?

- Agencies like the idea of people with disabilities dating but don’t really supported. They worry a lot about consent and would rather have someone not engage in relationships than do the work that it takes to support two self-advocates in love.
- Dating has implications in you freedom, if you find yourself dating someone in your group home, it will limit who you can have in your room and where you can spend time with that person.
- Agencies and parents worry a lot about paid help being abusive towards individuals and not enough is done to educate self-advocates on sexual education and healthy dating and relationships.
- Agencies need to do more to educate self-advocates on how to reach out for help when they are in an abusive situation. Often, individuals are afraid of repercussions, so it seems easier to stay quiet.

What do you think is the most helpful advice you can give for someone with a disability in search of dating success and healthy relationships?

- If you are lucky enough to find someone that values you for who you are and not your disability, as an equal, you must learn to be a good friend.
- It must go both ways. You need to care for that person as much as they care for you.
- A relationship takes work. It is in constant evolution.