QuickGuide

Ways to experience risk safely

Introduction

We all take risks as we go about living the lives we choose. Some of us will be risk-adverse whereas others will thrive on making decisions that may seem risky to others. All of us must have the freedom to make our own choices and live with the consequences.

This is important because sometimes a person living with disability may not have the freedom to take risks. Those around them may be protective, wanting only to keep them safe, take care of them, and watch over them. And/or they may have had a guardian appointed in their life, who makes the decisions for them, and who may be taking a different approach to risk than the person would for her/himself if given the choice.

Also, some people living with disability may themselves be making very cautious decisions, because of a heightened awareness of their own vulnerability, and/or because of what they have learned so far in their life about whether they are ‘allowed’ to imagine an ordinary life for themselves and the normal risks that go with that.

The problem with the above is that it can inadvertently limit the person living with disability’s capacity and opportunity to make choices, to take risks, experience failure, and to grow. As an extreme example, the safest way to avoid an accident in the street would be to never leave the house, but this ‘safety’ would close the person to many different opportunities.

This quick guide looks at how peer networks can talk about this, including something called ‘dignity of risk’.

Let’s make it happen

A peer network can have a good conversation about ways to experience risk safely, and there is much people can share.

Rights

The peer group discussion could look at human rights. This might include the right to make choices and that a person living with disability should be able to exercise that right even if others don’t agree or consider the choice unsafe.

The peer group discussion could include looking at what other people have said about the right to take risk. For example:
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“To deny the right to make choices in an effort to protect the person with disabilities from risk is to diminish their human dignity.”
Robert Perske
Long-time advocate for people with intellectual disabilities

Conversation Starter:
This type of quote could stimulate a good conversation about what peer group members think about concepts like rights, and protection, and dignity.

Dignity of Risk
Dignity of risk is a concept that outlines how people should have the freedom to make decisions and choices that may expose them to a level of risk. Applying for a job exposes the person to the risk of rejection, but for most people the possibility of waged employment is worth taking on this risk.

Wikipedia defines it as “the idea that self-determination and the right to take reasonable risks are essential for dignity and self-esteem, thus should not be impeded by excessively cautious caregivers concerned about their duty of care.”

Sometimes people living with disability are prevented from making certain decisions or participating in activities because other people think such decisions and activities are too risky. But how risk is perceived is unique to each of us as individuals. So the management of risk should be tailored to a person’s individual circumstances.

Allowing individuals to take risks and step into the unknown is part and parcel of treating people with disability with dignity, as fellow citizens.

To make good choices, people need to understand the consequences and take some responsibility for them. This takes practice.

Conversation Starter:
A peer group could have a conversation about the things people want in their lives, and how they want to deal with the risks that are involved.

Low expectations
Overprotection of people living with disability can contribute to lower self-esteem and underachievement. This is because such overprotection is often associated with other persons having a lower expectation of what might be possible in the person’s life. The person living with disability then comes to believe this to be true, and to believe they are less capable than others in similar situations.

Expectations are often based on what people assume. The idea of the Least Dangerous Assumption was developed by a person called Anne M. Donnellan in 1984.
There is a reference to it at the end of this QuickGuide but, put simply, if people assume that an imaginary person called Joe, because of disability, can never catch the bus, then Joe will probably never catch the bus. However, if people assume that Joe can catch the bus and then takes steps to equip Jo with the support, knowledge and know how to catch the bus then there is a better chance Joe will be able to do so.

**Conversation Starter:**
A peer group could have a conversation about where they have experienced the low expectations of others, and what can help to push back on this.

**Informed choices**
Key to a person taking risk safely is how the person is supported to make an informed choice. This is based on what the person wants to achieve and the risks they are prepared to take on to achieve it.

Informed choices are based on accessing and considering the best information that is available to us. This may include advice and support from friends, partners, family members and other significant people in our lives as well as past experiences.

People living with disability are no different in this regard, and have the right to make an informed choice.

However some people may require some additional assistance in order to be able to make and express choices. Such assistance might include access to communication aids or translators, information in different formats, longer timeframes or different environments in which to make decisions.

**Conversation Starter:**
A peer group could have a conversation about what specific information different people need to make a choice about something that’s important to them, and ways to get this information.

**A question for non-disabled people involved in the life of a person living with disability**
In Outing The Prejudice: Making The Least Dangerous Assumption, Zach Rossetti and Carol Tashie state that

“The question we should all be asking ourselves is: “Do you really believe that a person living with disability is a valued and competent and unique person?” Think long and hard about that question. If you cannot honestly answer “yes,” then the next question is simply, “Why?” Think about your beliefs, your experiences, and the prejudice you have been taught. Ask yourself how you can change those dangerous assumptions and mindsets. Talk with people who are friends, parents, siblings, lovers, and colleagues of people with disabilities.

Listen to people who have been segregated or devalued because of the way they look or move or communicate. Learn everything you can about the many ways people
communicate and get around and show us who they are and what they know. Recognize prejudices and work through them. It will not be as difficult as it first seems. And you will never again make assumptions about people that result in the loss of opportunity, experience, or respect.”

https://ollibean.com/outing-the-prejudice-making-the-least-dangerous-assumption/

**Conversation Starter:**
A peer group of family members could talk about what experiences and messages they’ve had that have trained them to believe their family member will not be able to take up valued roles in community life, or simply made them more fearful about risk. Encourage group members to talk about how these messages could have different, and if anyone in the group has overcome them.

A peer group of people living with disability could talk about the same thing happening with their family members, and what has helped shift those fears so that the person is able to make informed choices.

**The Chance to Try**
People have the right to learn from experience. In some cases a person may want to try something new but will not necessarily have all the information about it. The best way to find out whether it is suitable might be to simply try it out. Exploring new things and finding out if we like them or not is key to development.

“The greater danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”

— Michelangelo

**Where you can find more information**

In this blog, *Janet Shouse*, a parent of a young adult with autism, talks about dignity of risk.


On its website, Interchange in WA has this article about Dignity of risk


This is an article about the least dangerous assumption

https://ollibean.com/outing-the-prejudice-making-the-least-dangerous-assumption/

Please also see the Quick Guide on supported decision making.