

ELEVATUS TRAINING
LEADERS IN SEXUALITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY

Supporting Breakups, Rejection, and Heartbreak

A workshop for staff that support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.


Presenter:
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Learning Objectives

- Understand break-ups and rejection as legitimate losses that deserve support—not avoidance or punishment.
- Recognize how grief and heartbreak may be expressed differently by people with I/DD.
- Respond to intense emotions without minimizing, rushing “closure,” or discouraging future relationships.
- Set appropriate boundaries while still honoring feelings, autonomy, and dignity.
- Support healing, resilience, and readiness for future relationships.




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Agenda

- Introduction and Welcome
- Someone Sets a Boundary
- Setting Your Own Boundaries
- Managing Heartbreak (Ending a Relationship)
- Scenarios and What Can We Do?

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Discussion: Disliking a Boundary


How do you handle someone speaking up or setting a boundary you do not like?

What are you observing as to how people with I/DD handle this?

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Reactions to Heartbreak and Disappointment


- Sadness, withdrawal, loss of interest in activities
- Feelings of longing
- Low self-esteem or self-worth
- Angry, frustrated
- Getting "stuck"
- Trouble sleeping, eating changes, and other behaviors
- Difficulty communicating




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Reactions to Heartbreak and Disappointment Continued

- Feeling sick, headaches, stomach aches
- Need reassurance
- May wonder why?
- May blame self



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Discussion: A Disappointing Boundary

How do you handle being when someone speaks up or sets a boundary that is disappointing to you?

What are important messages for people with I/DD (and everyone) need to hear about this?

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Framing the Topic: Messages (1 of 4)

- **Use different language**, not rejection. This makes it personal, about you.
- **Normalize it**. Heartbreak and disappointment are part of life.
- **Explain what happened**: They said no-they are not going to change their mind. Or They decided they don't want to be in a relationship anymore.
- **Validate their feelings**. Let them feel their feelings and don't minimize.

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Framing the Topic: Messages (2 of 4)

- **Teach ways to cope**:
 - **Express feelings**: talking, journaling, drawing
 - **Self-soothing**: music, favorite activities, movement
 - **Routine**: keeping structure helps stability
 - **Safe social support**: friends, staff, family




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Framing the Topic: Messages (3 of 4)

Respect their Decision and Boundaries: Teach what is and is not okay after a breakup or getting a no:

✗ Not Okay

- Repeated texting, calling, asking out
- Showing up uninvited
- Trying to "convince" the person

✓ Okay

- Accept their decision. They get to decide what is best for them, and so do you
- Giving space
- Respecting "no."
- Say, *"I'm sad, but I will respect your decision."*

Framing the Topic: Messages (4 of 4)

Messages to give to support self-worth:

- It is one person's opinion, and they believe you are not right for them. It does not mean you are not good enough.
- It does not mean you should stop trying.
- You do not need to change who you are. You are right, just the way you are. It just is not a good fit.

Fitting/Not Fitting Example



Every individual has unique traits.
Example: Some hands are bigger, smaller, thinner, fatter, browner, lighter. There is nothing wrong with any of these hands.
BUT, some hand fit with certain gloves and others do not.

Balance Support With Autonomy

- Do not overprotect
- Support learning
- Respect their right to feel, choose, and try again



Our job is not to protect them from heartbreak—it is to teach them ways to manage heartbreak and disappointment — just like anyone else.

Dealing with Someone's Boundary/Opinion

1. Use positive self-talk
2. Ask: *"What else can you do to feel better?"*
3. Teach emotional regulation skills
4. When do they need additional support, such as a counselor?
 - cannot move on
 - intense sadness
 - depression or anxiety



Teaching Emotional Regulation

- Recognizing feelings
- Naming the feeling
- Understanding triggers
- Calming strategies (coping skills)
- Expressing feelings safely
- Problem-solving
- Tolerance for "No" and disappointment

Emotional regulation is **not about stopping feelings**—it is about:

- Feeling emotions safely
- Expressing them respectfully
- Recovering and moving forward

Teaching Emotional Regulation Example

Situation: Someone is told “no” to a date.

Teach:

1. “I feel disappointed.”
2. Take three deep breaths
3. Say: “Okay, thanks for telling me.”
4. Do a preferred activity
5. Talk about it later with support



Video: Dealing with Rejection



Discussion: Setting a Boundary With Others



How do you handle speaking up or setting a boundary with someone else? Saying no to others? Or ending your relationships?

What are important messages for people with I/DD to hear about speaking up and setting boundaries?

Speaking Up and Setting Boundaries

- **Be kind**, but also know that they **may still feel sad or hurt**.
- You did not do anything wrong. **You spoke up for what is right for you**.
- **You are allowed to say no** to a hug, date, or relationship. Be clear.
 - *"No, thank you."*
 - *"I do not want to date."*
 - *"I like you as a friend, not a boyfriend/girlfriend."*
 - *"I am not interested."*
- **Do not avoid or encourage** them.

Speaking up and Setting Boundaries Continued

- **You do not have to take care of the other person**. That is their own job.
- **You have to take care of yourself** and speak up for what is right for you.
- If you do not want to be with them, they probably would **want to know that now rather than later**.



Video: Consent and Sexual Relationships: Sexuality and People with Developmental Disabilities



Tips for Breaking Up



- **Make a clear decision:** Decide clearly if the relationship should end and discuss with friends/family.
- **Know that you will probably be hurting someone else:** It may hurt both of you, but staying when you do not want to can hurt more.
- **Stick to your decision:** Sadness is normal, but reasons for ending remain valid.
- **Be truthful, but kind:** Explain why you are ending it, treating your partner as you would like to be treated.
- **Pick a good time and place:** Somewhere safe in case the situation gets uncomfortable, and you need to leave.
- **Try not to blame yourself or your partner for the breakup.** Relationships end for many reasons. It is normal for needs and interests to change.

Discussion: Self-Advocacy Skills



What are self-advocacy skills that help people manage when others set boundaries?

What are self-advocacy skills that help people manage when you speak up or set boundaries?

Teach Self-Advocacy Skills

Speaking Up and Setting Your Boundaries

- Saying, "Yes."
- Saying, "No."
- Stating your boundaries: being clear and kind
- Speaking up skills versus bossy, pushy, mean, or saying nothing

Others Speak Up and Set Boundaries

- Accepting a "No."
- Managing Emotions
- Respecting others' boundaries
- Asking for something different?

Model for Scenarios:

1. How might this person feel?
2. What are some self-advocacy skills that might be helpful?
3. How could this person respond?
4. What are some coaching prompts that support people can use?

Get No, Boundary, Excluded, Silence Scenarios

1. Alex asks someone out on a date. The person says, "*No, I'm not interested.*"
2. Taylor asks a friend to hang out. The friend says they are busy.
3. Sam asks for more hours or a new role and is told no.
4. A group is making plans and does not invite Chris.

Get No, Getting a Boundary

5. Casey sends messages and does not get a reply.
6. Someone is told their comment or behavior made others uncomfortable.
7. Riley asks for help, and the person says they cannot.
8. Morgan wants to join a game, but the group says it's full.

Model for Scenarios Review

1. How might this person feel? The one saying no or setting a boundary?
2. What are some self-advocacy skills that might be helpful?
3. How could this person respond?
4. What are some coaching prompts that support people can use?

Giving No, Setting a Boundary Scenarios

1. Morrigan already said no to a date, but the person keeps asking.
2. A friend wants to hang out with Zosimo every day, but Zosimo needs space.
3. Someone encourages Peyton to do something they are uncomfortable with.
4. Someone asks Shanell for her phone number, address, or private details.

Giving No, Setting a Boundary Scenarios Continued

5. Someone tries to hug, touch, or sit too close to Sasha, and Sasha is uncomfortable.
6. Someone keeps asking to borrow money, but Corissa does not want to.
7. A group of friends expects Jose to include someone whom they do not feel comfortable with.
8. A person thinks they are in a relationship with Sam, but Sam does not feel the same.

Questions and Answers



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Wrap-up



What is one thing you plan to do moving forward?

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As a welcome gift, you will receive our free ebook titled *"Click with Confidence, An Online Safety Guide for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the People Who Support Them."*

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Upcoming Workshops



ELEVATUS TRAINING Supporting Healthy Relationships at Home, Work, and Community

A workshop for professionals, self-advocates, and organizations that support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Learn how to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities build healthy, safe, and meaningful relationships.

May 6 | 3:00 – 4:30 PM EDT



ELEVATUS TRAINING Tinder, Grindr and More: Supporting People with IDD Who Are Dating Online

Back by popular demand!

A workshop for professionals, self-advocates, family members, and sexuality educators who work with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Join our interactive workshop to learn how to support safe dating app use for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

June 9 | 1:00 – 4:00 PM EDT

To register, visit: <https://www.elevatustraining.com/online-workshop-series/>

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Upcoming Workshops



ELEVATUS TRAINING Developing a Sexuality Policy that Empowers, Supports, and Protects

A workshop for professionals, self-advocates, and organizations who support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Join our two-part workshop to help professionals and organizations get approval and craft sexuality policies.

Part 1: October 7 Part 2: November 16

2:00 – 4:00 PM EDT

To register, visit: <https://www.elevatustraining.com/online-workshop-series/>

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