

## Working With (Dis)abilities: Reflection from a Pilot Project

Budi Sudarto – Victorian  
AIDS Council, Melbourne  
Adam Sharpe – GLBT  
Disability Support Services,  
Melbourne



## Individual Exercise



## How we started the project:

- GLBDTSS identified a growing need for their members to receive education on relationships and sexual health.
- Limited resources available to these men in addition to limited social support.
- GLBDTSS and VAC established a partnership to trial a specifically-designed Relationships workshop for gay men with mild to medium intellectual (dis)abilities.



## Uncharted territory?



## How it worked:

- Developed a workshop specific to their needs.
- Key topics:
  1. Exploring personal expectations.
  2. Communication in a relationship.
  3. Self-advocacy: when and how to draw the boundary.
  4. Consent, including age of consent.
  5. Sexual health in a relationship.



## The Workshop:

- 8 GLBDTSS clients and 4 support workers attended the workshop.
- 4 VAC facilitators delivered the workshop.
- Using peer education and adult education framework to maximise learning.
- Each participant was paired with either a support worker or a facilitator.
- 6-weeks workshop



## The Discussion:

- Participants felt excited being in the same room as other gay men as many of them lived at supported residential accommodation with limited opportunities to socialise.
- Participants understood the concept of 'relationship', with many expressed the desire to "get married".
- Not all participants understood boundaries, confusing boundaries with "being rude".



## The Discussion contd...

- Not all participants understood age of consent, over-relying on the information given by their partner – "he told me that he is old enough".
- Limited understanding of sexual health.
- Feeling embarrassed talking about sex and safe-sex.



## The Discussion contd.

- Only one participant demonstrated an understanding of safe-sex  
"Always use condom; if not, then good bye".
- "I don't want to upset him" – highlights the need for further education on self-advocacy and sexual health.



## The Discussion contd...

- Opportunity to learn about HIV transmission and living with HIV from the HIV Positive Speakers Bureau, a program of Living Positive Victoria.
- Opportunity to interact with other gay men – increase a sense of community attachment and belonging.
- Learning as part of a social group – more relevant to their needs.



## Reflections

- The workshop highlights the need to create an on-going supportive and educative social space for gay men with intellectual (dis)abilities to talk about sexual health and relationships.
- Contents must be relevant to their learning abilities, lived experiences, and social circumstances (eg, supported residential accommodation)
- Include them in the conversation (eg, exploring what they want from the workshop)
- Respect and dignity.



*"Learning from them as much as they learn from us"*



## Future directions:

- Further workshops are planned for 2015.
- ASK (Assessment of Sexual Knowledge) Tool to reflect participants knowledge about sex and sexual health, prior to and after the workshop.
- Training support workers on sexual health and group facilitation.
- Inclusion and meaningful participation on the principles of social justice.



## Acknowledgement

*We would like to thank the GLBDSS clients who participated in the workshop, whose humour, wisdom, and resilience are inspirational.*

