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SEXUALITY in persons with

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In persons with what ?? The fact of the matter is that each of us possesses a “SEXUALITY”.

We often prefer to ignore the sexuality of people (with ... MR) when providing supports and services. After all, SEX is a real “bag of worms” and we are uncomfortable even talking about it. We have enough trouble figuring out SEX for ourselves, no less trying to figure it out for someone else. SEXUALITY is an issue that is easier ignored or denied. If push comes to shove, we can always fall back on the “it’s a private issue” to rationalize not dealing with it.

I trust you will agree that the word “SEXUALITY” sounds a lot better than the word “SEX”. It is important to understand that SEXUALITY involves a lot more than just the physical act of sexual expression.

SEXUALITY can be defined as the integration of the physical, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of an individual’s personality which express maleness or femaleness. SEXUALITY is an expression of one’s personality and is evident in everyday actions. Sexual Intercourse is our most intimate way of expressing and receiving affection.

In Schuylkill County I have had the pleasure of participating in the development of a Policy on SEXUALITY - we call it a “Socio-Sexuality Policy”. The word “Socio” is there to emphasize this idea that we are talking about a lot more than just sex.

Many of the issues related to SEXUALITY are the same ones we deal with regarding other behaviors - it’s just a much more charged and sensitive area. On one hand we are concerned about respecting the autonomy and rights of persons, on the other hand we acknowledge our responsibility to protect them from harm. The issue of Capacity to Consent becomes real important here.

I have found some help for myself in dealing with these issues by thinking of a triangle with the perspective of 3 different people at each corner - a PRIEST, a STATE TROOPER and a CIVIL LIBERTARIAN. In deliberating a particular situation, I like to consider the issues from each of these points of view.

- The Priest represents the perspective of religion, morals and ethics.
- The State Trooper represents the perspective of the legal system (and there are Laws in Pennsylvania about various sexual activities, marriage and people “so ... deficient that such person is incapable of consent”).
- The Civil Libertarian represents the perspective of individual rights, that the person should be allowed to do what s/he wants and we have no business interfering.

I have always had to remind myself that our “positive approaches” movement needs to be tempered with considerations of our legal responsibilities. We talk about giving people more choices and being least restrictive. But we also need to be careful not to leave people on their own who are ill equipped to deal with the challenges they face. What seems like a wonderful concept at a person-centered team meeting may look pretty foolish and indefensible in a courtroom.

Somehow we need to find a balance between the various perspectives. Some Agencies focus on the legal issues - we are state funded, the law says it is illegal, therefore it is not allowed here. Others take the rights approach - it’s the person’s right, it’s private and we are not getting involved. There are few Agencies with Policies - after all, it’s probably better to ignore and deny the issue, no matter how you write the Policy someone is going to be mad - the Priest, the State Trooper or the Civil Libertarian. You can’t win so why even try.

In helping develop the Policy in Schuylkill County, I have become aware that there are no “one right answers”. We have decided that it is not for us to define the sexuality of people, but to assist them to define it for themselves. Our Policy does not give the answers, but it does set up some reasonable procedures for trying to help make decisions that make sense. If I ever make it to Court over a SEXUALITY issue, it will be that decision making procedure and not the ultimate decisions which will be my best defense.

What’s your Policy on SEXUALITY?

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