

Self Advocacy Update: Relationships

Healthy relationships can incorporate many different people in our lives: parents, siblings, teachers, mentors, peers, friends, supported living staff, vocational support, exercise coaches and so much more! One kind of relationship that is not discussed as frequently as others is intimate relationships.

People with disabilities may face a challenge and discrimination of receiving information that they cannot have intimate relationships. This can result in lack of information and resources about basic needs and safety, such as body ownership and awareness as well as being able to fully understand and advocate for consent. In fact, there are many self-advocates that have a healthy and happy intimate relationship with a spouse or romantic partner.

Members of the program Self-Advocacy have been discussing healthy relationships and expressed interest in wanting to continue learning more, especially in relation to sexuality and intimacy. As there are many wonderful local organizations and resources, the group welcomed in community professionals.

In May, Blanca Ortega from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services of Whatcom County (DVSAS) presented at the meeting. Through her presentations advocates were able to define differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships and how to recognize if a relationship is not healthy. In June, we had a workshop on intimacy and consent with Tracy Dahlstedt-Rienstra, M.Ed., Health Educator, Peer Sexual Health Education (PSHE) coordinator for Prevention



& Wellness Services, WWU. The meeting focused on the meaning of consent and communication; how to communicate and understand consent, and how to respond appropriately. Members are also empowered with knowledge on how to connect with these community advocates, seek additional information and resources, and how to ask for support.

"I love the fact that I learned about resources to look up when I need to and to go to whenever I want." - Laura

"I like to stay healthy." - Amy

"I learned what consent really means and how to approach it. I thought I knew what consent meant, but I didn't." - Ty

"I learned a lot from the DVSAS presentation and WWU last month (June). Both of those places are there to answer questions and for you to know you're OK if you have a concern. They are always there for you to go to and are an advocate for you." - Terri

What is our Self Advocacy Program?

Self-Advocacy, a program of The Arc of Whatcom County, focuses on various aspects of self-advocacy. Through group meetings, individual skill building, involvement in legislative advocacy, and providing outreach and awareness in our community self-advocates are able to practice their skills and abilities to speak up for themselves and others who may need support. Meetings are typically on the first Thursday of the month from 4:30p-6:30p. The next meeting is Thursday, September 6 from 4:30-6:30pm (No meeting in August) at The Arc's Dan Godwin Community Center at 2602 McLeod Road, Bellingham. Visit <http://arcwhatcom.org/wp/programs/self-advocacy/>, call 360-715-0170 or email selfadvocacy@arcwhatcom.org