

# FAMILY REACTION TO A DISABLED PARTNER



**Lisa** – “ I experienced some more or less serious family reactions to having a disabled partner, so I just thought you might have some ideas or hints on how to deal with the situation.

So I told my family (okay, not the whole family but those who I see on a regular basis) about having a boyfriend who uses a wheelchair. I knew before that they wouldn't be very happy about it but I still imagined it a bit easier than it finally is. Of course they are worried that I will have problems I could easily avoid. But what is going on there doesn't result simply from being worried. It got kind of a forbidden topic in the family. As long as nobody speaks about it, the situation seems to be okayish. But first, I am not really satisfied with not being allowed to talk about him and second there are situations where it is hardly avoidable to mention it. It simply becomes part of my life and although it is a LDR there are irl meetings which I can't and don't want to hide.

If the topic comes up, it is just so filled up with emotions (and lack of knowledge on their side) that normal conversations are hardly possible. They simply don't want to talk about it. And if, there is just a focus on all the "bad" points and problems that will come up (especially since he may need more help than what they first expected and with another large focus on society issues, like having a hard time finding friends etc, which I think is a bit exaggerating, but granted, I do not really have irl experience with it).

No family member has met him so far and as far as my parents are concerned they are not keen on doing so. (And I guess I'm just too young to be 100%ly independent of them and indifferent on their opinion, although I have been moving out more than 4 years ago and been living in another city ever since.) Every interaction with them got more difficult since I told them several months ago and there are situations where I just feel like a leper.

Okay, so if you want to share, I would be very interested in whether those of you who have or had a disabled partner experienced similar or other problems regarding family reactions and whether you have any advice on how I could improve the situation. I am aware of the fact that nobody of you really knows any of them and the answer may be different for each person, but maybe there are some strategies that have helped you? I would be really glad about some answers”

**Devushka** – “Does your family know anything about your attraction to disabled men or have you had other disabled boyfriends that they knew about? Or is this your first time telling them you are in a relationship with a disabled guy? Even though I've been with my partner for 5 years, I'm scared to death to tell one of my aunts about his disability because he is the third dis guy I've dated, and she already knows about the other two. Is there a possibility that your family suspect that you prefer disabled men?”

**Emma** – “Lisa I'm sorry you are having to go through this.

When my husband and I first started dating I only told my immediate family about his disability, my mom, dad and brother. I told them about his disability all separately and over the phone. Neither my brother or Dad had a negative reaction just some questions. My Mom on the other hand, wasn't quite the same she was judgemental and immediately started questioning my decision to date him. I had a brief initial conversation with her where I just told her the basics and didn't really respond to her skepticism. Afterwards I wrote her an e-mail saying basically I was dating him and she needed to accept it. Ironically she has MS and is actually more disabled than he is which I also told her very clearly so figured that would end the discussion about what he can't do. I don't remember if she responded to that e-mail but if she did it wasn't memorable. That was the end of the discussion about if he was good enough for me. I never brought it up again and neither did she. I didn't hide that we were together just told what I had always told her in the past about guys I was dating (which is not much). Now that we are married she sees that there is nothing to worry about in terms of his disability.

So #1, have some of your family meet him. I'm sure their imaginations are making up things to worry about in terms of his disability that aren't true.

Also don't hide him. Talk about him whenever you typically would so they realize you are happy and not just "in a phase". Take the time to educate them so they don't assume things and get to really understand the reality of his disability. Have you opened up to questions they may have? I always offer to answer any questions anyone has. It is sort of strange to mention but in the long run has made me feel better that people were able to ask whatever was on their mind.

Oh and one last thing. I don't think you need to tell your family about being a dev. I haven't shared that with them. If they ever ask I won't deny it but its not something I'm going to get into with people who I don't normally talk about sex with.

I hope this is helpful. Feel free to ask more.”

**Janewheeler** – “Lisa, you're dating a guy who has SMA or some kind of muscular dystrophy, right? (Something progressive?) I think you've likely got a tougher time than most, especially if he uses a motorized chair. Your family hasn't had a chance to appreciate him for his mind like most of us have been able to do 😊

And unfortunately, that's likely all they'll think he has to offer. It will be hard for them to see that you appreciate his body and the way he touches you, or the way you touch him. My mom hates it when I touch my husband's hair, and that's the most boring thing I can think of! So that's really not something that is ever easy or appropriate to discuss.

Mainly, they want to know that he will take care of you, not the other way around -- regardless of whether you need to be taken care of, or if you enjoy taking care of someone else's needs. And there's always a huge difference between romantic needs and caregiving needs, too; they want to make sure that you won't be locked into anything that prevents you from doing things you might

want to do. That includes spending your own time/money being responsible for his care, among other things.

I think all you can do is just anticipate as many questions as possible so you can try to move past them, if that's possible.

I wish he could have a chance to show them what a thoughtful, smart and caring person he is on his own terms -- the way that he showed you. (And us!)"

**Lisa** – "Thank you all for your answers (here and per pm)!"

First to your questions: Well, my parents do know that I am attracted to disabled guys. I needed to mention it while telling them of my boyfriend. I had known before that their attitude towards disabled people is one of pity if not worse and that they would never ever understand what I am doing otherwise. Plus when I kind of dated another disabled guy before (which wasn't serious in any sense, but still), my mother got it somehow and asked me whether this is what I find attractive. I didn't tell her by then, but I figured she would have asked the same question this time too, anyway. Maybe them knowing is an additional problem, but yeah.

And yes, Jane, he uses an electric chair. But I haven't really come to tell my family most things of him, because they didn't want to talk about it and if it came up I tried to focus on telling good stuff about him that would make them like him more. So there are still some things left I didn't tell them but eventually have to. I guess I haven't answered all their questions as extensive as I could have done, but every time I told something disability-related they freaked out and didn't ask out of gaining knowledge or being curious but just to find more negative things to show me it isn't meant to be or something. This all sounds really bad and I do know that they are just trying to protect me from something they know is going to be difficult.

I guess time is a very important factor and I will try to be more open and honest with their question even if it means more struggle in the short run. At least I have also seen that some of you had similar family issues. And I also got some links on advise on coming-out to parents (actually intended for gays), which seem to mirror my situation surprisingly well.

So thanks again for being here. It makes things a bit easier. Hugs to you all!"

**AlrighyAphrodite** – "Lisa, I have been in your situation and it is not a pleasant one so let me extend my deepest sympathies to you. It is really sad and disappointing when you have something you are excited about and want to share, and then the people around you react like you have something to apologize for. It takes a lot of inner strength to stay committed to a relationship in the face of those circumstances, so good for you.

I have been in a relationship with two disabled guys who have been in some way introduced or at least had their presence announced to my family. Probably 6 years ago I was with a T-4 para and my current (complicated) relationship is with someone with moderate CP. I have not come to Thanksgiving with an "I <3 Wheels" t-shirt or otherwise announced my devness (as far as I'm concerned, that is not really something most people talk about with most of their families anyway), but for anyone who has cared enough to think about it I'm sure it's pretty clear.

When I told my extended family about my first relationship, they were a little weirded out, but they were not openly hostile, it was more like a "whatever makes you happy" sort of reaction. My mom, however, was a different story. When I told her that he was paralyzed, she literally gasped and clutched at her chest, and I immediately thought "this was a bad idea." We argued about it,

yelled about it, many tears were shed about it on my part. The relationship eventually ended and my mom was never supportive of it the whole way through. Her resistance to the relationship was not the reason it didn't work out, but it certainly didn't make things any easier. The relationship between my mom and I has been pretty complicated but I think she eventually saw that how she handled it had really hurt me. She, like most moms, is not a bad person. She just thought that she was doing what was right for me.

Over the intervening years my relationship with my mom has grown and changed a lot. When I started my second relationship with a disabled guy, I handled things much differently. I actually didn't even tell my parents that he had CP before they came to meet him. I don't necessarily recommend that strategy to other girls but in light of my previous history I knew that she would check her reaction once she was in front of him and I was pretty confident that once she got to meet him, she would come around pretty quickly. I turned out to be right. When they were introduced, there was a very brief raise of the eyebrow on her part, which is something he is used to anyway. After that, my mom and I have talked in great length about my relationship and she has not had any problem with his disability at all, in fact she is very supportive, although she of course still wants to protect my best interest.

Like I said, I wouldn't necessarily recommend springing your guy's disability on your family (it sounds like you're past that point already) but it worked out for me. I do have some advice for you, though, and it's probably more in line with Emma's than Jane's. I think it is less about trying to convince your family to like him than it is about drawing what I would call healthy boundaries that require your family to respect your relationship regardless of whether not they like him.

This approach has certain caveats, and if they don't apply to your situation they likely will not really work for you. As far as I'm concerned, the first step is define the relationship between you and your family and how much of their influence you are willing to accept. In my case, even if my mom never came around to my current squeeze, I would continue the relationship. If it really came down to that, what do you think you would do? Hopefully it won't, but I think examining that question for yourself will help you decide what to do. There may be legitimate reasons that your family has a right to exercise control over your relationship. First, I assume that the relationship is not abusive or in any other way destructive, otherwise they would have the right to be concerned. There may be other cultural or personal reasons that they have the right to exercise some influence, for example if you still live with them. In that case, you may have to win them over and that is probably much harder.

In my case, I eventually just told my parents, respectfully, that as long as I'm not doing anything dangerous, my relationships are not something they have the power to influence. There are other areas of my life they have more control; for example, if they give me money they have a right to ask where that goes. But just because they have at times loaned me money doesn't mean they get to dictate who I have a relationship with. My mom can like it, love it, hate it; she can offer her opinion but it's clear to both of us that she doesn't get to hold it over my head if I don't take it. It's kind of like Emma said, you can choose to come to the party or not, but the party is going to continue whether you like or not. I think this has really helped reset our dynamic in a way that allows us to talk about the topic like adults which in my opinion is much healthier.

That dynamic also helps me to present my relationship much in the same way that I present what I had for lunch that day. It's a topic of conversation, but I'm not asking for my mom's approval or permission, I'm just reporting the news from my life. I think it also helps to approach the topic in a casual way like you would if you were talking to a friend. Instead of coming

prepared to drop a bomb and wary of what they are going to say, I now present it (if I present it all) by saying "I'm seeing someone, he is a wonderful guy, he gets along great with my dog, he has cerebral palsy, last weekend we tried a new Mexican place." I think that helps keep you in control of the conversation and encourages them to consider that maybe it isn't such a big deal after all. Don't be disrespectful or snarky, don't get angry, don't freak out, don't lose your cool. Stay calm and they will be encouraged to stay calm as well. I know it's hard and I know they have made you feel like a leper, but you are not a leper. All of us are in this together, and you have a right to want what you want and love who you love. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you or your relationship, so don't let their reaction force you into acting like there is. Stay on your center and know that you are fighting the good fight. If the drama has to unfold around you, just let it unfold. Don't let it pull you off your center, and don't let it change your good heart."

**Lisa** – "First, I am not really economically dependent on them (at least not at the moment). I also do not live with them on a regular basis. But I think there is a lot of emotional influence. And thinking about what you wrote, I'm convinced that some of it might be a boundary problem. I don't think that my family will come around with me having a disabled boyfriend anytime soon. But sure, they don't have to. I just have to get over the fear that rejecting their influence on this matter will also reject it in all other areas of life.

And second, you're right. I didn't manage to stay cool, to let drama unfold and stay calm. Maybe it's because the topic touches something deeply inside of me and because it is connected to the whole dev story and coming out in front of others. Maybe I hadn't been prepared well enough and presented a spot of myself which had been too vulnerable at this time. That's why I love this board - being with other devs makes me feel very comfortable with myself. Thank you so much that you are here, all of you!"