

Dates & nuts

Dating with a disability: An exercise in humor and humility

By Stacey Rowe



Meeting the right person can be challenging enough without the complications of living with a disability. With so many singles swiping through superficial photographs to meet people, the very thought of joining a site can be quite daunting. Despite an estimated one in five people reporting having some form of disability (US Census), today's dating site checklists typically don't allow you to disclose whether or not you are disabled, and some disabilities simply aren't visible to the naked eye. However, you could be like Sarah Hepler and simply take matters into your own hands—by self-disclosing with a dating profile headline that matter-of-factly states, “Ask me how I lost my arm!”

With an extremely positive attitude and great sense of humor, thirty-five-year-old Hepler has enjoyed coming up with creative stories to respond to such queries, both online and in person. A few of her favorites include petting the stingrays at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, a beer bottle arm-severing incident at a bonfire, and a “Soul Surfer-style” shark attack. The shark attack

response is what she used when an older gentleman started hitting on her at a bar. He later called a local radio show for help in searching for her, describing her as left-handed. When the hosts inquired how he picked up on that detail, he replied, “Well, she only had one arm,” and the search over the airwaves for “One-armed Sarah” began. A good sport who enjoys a laugh, Hepler called the radio station and agreed to meet the gentleman again, but only as a friend.

The real story is that Hepler was in a terrible car accident at the age of ten, and her arm was amputated as a result of her injuries. She had more difficulty with her classmates upon her return to school post-accident than she did cultivating new relationships. “Kids can be very cruel,” she says, “and a lot of them made up stories about what happened.”

While a prosthetic arm is certainly an option, she has opted out—too uncomfortable. In fact, she ended up quitting dance because her instructor wanted her to wear one so she would look like everyone else. She is able to ride horses without the use

of a prosthetic, though. “There’s no problem with horses; horses don’t judge,” she jokingly adds. Being an amputee has definitely helped her develop a tough shell. It’s also made her more empathetic and accepting of others, particularly in her work as cofounder of Hepler & DiMarco, a local company helping seniors transition from community living into long-term care.

Hepler has had more success meeting people in person and attributes this to her personality. She had a boyfriend throughout high school and had no trouble meeting men in college.

Since her divorce, she has dabbled in online dating. That’s when things became a little more challenging. “Initially, I didn’t talk about my arm,” she says, “I would send additional pictures where it was obvious that I was an amputee, and guys would either make an excuse or avoid talking altogether.” Eventually, she started incorporating information about her disability into her online profile. Some men would look at her pictures without reading what she had to say, and others wouldn’t take her seriously and would become offended upon meeting. “It’s disappointing to find out how shallow people are. It doesn’t matter how much of an intellectual connection you have—people still see you differently.” With the increased visibility of people with disabilities in the media, on fashion runways, and in advertisements, society seems to be shifting in a more positive way toward acceptance. However, we still have a lot of work to do in the modern dating arena, where dismissive judgments and rejections are commonplace.

Luckily for Hepler, keeping a positive outlook, perseverance, and putting herself out there has paid off. She met her current suitor online several years ago and due to the distance (yep, the National Aquarium story was for him), they formed a strong friendship first. He sent her a great initial message, and she discovered they shared common interests and a similar sense of humor. As a business owner, he also provided helpful advice when she started her own business. She acknowledges that while living six hours apart can be difficult at times, they are able to make it work. Most importantly, she has found someone who loves and accepts her for who she is, which is what any person desires from a partner. (585)

Stacey Rowe is a freelance writer based in Rochester.

Illustration by Lissa Mathis