



Commentary

Persons with mental disability and marriage

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Abstract

Individuals with disabilities often find themselves facing a multitude of challenges when they decide to venture into the realm of marriage. This journey, which involves seeking a life partner, can be influenced by a combination of their personal desires and the expectations of their family members. As such, it becomes increasingly vital to have various online platforms available to cater to this unique and diverse need, spanning across different languages to ensure inclusivity. Furthermore, the role of governments in facilitating this process should not be underestimated. They can play a significant part by actively promoting awareness through various means, including but not limited to distributing informative leaflets, creating insightful pamphlets, and strategically placing informative hoarding boards in key locations. By doing so, they can contribute substantially to simplifying and enhancing the process of finding a suitable partner for individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: Persons with mental disability, Marriage website, Marriage App

Introduction

The World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and

social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.^[1] It also defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community”.^[2]

As per the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016),^[3] mental disability includes intellectual disability/specific learning disability/autism spectrum disorder/mental behaviour/multiple disabilities. However, according to the Census 2001,^[4] there are 21

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million people with disabilities in India who constitute 2.13% of the total population.

A person with a mental disability suffers from one or more comorbidities.^[5] Besides this, they have other issues, e.g., persons with intellectual disabilities have less life expectancy than the general population.^[6] Due to stigma and financial issues, marriage becomes a challenge for a person with a mental disability.^[7,8] If the person with a mental disability has a profound Intellectual disability or severe Autism Spectrum Disorder, for example, this may not be very suitable for the concerned person to marry. However, if the person has mild symptoms or their family is capable of managing anything that could happen in the future, the concerned person might choose to get married.

Specific issues after marriage of mentally disabled persons

Many individuals in India think that marriage is a solution to all psychological problems. However, as clinicians, we are aware that marriage is no panacea. Symptoms could worsen if the individual experiences stress that they cannot manage effectively. So, though it is plausible that following marriage, there may be a possibility of enhancement in emotional, cognitive, mental health, and sexual health facets, there are chances that these can further deteriorate drastically. However, another concern is that people may be exploited for financial gain, though altruistic traits are also present in some people, which may prove those options fruitful. However, the majority of people with mental disabilities report having an interest in marriage. At the same time, some others only indicate this interest when the clinician asks them about it in a one-on-one interview. Nevertheless, the reaction of all family members is not the same as the interest expressed by a person with a mental disability. The reaction of family members differs from case-to-case basis due to individual differences, socio-demographic characteristics, family environment etc.

Searching for a partner

Sexual health is a unique part of comprehensive health. Marriage and/or searching for a partner can, of course, be a significant component related to sexual health. To help arrange the marriage, there are many ways and digital avenues are also available and gaining popularity in India. The general population uses several matrimonial websites to find a partner. Among these websites, several are well-known, such as jeevansathi.com, shadi.com, bharatmatrimony, vivaah.com, simplymarry.com, nrimb.com, communitymatrimony.com, m4marry.com, matrimonialsindia.com, secondshadi.com. As the name shows, nrimb.com is a site for NRIs. The secondshadi.com helps those who have divorced or been widowed.^[9] Some sites are available that prioritize specific communities, e.g., oriyamatrimony.com. Not only the sites, there are now several Apps accessible, such as Tinder^[10], where users may meet for dating.

There are also a few matrimonial sites for persons with disability, e.g., disabledmatrimonial.com, abilitymatrimony.com, divyansathiya.com, and manomarrriage.com.^[11-14] These mention that the site is for persons with disability. However, we could not find any online group, e.g., a Facebook group or Instagram group, for the marriage of persons with a disability after extensive searching.

Searching partners for mentally disabled

In physical disabilities, the affected part of a person is the body. In contrast, in mental disabilities, the affected part is the brain. Persons with physical disabilities can put much effort into finding a partner. However, while doing the same, persons with mental disabilities may feel much more challenged as their affected part is brain. With this, finding a partner for a person with mental disabilities may be more challenging due to stigma.^[7,8]

As there are available websites regarding searching partners for persons with disability,

why not make use of a website for persons with all mental disabilities. The topic of debate will now shift to whether or not the app or website is accessible to persons with mental disabilities. As we found, the *mano marriage.com* website is specifically meant for persons with psychiatric disabilities and other specified disabilities.^[14] The ability *matrimony.com* has specified one category of mental disability, i.e., learning disability.^[12] However, though the other two sites, i.e., *disabled matrimonial.com* and *divyangsathiya.com* are meant for person with a disability,^[11,13] still it has not clearly mentioned whether this includes persons with mental disabilities or not.

Support required from family, society and government

In a society like India, marriage is not between two individuals as in other cultures. Many people are engaged in the process, and many important family members must approve the choice. However, despite everything, a person with a mental disability has the freedom to make a choice. Therefore, individuals who can maintain the relationship as needed and whose families support it should take advantage of opportunities to meet new people on different apps/sites and, if they find someone they like, decide to get married. Of course, both parties should be open to the other party about their symptoms, prognosis, abilities, incapacities, etc, well in advance.

However, as we have already indicated, family members willing to participate and demonstrate interest in doing so may do so. So, family views should be taken into consideration. However, one thing has to be prioritized, i.e., both partner and family members need to be psycho-educated about health profiles, possible outcomes, coping strategies, etc. There might be another solution, e.g., living in a relationship, which may help both partner and family members. Again, it depends on the mind set of the people involved.

In the normal course of human existence, family formation comes after education, followed by wealth. Currently, there are several chances for persons with disabilities in higher education and employment, with 4% reservation in govt jobs and 5% reservation in private companies;^[3] various websites are also accessible to apply for jobs in various companies. The government has different provisions concerning education and jobs for persons with mental disabilities. However, we could not find any research that showed government initiative for the marriage of persons with mental disabilities. Therefore, the government may initiate possibilities for persons with mental disabilities to opt for finding a partner if the person's health status and family member permits.

Digital services should be enhanced in these aspects for persons with disabilities. However, again, it depends on how comfortable they are with digital services, and if they are not, then how comfortable are their family member /caregivers in using digital technologies. So either the existing website for the general population can make a separate section for persons with mental disabilities to enhance the procedure, or a new website/app can be created in different languages. Further, success stories can be highlighted. Pamphlets, leaflets, and hoarding in public places can be used to advertise these services.

Unfortunately, as we have already mentioned, we found only two sites, i.e., *ability matrimony.com* and *manomarriage .com*, that are specifically catering to persons with mental disabilities or one of the categories of persons with disabilities. Such meagre accessible options for people with mental disabilities today for seeking a happy romantic relationship and partner do not reflect the digital advances. Therefore, social organizations, clinicians associations, and governments should come forward to give this topic its due consideration.

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Conflict of interest: None

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