

The Accessible Stall: Episode 003: Sex, Dating, Disability

TRANSCRIPT

Emily: Hi, I'm Emily Ladau

Kyle: And I'm Kyle Khachadurian

Emily: And you're listening to another episode of The Accessible Stall.

Kyle: Hey Emily...

Emily: Yeah?

Kyle: We're gonna talk about sex!

Emily: Oh, hold on, back up there. Take me out to dinner first!

Kyle: No, today's episode is gonna be about romance and dating and sex. [Emily interjects]: And disability!

Kyle: Well everything we do is about disability, don't you know the name of our program?

Emily: Just making sure our listeners at home know too.

Kyle: So dating and disability is one of those things that... dating is awkward for anyone, I think. I don't know 'cause I'm only one person, but I imagine that when you have a disability it's a lot weirder because you have almost a responsibility, you can either just close it or you don't have to. but that's only if your disability isn't visible, if it is visible do you just not say anything about it? Or do you put it in your profile picture and just have your wheelchair be there, or do you explicitly say it? There are many many things and decision that you as a disabled person have to make an able-bodied person doesn't have to make, and we're going to talk about all that cool stuff today.

Emily: So should we start with dating when you meet someone organically? Or should we start with online dating, because boy do I have stories about both.

Kyle: I mean... what are you from the 1950s? I think online dating is fairly organic these days.

Emily: I suppose that's true. Okay so we'll talk about online dating because I have definitely had my fair share of forays into online dating and sometimes it's gone somewhat well, sometimes it's gone very well and most of the time it's been completely miserable failure. and so much of that like it or not has to do with my disability and and my decisions to either share that I'm disabled

or withhold that I'm disabled initially when it comes to communicating with people on online dating sites.

Kyle: Well I know I just made fun of you 2 minutes ago, but I actually don't have any experience in that so I think you should sort of man the reins for this part of the discussion.

Emily: Okay I can definitely take this one, seeing as how I have a little bit of experience in that field. I downloaded apps out of curiosity more than anything else so, I had Tinder on my phone and all of the Tinder knock-offs and in those they tend to pull your photos from your Facebook so I thought long and hard I said "do I pulled the photos that have my wheelchair in them? Do I choose the ones that don't? And it's not that I wanted to hide my disability, it's not that I'm ashamed of who I am although it took a long time to get to that place but I wondered would that be an immediate rejection, you know an immediate swipe left I think it is on the app, or would it bring out all the creepers, or would it help me weed out the people who just weren't worth my time? I think you and I talked about this a lot when I first ventured into online dating.

Kyle: Yeah, you did. I think you ran into your fair share of all of those people that you just listed that you don't want to run into, you ran into every single one of them. But, what was your experience like? Because your disability is different from mine, you sit down, and I don't and so you don't have the option to hide it. All you have the option to do is not explicitly say it which is one less thing than I have. So, what decision was it and how did you get there? Because I actually don't know that.

Emily: Both really important questions, but so complicated because I actually ended up conducting a little personal experiment and on a couple of the apps I put very obviously that I use a wheelchair, on a couple of them I held back about it and then my personal favorite come on my OkCupid profile I amused myself by making little hints throughout the profile that use a wheelchair. So one of the questions is "what are six things that you can't live without?" so one of my six things was wheels and my profile name was Emily rolls with something number or something or other so don't you creepers go try to look me up now-- no my profile is disabled-- but I waited to see if anyone would catch on to it and that went differently on all of the different apps and sites that I tried and it was quite the ride... literally, a ride, a wheelchair ride.

Kyle: What was your most successful version of yourself?

Emily: I don't know what that says about society and disability, but I had the best luck with not disclosing right away and telling people after I felt like I was a little bit more comfortable with them. And then from there, gauging their reaction. I mean, on some of the apps where was blatantly obvious that I was a wheelchair user, it brought out all the people that I wish I never had to deal with, the scum of the dating app world, where one person literally said "sorry, it's a deal-breaker, bye" and then blocked me on the app. And another person thought it would be a lot of fun to have a conversation about how my help with this was very attractive to him.

Kyle: I just want to stop you and ask you something about what you said though. You said that for someone it was a deal-breaker. I want to talk about that I think that's very important. I don't find wheelchairs to be a deal-breaker. I would be a very bad disabled person if I did. But,

everyone has their preferences and everyone is also fully free to agree or disagree with those preferences and that's just the way people are. Do you think, it would have been better or worse if he told you first that he knew right from the get-go that it would be a deal-breaker or do you think it would have gone differently had he gotten to know you and sort of... you'd be the reason why the deal-breaker with no longer be a deal-breaker?

Emily: You and I had this conversation off the record of a while ago when I was one upset about being told that wheelchair was a deal-breaker and I've since had a lot of time to think about it. And, I'm leaning towards it was more helpful to be told that it was a deal-breaker because as a painful as that was, it ruled him out. Because I don't feel that my job is to convince someone why I'm worth dating. If they're willing to give me a chance and if I need to convince them that they should overlook my disability, that's not what I want because I want someone who acknowledges my disability is part of who I am but that they accepted anyway.

Kyle: I agree with most of that.

Emily: With most of it? What do you mean?

Kyle: The only part I disagree with this that I wouldn't call my disability part of myself, but we can talk about identity in a future episode. But as far as dating goes, I think that disclosure is one of those things that I mentioned the beginning the able people just don't have to deal with, or rather I should say non-disabled people don't have to deal with. But we do and as you can see through Emily's series of anecdotes that it does have a profound impact on the people that you attract or not. but let's move a little forward, let's say that you have a tablet yourself in the dating world and you have a series of suitors to choose from and now you're on a date. And, your meeting somebody for the first time, and that somebody isn't disabled, but you are. Now what? You my personal experience, where my disability is sort of invisible until it's not, by the time it comes up the person I'm out of the day with generally either already knows or realizes in real life that it's not as big a deal as they had previously thought, but I imagine that that's a little bit different for you given that your disability is metaphorically attached to you.

Emily: Yeah, I think another reason why I ended up mentioning disability before any prospect of meeting a person came up was because I wouldn't want someone to show up on what is essentially a blind date and then it end up being like "oh, surprise! Here's the thing that I forgot to tell you about me that's blatantly obvious", and so I don't feel that I need to show up on a date and say "surprise, I use a wheelchair!", so that's why disclosure was important to me. And also, it gave me a chance to fell out a person a little bit more when you divulge something about yourself so I made an effort to... [Kyle interrupts]: You laid your cards out on the table.

Emily: Yeah because it makes it a little bit easier when you're meeting someone for the first time.

Kyle: I don't know I mean I don't have that problem. That's a problem that within the disability community I don't have that you do. That just goes to show you guys how different this all is, I mean it this isn't just "us and you", "us and within us and within those groups of us and you". But

let's take it a step further, let's say [Emily interrupts: Boy we're taking a lot of steps further and you still haven't taken me out to dinner!]

Kyle: well, I mean we are recording an episode I can't exactly take you out anywhere. so you've narrowed your pool of suitors down to 2 or 3 [Emily interrupts: now our listeners think that I have all these suitors]

Kyle: Well, you do don't you? No, I know we're both very monogamous people. But, you've been on a few dates with a few people and some have worked out and some don't and you have your little pool of favorites and you're choosing between one or two and you're going on one last date for each of them before you make your decision as Long Island's hottest Bachelorette. And you come across during your date a situation that isn't wholly accessible, and suddenly you and your date feel awkward because even though you explained your disability to them and they clearly accept you as a person and all that good stuff, this would be their first time experiencing how disability really impacts your daily life. because seeing you roll around in a wheelchair as it affects your daily life is no big deal that's something you've already figured out. I can't walk therefore I use this thing to move around. But, seeing you navigate an issue in real time could prove jarring to someone who's never experienced it before, so I guess what I'm asking is what are your experiences with that? they must have happened at some point.

Emily: Well to be totally honest, I didn't go on a whole heck of a lot of dates from the people that I talked to on different sites and apps because in a lot of cases it didn't click for reasons other than disability related issues, you know? And then, when you meet someone in person and you start dating them that way then they just know already so they are aware on some level, they know me on some level which is a little bit different then if you're meeting me because you're connected with me on the Internet or something like that. but regardless, I'll give a person some leeway, I mean it's going to be a deal-breaker if you immediately ask ridiculously inappropriate questions in rapid succession or just generally make me feel uncomfortable or treat me like my disability is some kind of novelty or I'm so adorable, like "ooh look, she's so cute, I'm gonna pat her on the head!" but people get leeway from me because I don't think that you can understand everything about a person just from meeting a couple times regardless.

Kyle: No of course not. So you do give them a little bit of slack?

Emily: Yeah and even though your disability is not visible in the same way that mine is I mean don't you also have to have the conversations with the people you're dating at some point about what you can and cannot do or how your disability does it doesn't affect you?

Kyle: Yes, but it's very very quick and painless. So let me talk about myself, I've sort of been interviewing you this whole time and that wasn't intentional, but I have only ever dated one able-bodied person. And that wasn't by choice, it wasn't like I was looking for one or the other, it was just that most people I know were disabled so most of the people I've dated are also disabled, you know how it goes. But, with that one person it just sort of came up organically. I think we were talking about swimming or bike riding or some other mundane nonsense I can't do, and I was just like "oh, I can't do it", and she said "well, I'll teach you" and I was like "no, no you won't. You can't, I promise." And she asked why and I was like "oh, 'cause I have CP" and

she's like "no you don't, I know what that is, there's no way you have that, you're too--I've seen you." and I was like "no, I know you know what it is, I know you've probably heard of it before, but I do have it and I have a very mild case of it, so I don't 'look like CP' so to speak." I would actually find out later that most cases where people have CP do in fact look like me and are as mild as me most cases are, but I didn't know that at the time so it was a bit of a revelation for her, but at the same time at that point she had already known me and knew that it was nothing. It was nothing. We didn't do things that I couldn't do. That was just that. There were a handful of times where my disability would come up like I would get tired before she would when we would walk somewhere or walking downstairs or something, and for some reason she really liked to tie my shoes, because she never understood that I could bend down without trouble I guess when I bent down it looked funny.

Emily: What?!

Kyle: Yeah I swear to god. It wasn't out of pity, I guess I just looked like I was in pain when I bent over to tie my shoes.

Emily: I've seen you tie your shoes, you do it on the floor!

Kyle: I know.

Emily: Very interesting fun fact I just learned.

Kyle: No but that was just her thing, that was just her way of helping. I mean, I'm not giving her enough credit she help whenever I ask him whenever she felt like she could, and it was always well-intentioned and deserved. But, I guess what I'm trying to get at is that's because this person knew me and when she learned I had CP some of the first thing she did was brush it off like it was a non-issue because it was, and only became concerned about it when it became an issue at which point she was more than willing to learn everything she could do in that moment to make my life easier. So really, I only had to mention it once and everything from there on was a learning experience that because she already liked me, was more than willing and happy to learn.

Emily: I think that you've definitely had a much easier experience than I have in that sense.

Kyle: Yeah.

Emily: But also, it's so much different when you meet someone in person for the first time instead of meeting someone online and then meeting them in person Kama there's less of a chance for you to premeditate how you're going to handle questions about your disability until for me when I was talking to someone online I would say "oh, you can ask me any questions you want and I hope that it's not a deal-breaker and blah blah blah", and I was almost apologetic for myself and who I am, but in person I'm a little bit more [emphatically] "HI, I'M EMILY, AND I'M IN A WHEELCHAIR AND YOU'RE GONNA DEAL WITH IT." So it's so interesting how things go so differently for me, whereas for you it's mostly a non-issue, for me I see it come up in even little things like "oh hey, did you make sure that the restaurant that we're gonna go to is

wheelchair accessible?" and I feel so awkward saying that when you're trying to plan a date and trying to be all cute but it is part of my reality.

Kyle: yeah, but after a while you don't have to ask that anymore. I mean, the person will learn to know you. I mean, you might out of habit.

Emily: Yeah, I hope.

Kyle: but to your point, even when you date within disability, like the girl I'm dating now has CP like me but there are things that you just have to learn no matter who it is. You have to learn about your partner and you have to learn about what they need, if it's disability or not, and when I--not so much with my current girlfriend--but when I've dated people with CP before, there have been many different ways that CP has shown itself that I had to learn about them that I couldn't believe that they went through because I didn't, and vice versa. so when it comes to dating and disability, I think communication is really just the best part, or at least the most important part. It makes things easy, whether or not your partner is disabled.

Emily: yeah, all dating is about learning about who you're with, and so for me right now with the person that I'm dating as much as there's a learning curve because I'm trying to explain different things about my disability to him because he doesn't have a disability, there's a learning curve for me about him and that's just a normal part of dating and so I think in a way this transitions over to the other topic that we really wanted to focus on which is how dating and sex with a disability is not really a this overly complex and incredibly difficult thing that everyone seems to think it is. I think we're always put on this spectrum where we are either infants who don't have sex or we are hyper-sexual and fetishized.

Kyle: but really most of us exist in between. I want to say all of us, the reason I said most of us is because some of us are asexual, but really there are no more of us that are asexual than the rest of the general population so it's safe enough to say "all", because we're just like everyone else and I think that that sort of an overarching theme of the show but things like this are things that are sort of important to talk about, so in regards to sex, I have CP. That means that the muscles in my legs are ridiculous and just do what they feel like most of the time, and I pretend like I can walk by constantly falling forward and relying on forward momentum to propel my body forward. [Emily laughs] but that's not how normal people walk. I promise. And so, as you can imagine, when the time for that comes, it's hilarious. There's no other way to describe it. It's really funny, and if it wasn't pornographic I'd say that you should all see it, but really it's a freak show, use your imagination it's exactly what you think it is. [Emily laughs]

Emily: Yeah, we'll save the detailed descriptions but needless to say, and I think it's fair to say this for both of us that our bodies do work in different ways and so when sex comes up it is a matter of figuring out how your body works and how your body works in tandem with your partner and again that's the same for anybody, disability or not. Maybe disability and a few extra challenges, I mean I know it definitely does in my case. [Kyle interrupts: Yeah, it does] But it's a matter of being creative.

Kyle: Yeah, and how do you fix that? You just have more of it, right? So it's a good problem to have if you're with somebody who's willing to make it work with you. Like you said, I really don't think it's too much different, but I do think that where it is different is not the act itself, but I think that when you are disabled and also if your partner is disabled as in my case, there is this extra level of patience that you have to have. Because, you know, if you're dating someone able-bodied they have to be patient with you, but if you're dating someone with a disability, then you have to each be patient with each other. Not to say that able-bodied people don't also have to be patient with each other, but there is this certain extra. Disabled people don't have those stereotypical movie sex scenes, I mean no one does, but able-bodied people can pretend to act when out every once in awhile, we can't. And, it takes time and it takes effort and it takes patience, and the only way to do it is to do it, and like I said before if you are with a partner who's willing to learn with you it's a really good problem to have, with the most excellent solution in the world. But, there's something about getting there that feels like a bit of an achievement, and when you do it feels really good. The journey there is slightly more steep for people like us I imagine.

Emily: but that's also not to say that it's so massively great and inspiring achievement when people who are disabled have sex all that is to say is that you climbed over a few extra challenges--winky face--and figured it out.

Kyle: No, no no no... I'm actually glad you said that, I didn't want to make it sound like it's this big deal because that's the point, it's not. It's just a slightly bigger deal than when able-bodied people do it. For example if your two able-bodied people I'm willing to bet that when you do it you don't look at your partner and go "huh". But we do! And it's just one of those things, and it sort of brings you closer to your partner. Not in a romantic way, but more in a way that says "I've extended this effort to figure you out, and you've done the same for me, it really--in complete seriousness--it shows character that for an abled person, you'd need to do something more, I guess I'd say a bigger deal than just have sex. Much like making a dating profile and setting your profile picture to you in a wheelchair, when you have sex with a disabled person, whether or not you are one, they have a dozen dials going on in their head "gauging" how you're doing, not dealing with the actual act but how you're handling it. Not because it's different, but because it can be different. And when it becomes different, how you approach that, and it doesn't take much effort to do it right, in fact I would say it takes more effort to screw it up, but much like the unwanted help episode, the best thing I think you can do is ask if such a thing happens.

Emily: I totally agree with you. And, it makes for some funny memories! "Oh, not here, there. Oh, don't do that, do this, oh oh ow, nope, that's not working, you know?"

Kyle: Yeah, but that's my point, there's abled couples who don't have that! I mean I'm sure if they're trying something new they might run into that but we have it from the get-go. There's no running away from it, it just happens. It's not a roadblock but it is a hurdle that you just have to overcome, and it's a pretty good feeling when you're with someone that's willing to do it with you. Metaphorically and literally. [Emily laughs] No I'm serious! Because it sort of solidifies whatever relationship you have with them, and also you just had sex. It's a win-win!

Emily: Totally winning situation, no matter how you look at it. And also the act of having sex is--I mean, I hate to sound so clinical--but it is a good way to gauge how your partner feels about disability and about your body in general. Also, a way to gauge not their open-mindedness so much as their willingness to be flexible, and again literally and figuratively, but what I really mean there is not necessarily defining sex in a traditional sense. So, people think sex equals intercourse and sure, yes, but there are so many other forms of self-expression and sexual expression and when it comes to having a disability, we often refer to sex in ways that might mean something different than what people traditionally consider. But that doesn't make it any less intimate or important or meaningful.

Kyle: Yeah, I mean there's a reason why they call it oral sex and not oral grocery shopping, right? That's sort of what you're saying. [Emily laughs]

Emily: I meeeean... yes?

Kyle: I have a confession. When I say that word I do generally mean intercourse but obviously there's many ways you can define the word "sex", and you should define it whatever you feel most comfortable with that is also within your ability level. and, sometimes it can be whatever it is you need it to be, man. as long as it's consensual and you're both happy, do whatever you want.

Emily: Consensual is a big one.

Kyle: I feel like we don't have to say that but I feel like we probably should.

Emily: Yeah, no I think it's important. Especially because when it comes to disability, because there is a higher rate of rape and sexual abuse unfortunately.

Kyle: Yeah, very unfortunately. The most unfortunately.

Emily: But our goal is really to focus on debunking the taboo around dating and sex and disability, and as far as I'm concerned, most of my dating and sex stories are just about as ridiculous as anyone else's I've heard, disabled or not.

Kyle: That's the point, I mean the only thing being disabled does to sex make it funnier, and slightly more painful. But other than that--I'm saying that facetiously--but it's really not that big a deal and I think that that's the point we're both trying to make is that although it adds its own set of hurdles, they're not that hard to overcome and if you have a partner that's willing to overcome them with you then they're hardly hurdles at all. And, you're both better in the long run for it, and you the more you practice, the better at it you'll be. Both in [sic] a growing standpoint and a physical standpoint.

Emily: Oh it's totally trial and error. 100% just making mistakes and failing miserably and getting back up and doing it again the next day. And it's harder as someone who is disabled because people are... [Kyle interrupts: We don't move the same]

Emily: ...Yeah and people are judgemental too, you really can't escape that, there's absolutely no escaping it. But every once in awhile, you find someone who will accept that you have a disability whether it's visible or not and you'll find someone who might see a scar on your body from surgery that people don't normally see or who might realize the ways you which you cannot do things that they always expected a partner to be able to do, and in those moments you have to find the happy medium and the in between and just accept each other as you are. And it's so cheesy--it's SO cheesy--but it's so true that as much as disability and dating comes with its own extra set of struggles, it's really so much like anyone else.

Kyle: Yeah, I mean I think if there's one thing that we want to have our listeners take away is that sex, dating and disability is 90% sex and dating and 10% disability. And that 10% is sitting right there on top of all the other nonsense that comes with it and... [Emily interrupts]: I'm sorry but there have been so many innuendos I just could not keep my mouth shut anymore.

Kyle: Go on.

Emily: On top. Comes with it.

Kyle: There you go. Are you happy?

Emily: Are we allowed [to say that?]

Kyle: Yeah, we're not allowed to curse but were allowed to say anything else.

Emily: Great because I've been waiting to say that this whole episode!

Kyle: Cool. And as much as it is "a thing", it is not "a thing". The only people who will ever see how much of "a thing" it is is you and your partner who will, if you are a good match, figure it out and it's the best practice of something you'll ever deal with.

Emily: And, it isn't nobody else's place to judge your relationship, no one's. It is your business, OR, lack of relationship if you are asexual. If you are not in a relationship. [Kyle interrupts]: Well then, don't listen to this episode!

Emily: No seriously! I think it's totally fair for you to talk about it!

Kyle: Yeah, I was just being facetious.

Emily: No I know, you just like to be silly.

Kyle: Mhm.

Emily: But it's definitely difficult because often people will judge me and assume that because I use a wheelchair I should be dating someone who uses a wheelchair, or how inspirational it is that somebody able-bodied would date me. And, as far as I'm concerned, I'm going to date you I'm going to date. I mean, someone said to me when I was with my ex who used a wheelchair,

they saw us sitting in front of the Lincoln Memorial, and I had my head on his shoulder, and they came up and tapped us on our shoulders and said "I just want you to know that you are cavity-inducingly cute, and you just made my night!" And I was so irritated by that because plenty of other people were getting all snuggly snuggly in front of Abe Lincoln and no one else got that comment, you know. [Kyle interrupts]: Yeah there's plenty of people way cuter than you guys!

Emily: Seriously! We were not that adorable... we were kind of adorable.

Kyle: To your point though, there's a certain--you've said it off the record to me enough times. Not that you hope or wish--but that it was easier in some way or another to date someone who uses a wheelchair because there are things that they just get, and I always say to you that it doesn't matter. That's more of a thing of timing, because a person who uses a wheelchair from birth we'll just know because they've had their whole life to know. But somebody who doesn't have to spend some amount of time before they know it. But once they know, I would say that they would know as much. I will say that my current girlfriend has CP just like me but that's not why I picked her. And the only benefit that that by itself gets me is that I don't have to explain the weird pains I feel sometimes. But that's it. There's very little benefit from seeking out a partner who has your set of disabilities. If that's what you want to do, then go ahead but I promise you you're not going to get much out of it if that's the only thing you're looking for.

Emily: I agree, I agree. And I think before we get too cheesy that we have to start playing a love song or something...

Kyle: Let's not.

Emily: We should probably wrap up this episode, and you know, speaking of wrapping things up...

Kyle: Yes, practice safe sex, kids. Please.

Emily: So glad that we had that PSA. And on that note, once again: I'm Emily Ladau

Kyle: I'm Kyle Khachadurian

Emily: And you just sat through another episode of The Accessible Stall!

Kyle: Bye guys.

Emily: Bye, thanks for listening!