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Forced marriage

[Respond](#) is an organisation which aims to lessen the effect of trauma and abuse on people with learning disabilities (including those who may also be autistic), their families and supporters. In 2015 we launched the '[My Life, My Marriage](#)' project, focussing on people with learning disabilities who have experienced or may be forced into marriage.

The project came about after we noticed that some of the people with learning disabilities that we were supporting were in relationships, where the behaviours of the partner or the family raised questions of concern. [Statistics from 2017 by the Forced Marriage Unit](#) show that in that year 125 people with a learning disability received support or advice on forced marriage.

Forced marriage

The [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#) made it a criminal offence in England, Wales and Scotland to force someone to marry (in Northern Ireland it is [under separate legislation](#)).

A forced marriage is when two people get married and one of them or both of them have not agreed to this and have not given their consent

An arranged marriage is very different from a forced marriage. An arranged marriage means that family and friends help a person to find someone to marry, introduce them and give support. The person agrees to this and gives consent to marry.

From our experience there can be several reasons why parents and families coerce or force a family member with a learning disability into marriage:

- having a learning disability can make the person and their family feel different from others, so getting married may feel like it makes the person the same as everyone else
- families believe that religion or family honour means that everyone has to get married

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- parents are worried about the future when they age, and want to make sure that their family member, and them as well, are looked after in the family home
- the person and their family are worried about the sexual feelings that they are having or about sexual things they are doing without being married.

My Life, My Marriage

The project started off recognising that forced marriage amongst people with learning disability is a subject that very few spoke about. Initially we aimed to raise awareness within the community and provide training to professionals about the potential warning signs to look out for, highlighting how forced marriage can present differently with a person with learning disabilities.

The project provides training to professionals and community members such as imams and parents and has been highlighted at large conferences, partnered with the Forced Marriage Unit. We also worked with Nottingham University on a research piece which also included the development of a [practice guidance toolkit for assessing capacity to consent to marriage](#).

We started receiving requests to work with clients who, following a capacity assessment, were found to have gaps in their knowledge and understanding of sex and relationships. Respond staff have created a psycho-educational programme which covers a range of subjects:

- trust and safety
- different relationships
- consent, choice and rape
- learning to identify what is a healthy sexual relationship
- marriage, sex and consent – cultural perspectives
- sexual fantasies
- contraception
- procreation - pregnancy, childbirth, babies etc
- concept of shame and honour, and cultural appropriateness and faith sensibility

We offer a bespoke programme which builds the client's knowledge and understanding on subjects that they need support with, and it also operates as an extended assessment where their progress is monitored and recommendations made.

Future developments

We need to continue to raise awareness within communities as families are suffering in silence due to taboos – our referrals do not reflect the need. Challenges exist in gaining trust within communities and we aim to tackle this by:

- offering training to professionals
- develop a more cohesive psycho-educational program that can be implemented in faith-based settings to meet the spiritual needs of clients

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- work more closely with school to address the issue at an earlier stage
- working with parents within their communities.

We have noticed the need for easy read materials or resources to improve understanding and awareness and are presently working with [CHANGE People](#) to create an up to date easy-read leaflet about forced marriage for people with learning disabilities. We are also in discussion with [BILD](#) to create a tool-kit about healthy relationships through the lens of culture and faith, for parents to use with their child or young person.

Lastly due to the complexities of the capacity assessment we have created an easy/ simpler version for professional that they can use with families – this will be available on the Respond website soon. We see these pieces of work as the legacies left far beyond the scope of the project.

Case study

Adam (not his real name) is 22 and his ethnic origin is Pakistani. Adam came to the attention of social services after he had been talking to staff about going away and having a big party. When he was asked more about the party Adam informed staff that his parents had shown him a picture of his future wife. Adam was assessed and it was felt he lacked capacity to consent to marriage, at which point we were asked to work with him.

We started off by going through basic anatomy with Adam and moving on to more detail, but as the sessions progressed it seemed that some fairly innocent images, such as two people kissing, would unsettle him. We also discussed life after marriage, such as where his wife would sleep. Adam did not fully understand that as a couple they may be sharing a bed – his response was that his wife would have to sleep somewhere else, and the discussion made him anxious.

As he weeks progressed I covered other topics such as:

- different types of relationships
- bodily fluids
- babies and where they come from
- contraception
- good and bad touch.

We were unable to fully discuss some of the topics with Adam as he became quite distressed during the sessions. When our sessions were finished we recommended that Adam receive more support, and that at present he lacked capacity to consent to marriage. We are aware that the social services are still working with the family to support them through this period.

Further information

[The National Autistic Society – Sex education and puberty](#)