



ELLEN MERKER

Helping disabled adults have healthy relationships

"People with disabilities are just like the rest of us. They want to be in relationships. They want connections, and sometimes that means they want sex," says Ellen Merker, owner of Heart Consulting in Madison. "When we assume that they don't want sex it only puts them at higher risk."

This idea drives Merker forward every day. After receiving her master's degree in rehabilitation psychology and gaining experience working with developmentally disabled clients as a case manager, Merker found a reason to take a leap and follow this passion. It began when a client was reprimanded at work for asking a coworker about sex.

As Merker began researching sex education for adults with disabilities, she realized there were no resources to help her. It opened her eyes to the fact that many of her developmentally disabled clients were survivors of sexual assault or engaging in risky dating behaviors.

Merker says that often special education teachers are discouraged from talking about sex and dating, and parents are unsure of how to bring up the subject. "But if [people] don't know the proper terms and then they are sexually assaulted, how do they report? How do they know to say no? And when is it okay to say yes?" Merker asks.

She called a friend at the Rape Crisis Center to pitch an idea for a workshop, which ran for three years, for women with developmental disabilities to help them understand healthy relationships.

Merker ultimately started her own company, Heart Consulting, and began seeing clients in February 2018, coaching them on things like consent and safe touching. In just a few months she was at capacity, a testimonial to the need for this service in our community.

In 2019 Merker plans to start a women's empowerment group for people with disabilities and expand Heart Consulting's services to the Milwaukee area.

She'll also focus on the big picture—impacting policy at the state and local levels. Making sure people with disabilities are included in the conversation when bills are introduced about teen dating violence or comprehensive sex education is critical, she says.

Ultimately, she wants to change attitudes about disability and sex. And in only a short time, she's proven that change can start with just one person.

—Emily Leas