

Thinking About Responsibility

Responsibility is an interesting concept to consider in relationship to people with disability who spend all or much of their time within the service system. *Responsibility* is about having accountability for one's actions, things or thoughts. However, responsibility does not exist in a vacuum but is strongly associated with liberty and dignity.

Quality in Practice

Liberty, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is:

the quality or state of being free; the power to do as one pleases; freedom from physical restraint; freedom from arbitrary or despotic control; the positive enjoyment of various social, political, or economic rights and privileges; the power of choice.

While **dignity** is defined as:

the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed.

The question that comes to mind then is to contemplate the relationship between these concepts. What is the impact of having a lot or a little of one on the ability to have the others? If we have little liberty, how responsible can we really be? If we have little liberty or responsibility, how much dignity can we hold?

It is widely believed that the more liberty one experiences, the more responsibility one can handle, leading to greater dignity. While we might like for people to show evidence of greater responsibility before they enjoy greater liberties, that is not in fact how it happens.

- A person cannot prove that he can handle money without having the money to handle. And he probably will need to make at least one mistake before really learning how to be responsible with his money.
- Someone cannot prove that she can have a relationship with someone not paid to be with her, until she has that relationship with someone not paid to be with her. And she might lose a friendship or two before learning to be responsible and reciprocal with her friends.

Most of us grow up being given more and more liberty in exchange for showing more responsibility. And we learn from our mistakes, mostly learning how to be more responsible, and the amount of dignity we hold increases along the way.

Many people with disability, especially those segregated in institutions, group homes, day programs and special education classes, have never been given the opportunity to experience liberty or to learn responsibility. Go ahead and reread the definition above and think about the people you serve and how many of them experience liberty. Some of our service models have led to a decrease in the dignity we afford people with disability.

Our job then is to increase liberty for each person we support, allowing them to learn responsibility and build a dignified life. The good news is that we have taken so much liberty away from people that we can find unlimited ways to do this:

- have people answer their own phones
- support people to get cell phones
- involve people in hiring/firing decisions
- involve people in policy writing
- let people who want to stay alone do so, for some amount of time and increase the time as it works out well
- encourage people to try new things
- give people their money
- have people document for themselves, even if on tape
- encourage people to take classes in subjects they love
- stop continuing guardianships and instead assist people to write wills, powers of attorney or other legal documents that will protect them in case of emergency
- make sure people have their own space and their own things with their own keys
- and ...