

Dignity of Risk

Anyone who leads a life of dignity and meaning takes risks. Each of us, in the pursuit of jobs, our personal and romantic relationships, our leisure activities, and our adventure has stepped into the unknown and risked failure, rejection, and even our physical well-being. Anything any of us have ever accomplished has come from some level of risk-taking. The benefits of succeeding in these situations, or from learning from our mistakes, are a crucial element in our development as independent people.

People who work and live with individuals with disabilities- usually with the best of intentions- often try to eliminate all of the risks and prevent any opportunities for failure in these individuals' lives. Some will even go to great lengths to prevent even minor failure, such as not allowing an individual with a developmental disability to lose at a minor board game. What can result is a life where an individual has never been tested, has never had the opportunity to grow, has never experienced the satisfaction of achieving something that was not certain to be achieved from the beginning.

Allowing individuals to take risks and step into the unknown is part and parcel with treating them as dignified adults. This is not equivalent to encouraging recklessness; allowing risk does not mean being unsafe or setting people up to fail. Rather, by supporting individuals in prudent risk-taking, and utilizing the wealth of teaching opportunities it unearths, we can bring meaning into peoples' lives. Providing them with the opportunity to try new things, test their limits, and discover capabilities they never knew they had will help them to achieve goals that enrich their lives.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if you were never allowed to take a risk, if others made all of your decisions for you, if others, not you, had the last word on what you were capable of. You certainly wouldn't deserve such a life; nor do the people we support.