



“Love means  
nothing  
in tennis,  
but it’s  
everything  
in life.”

— Author Unknown



## casa’s support plans - part three

*This year we are discussing the components of Casa’s Support Plans, highlighting one every month. Please take this opportunity to learn more about these plans and the impact they have on our residents. Our subject this month is **ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**.*

What do romantic crushes at Casa de Amma and the weather in Texas have in common? They both change daily and are unpredictable! Because we support residents whose emotional and developmental maturity varies greatly, each person is on a continuing spectrum of how they perceive, and what they want, from their romantic relationships. No matter if they find themselves sitting next to a ‘cute friend’ at dinner or getting engaged, all scenarios have one thing in common — everyone deserves to be listened to and supported through the delicate journey of a romantic interest.

At Casa we have had relationships that lasted all of ten minutes, as well as marriage. We believe the validity of a relationship isn’t measured by the duration, but by how each has helped one another mature and grow such as learning to be kind, reciprocal, and how to communicate feelings and desires. Our philosophy differs from some other programs throughout the country. Some have policies where relationships and intimacy are strictly forbidden, while at others there is an anything-and-everything goes attitude with little or no staff involvement. Casa’s perspective balances the reality that our residents are adults while also taking into consideration their vulnerabilities, desires, and disability related challenges. We do this by providing an engaging environment where residents feel comfortable discussing their relationships while making use of staff for feedback and support whether it’s for casual dating or popping the ‘big question’. We have developed a detailed questionnaire our staff uses to ‘discreetly’ guide discussions when residents want to be in a relationship which identifies their values, ethics, possible areas of vulnerability for abuse, the in’s and out’s of dating and how it works, and remembering their manners throughout the process. At the end of the day the residents are independently able to make their own decisions and our position is to support them as much as possible, and help them learn and grow from every relational opportunity.

## . . . in their own words

*We asked a few of our residents how staff has been helpful and how they have supported them with their relationships:*

“Staff has helped me communicate with my girlfriend. They also have helped me plan anniversary dinners. Staff are always there when I need help from them.” - Adam



“I’ve dated my boyfriend Will for seven years and he means a lot to me. I like how staff created Casa de Amore, Casa’s Valentine’s Day Dinner and Dance. It’s a lot of fun and a great way to celebrate. The staff has also helped me talk to him when we aren’t getting along or need to discuss something serious.” - Ellen



“Relationships are very important to me and the staff at Casa has helped me a lot in working through my feelings. I’m so thankful I have the staff to help me with all my relationship ups and downs!” - Kristen

“I’ve dated Jeremy for eight years and it’s been awesome. We go shopping and have fun together. Staff has helped us with our plans and help us communicate with each other. Sometimes I have trouble communicating with him and staff is always there to help me say what I need to in a calmer and nicer way.”

- Ashley





# important words for anyone supporting adults with disabilities

Over the coming months Casa de Amma Executive's Director Aaron Vorell, will share his thoughts on the importance of **Living, Learning** and **Belonging** and explain why they are the core values for anyone supporting adults with disabilities.  
In this issue: **Part One of LIVING.**

## — INTRO

"It's sort of like dancing!" A few years back I heard this description used to explain the sometimes, precarious relationship between support staff and adults with developmental or intellectual disabilities. The adult with disabilities went on to explain that "the dance" was learning how to work together and avoid getting their toes stepped on in the process. I thought this was a very insightful and illustrative way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and support staff. Just like in dancing, each partner needs to know who is leading, where their steps are supposed to go, and when the dance should end. Done without proper communication and respect, it will likely end in frustration for both!

For most of us who work in a support role with adults with I/DD (Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities) we didn't get into the field (or stay in it!) for the money. We didn't do it for the flexible schedule or the benefits. We did it because we genuinely want to help others and make a difference. That being said, it's imperative we remember that proper motives don't always lead to effective work. We can start off on a journey with a genuine and sincere desire to get to a specific destination, but without a clear road map in mind, we may never arrive. As we work with our clients and residents in various settings, I propose we closely consider the three values of Living, Learning & Belonging so our work can be person-centered, respectful and successful.

## — LIVING

It has been said often that "Life is what you make it." This statement is often used to remind us that we can't just let life happen to us, but that we should pro-actively seek out opportunities and make the most of every day we are alive. But let's consider how differently this comment could apply to a few people. If I say, "Life is what you make it" to my seven year old daughter who is worried about not getting a role in her school play, I am likely encouraging her to do her best and trust that good results to follow. Then if I say to a forty-five year old on the verge of a career change and cross country relocation, "Your life is what you make it" — the context is much broader with much more significant implications. Even more to that point, when my grandmother finds out she likely has incurable cancer and is weighing the choice of aggressive chemotherapy or spending her remaining days without difficult treatment, the concept of "Life is what you make it" takes on a whole new level of importance and consequence.

The most important word in this statement is the "YOU." The question comes down to how big is your YOU? When we say life is what you make of it — the YOU depends on the amount of choice, control, power and assertion the individual has. The size of your YOU is the amount of influence you yield over your life. Less YOU, less choice — more YOU, more choice. The third grader can choose how much time they will put in for the plays' rehearsal and what part they will try out for, but little more than that. The forty-five year old has multiple jobs, living and family options, but with each comes a higher level of complexity. The grandmother who is faced with decisions of life and death has enormous influence on how the rest of her life will go.

Consider for a moment, what are some important life choices you have made in the last five years. Comparatively, what are some life choices those with disabilities have made in the last five years? What process do you go through when you make big life choices — do you have people you consult, people you ask questions of, people you must get permission and acceptance from? Now compare that to adults with I/DD. Who do they have to consult with? Do they have trusted people to ask questions of, who must they get permission and acceptance from? Some we support have to get permission just to access their own money, change their schedule or may even need a written agreement to move rooms. Your YOU is big, while all too often theirs is so small.

When we think about having a good life we usually we go straight to the big things such as career, homes, relationships, retirement, dreams, etc. We take for granted the smaller things we have complete choice over such as, where you live, who you live with, how you maintain your family relationships, who you spend time with, where you eat, what you eat, where you work, what you do when you are off work, where you vacation, what you wear, what you bring with you into the community, what you watch on TV, and so on and so on.

So, what does LIVING mean? I propose it should be understood as ***"The ability to make empowered choices that fit within the hopes, desires and preferences of the individual. Living a life that is valued by the person and consistent with their ideas of a meaningful life."*** I'm sure this isn't some ground-breaking revelation I've just offered but I want to ask, according to this definition, how many of those you know with I/DD are truly living? I have toured 'homes' of adults with disabilities that were very much alive; but in talking to those adults I realized they had very little life. Options were limited, opportunities were almost nonexistent and choices for the future were left to those who 'knew better'.

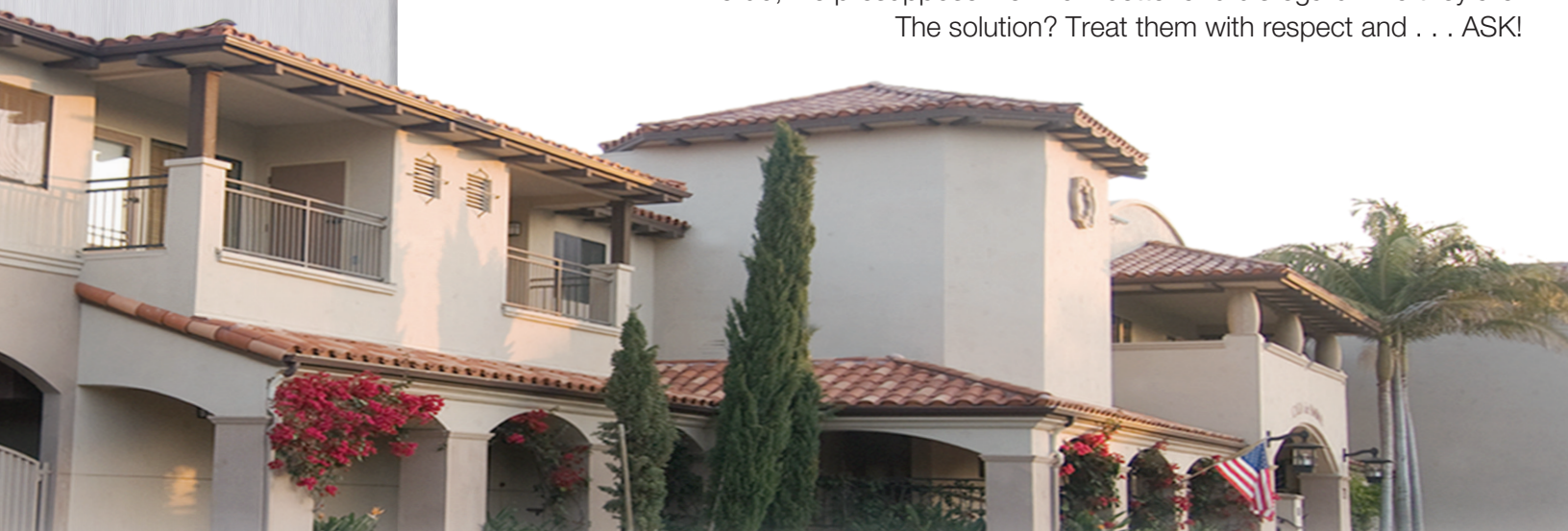
This scenario generally isn't the fault of the program or the staff, it can occur over time unless there is a conscious and attentive focus on this important issue. With staff members who care and have seen problematic outcomes of personal choice, we sometimes feel like we 'know better'. It's true that we may know better how to write a resume, how to create a budget, how to eat healthy — but we don't have a better knowledge of what that person values, what's important to them, and what they think 'living' means. When we assume we do, we presuppose we know better and disregard who they are. The solution? Treat them with respect and . . . ASK!

**"The question  
comes down  
to how big is  
your YOU?"**

**When we say  
life is what you  
make of it —  
the YOU  
depends on  
the amount  
of choice,  
control, power  
and  
assertion the  
individual has.**

**The size of  
your YOU  
is the amount  
of influence  
you yield  
over your life.**

**Less YOU,  
less choice —  
more YOU,  
more choice."**



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