

Defining Disabilities

Disabilities can be defined according to the impairment experienced by the individual. But remember, defining or categorising a disability should only happen with the aim of enabling a person rather than discriminating against them.

Physical Disability

Physical disability refers to damage to muscles, nerves, skin, or bones that leads to difficulties in moving about, in performing activities of daily living. Some examples of physical disabilities include:

- **Cerebral palsy** - resulting from damage to the brain (often during birth) that causes muscle incoordination.
- **Quadriplegia** - a substantial loss of function in all four limbs.
- **Paraplegia** - a substantial loss of function in the lower part of the body.
- **Hemiplegia** - a substantial loss of function on one side of the body (arm and leg), often due to a stroke or as a result of epilepsy.
- **Post-Polio Paralysis** - weaknesses in some muscles, and under-development of some limbs.

Assistive devices are very important tools that are used by people with physical disabilities to overcome barriers, for example wheelchairs, walking frames, crutches, orthotics and prosthetics, communication devices such as communication boards and specialised computers, and adjustments to motor vehicles. People with severe physical disabilities in addition often require assistance in the form of personal assistants and/or service dogs to enable them to live independent lives.

Visual Disability

“Blind” refers to the total loss of eyesight. Blind persons might experience difficulty in moving around and knowing where things are, doing some activities of daily living, writing, reading and following visual signs or commands. The most important enabling mechanisms for people who are blind are:

- **Independence training** (orientation and mobility skills training)
- **Literacy training** (learning to read and write using Braille)
- **Assistive devices** such as a white cane, Braille writing tools, specialised computers
- **Personal assistance** in the form of guide dogs and/or personal assistants to assist with reading, driving etc.
- **Access to reading materials** in Braille and/or audio-cassette.

“Low vision” or “visual disability” is more accurate for people who have some degree of sight, but who have for example a limited range of sight and focus that cannot easily be corrected with spectacles, who are squint (their eyes do not focus together), who need special lighting to be able to see, who have blurred vision (e.g. as a result of cataracts or brain injury), or who have tunnel vision. They usually require very specialised spectacles, Braille or large print, and other equipment to assist them to compensate for their low vision.

Hearing Disability

Hearing loss may be mild, severe or total. Children may be born Deaf, or people might become Deaf later in life. Hearing loss usually results in difficulties in learning a spoken language, following verbal instructions, making friends in the neighbourhood, behavioural problems due to frustration, accidents because warning signs were not heard. The first language of Deaf South Africans is South African Sign Language, which may have different dialects depending on where the person lives.

Hearing aids can assist people who are hard of hearing to communicate easier with the hearing world. Interpreters are essential to break down communication barriers between the Deaf community and the hearing world.

Mental Disability

Mental disabilities include cognitive, psychiatric and learning disabilities as well as physical head trauma. Particular attention needs to be given to the right of people with mental disabilities to advocate for their own rights, and not to always be ‘spoken for’.

Intellectual Disability

People with intellectual disabilities find it difficult to learn and retain new information, and often to adapt to new situations. Children with intellectual disabilities often develop slower than their peers and require additional support to develop. One example of intellectual disability is Down Syndrome. Augmentative and Alternative communication (AAC) strategies are essential communication tools for people with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, and include special communication boards, adapted computers, etc.

Psychiatric Disability

People living with a psychiatric or mental illness (who often prefer calling themselves users and survivors of psychiatry) often experience difficulties in perceiving or interpreting reality, coping with some aspects of daily life, forming and maintaining relationships, coping with difficult feelings, fears and anxieties, or often see and hear things that do not exist.

Enabling mechanisms include medication, counselling and peer support, family support and personal assistance to enable the person with a chronic psychiatric disability to live independently in the community. Perhaps the most enabling mechanism for users of psychiatry is positive and non-discriminatory attitudes from society.

Epilepsy

A seizure is an episode caused by a sudden disturbance in the brain. If seizures are recurrent, it is called a seizure disorder or epilepsy. Seizures are usually controlled with medication. Epilepsy per se is not a disability, but often causes physical and/or mental disabilities. People living with epilepsy can, for example, not obtain a driver's licence unless they have been free from any seizures for a period of three years.

Albinism

Albinism per se is also not a disability. It is an inherited condition where a person is unable to produce normal colouring of the skin, hair and eyes (lack of pigment). People with albinism have common features such as a very light and pale skin, white or sand-coloured hair and very light brown or blue eyes. The absence of pigmentation makes a person with albinism very sensitive to the sun.

People with albinism have a normal lifespan and normal intelligence, but often develop visual disabilities that impact on their levels of participation. The most enabling mechanisms for people with albinism are:

- Positive attitudes from peers and the community
- Assistive devices such as large print materials, spectacles, specialised equipment
- Protective clothing and medication such as creams that protect their skin against the sun

Source: Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA), Pocket Guide On Disability Equity – An empowerment tool

