

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, and bones that leads to difficulties in moving about, in performing activities of daily living. Some examples of physical disabilities include cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, paraplegia, and post-polio paralysis.

People with physical disabilities may make use of assistive devices for example wheelchairs, crutches, orthotics, prosthetics, or communication devices. In addition, they may 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. They may make use of assistance devices such as specialised computers, Braille writing tools, and make use of an assistant or guide dog.

Low vision or visual disability is more accurate for people who have some degree of sight, but

who have a limited range of sight and focus that cannot easily be corrected. They may need special lighting to be able to see, have blurred vision (e.g. as a result of cataracts or brain injury), or 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, or 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 can be 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.

Can mental illness be classified as a 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 such as medication,

counselling and peer support, family support, and personal assistance can enable the person with a chronic psychiatric illness to live independently in the community.

Recognising mental illness in children

Children can display certain behaviours that may indicate some form of mental illness such as drastic changes in school performances, inability to cope with problems and activities, frequent complaints of physical ailments, hallucinations, hearing voices that are not there, extreme changes to personality and behaviour such as anger or aggressive behaviour, thoughts of death, loss of interest in activities and friends.

Mental illness can be hereditary or caused by a psychological trauma such as loss, stress, or abuse. If you are concerned that a loved one has a mental illness consult with a doctor.

Responding to people with disabilities

The best response towards people living with a disability is a positive and non-discriminatory attitude. Most people with disabilities prefer to be treated the same as everyone else. It's important to note the individual behind the disability, take your cue from them – they will ask for help if they need it or choose to speak of it if they want to.

