Different types of disabilities

You may come across many disabilities in your work life. Some examples of common disabilities you may find are:

* vision Impairment
* deaf or hard of hearing
* mental health conditions
* intellectual disability
* acquired brain injury
* autism spectrum disorder
* physical disability.

If your staff member's disability is not clear to you, ask how it effects their work and if they need adjustments so they can work to the best of their ability.

DO NOT ask the person how they got the disability

Vision impairment

Vision impairment refers to people who are blind or who have partial vision.

When talking with a person who is blind or has a vision impairment:

* always identify yourself and any others with you
* ask if the person requires assistance, and listen for specific instructions, however be prepared for your offer to be refused.

If guiding a person, let them take your arm, rather than taking theirs. Describe any changes in the environment such as steps, obstacles, etc.

If the person has a guide dog, please remember the dog is working and should not be patted, fed or distracted.

**Tips**

* Ensure front of office staff are briefed and prepared on how to greet and assist people with vision impairment.
* Allow more time and greater flexibility for training and induction.
* Be aware that glare and poor lighting may exacerbate vision impairment.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing

Hearing impairments can range from mild to profound. People who are hard of hearing may use a range of strategies and equipment including speech, lip-reading, writing notes, hearing aids or sign language interpreters.

When talking to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing:

* look and speak directly to them, not just to the people accompanying them, including interpreters
* speak clearly and use a normal tone of voice unless otherwise instructed by the person with the hearing impairment
* if you don't understand what a person is saying, ask them to repeat or rephrase, or alternatively offer them a pen and paper.

**Tips**

* Ensure front of office staff are briefed and prepared on how to greet and assist people who are deaf or hard of hearing.
* Allow more time and greater flexibility for training and induction.
* Consider workspace location - allowing the employee to see people entering the room and situate the workstation in an area where there is minimal background noise.

People with mental health conditions

Mental illness is a general term for a group of illnesses that affect the mind or brain. These illnesses, which include bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety and personality disorders, affect the way a person thinks, feels and acts.

A person with a mental health condition may experience difficulty concentrating, which can sometimes be a result of medication. Try to avoid overly stressful situations wherever possible so that their condition is not exacerbated.

**Tips**

* Provide clear and thorough explanations and instructions, in writing if required.
* Ask the person how they would like to receive information.
* Allow more time and greater flexibility for training and induction.

Further information: Mental health in the workplace

People with intellectual disability

A person with an intellectual disability may have significant limitations in the skills needed to live and work in the community, including difficulties with communication, self-care, social skills, safety and self-direction.

The most important thing to remember is to treat each person as an individual:

* a person with an intellectual disability is just like everyone else - treat them as you would like to be treated
* be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with an intellectual disability to do or say something
* be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.

**Tips**

* Allow more time and greater flexibility for training and induction.
* Keep the pressure of any given situation to a minimum as stress can affect a person's concentration and performance.
* Keep instructions simple and in bite-size pieces use demonstration and increase complexity as progress is made.
* Be aware that a person with intellectual disability may be less aware of social cues and may have less developed social skills.
* Give verbal and written instructions or try giving examples to illustrate ideas and summarise ideas often.

People with acquired brain injury (ABI)

Acquired brain injury (ABI) refers to any type of brain damage that occurs after birth. The injury may occur because of infection, disease, lack of oxygen or a trauma to the head. Around 160,000 Australians have some form of acquired brain injury, with more men affected than women.

The long term effects are different for each person and can range from mild to profound. It is common for many people with ABI to experience:

* increased fatigue (mental and physical)
* some slowing down in the speed with which they process information, plan and solve problems
* changes to their behaviour and personality, physical and sensory abilities, or thinking and learning
* may also have difficulty in areas such as memory, concentration and communication.

A person with an Acquired Brain Injury does not have an intellectual disability and does not have a mental illness

**Tips**

* Allow more time and greater flexibility for training and induction.
* Provide clear and thorough explanations and instructions.
* Minimise stress to maximise concentration and performance.
* Give verbal and written instructions or try giving examples to illustrate ideas and summarise ideas.

People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is an umbrella description which includes Autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome and atypical autism. Autism affects the way information is taken in and stored in the brain. People with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and other activities. Impairments usually exist across three main areas of functioning:

* social interaction
* communication, and
* behaviour (restricted interests and repetitive behaviours).

Many people with an autism spectrum disorder also have sensory sensitivities, i.e. over or under sensitivity to sight, touch, taste, smell, sound, temperature or pain.

Some characteristics of Asperger's syndrome

Those with Asperger's syndrome are typically of average or above average intelligence, and can show a wide range of behaviours and social skills. People with Asperger's syndrome may display some of the following characteristics:

* difficulty in forming friendships
* ability to talk well, either too much or too little, but difficulty with communication
* inability to understand that communication involves listening as well as talking
* a very literal understanding of what has been said. For example, when asked to 'get lost', as in go away, a person with Asperger's syndrome will be confused and may literally try to 'get lost'
* inability to understand the rules of social behaviour, the feelings of others and to 'read' body language. For example, a person with Asperger's syndrome may not know that someone is showing that they are cross when frowning
* sensitivity to criticism
* a narrow field of interests. For example a person with Asperger's syndrome may focus on learning all there is to know about cars, trains or computers
* eccentricity.

**Tips**

* Establish routines and predictable environments.
* Inform people with autism what is about to happen before it occurs.

People with physical disability

The common characteristic in physical disability is that some aspect of a person's physical functioning, usually either their mobility, dexterity, or stamina, is affected. People with physical disability are usually experts in their own needs, and will understand the impact of their disability.

There are many different kinds of disability and a wide variety of situations people experience. The disability may be permanent or temporary. It may exist from birth or be acquired later in life. People with the same disability are as likely as anyone else to have different abilities.

**Tips**

* Always ask before offering assistance.
* Be at the same level when talking with the person.
* Never assume that a person with physical disability also has intellectual disability.
* Ask permission before touching a person's wheelchair or mobility aid.