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# DISABLED

*Nobody can say "it's got nothing to do with me".*

One person in ten in Britain suffers from some form of disability—and one family in four has a disabled person in it. We will all have to deal with disability in some way at some time, whether in the family, at work, at school, at college, on public transport, in restaurants, BUT we often fear things that we don't understand.

The important thing to remember is that a person can never be classified by a disability—whatever the "label" of the illness or handicap, it is never a description of a person.

## Think of the PERSON, not the DISABILITY



**CEREBRAL PALSY** (spastic) covers a group of disabling conditions that results from damage to the brain. "Cerebral" refers to the brain; "palsy" describes lack of muscular control that is often (but not always) a symptom. It can be severe, with inability to control body movements. It can also be milder—a slight speech impairment. In Britain over 100,000 people have some degree of cerebral palsy.

**SPINA BIFIDA** literally means split spine and is the commonest major disabling abnormality apparent at birth. The consequences of the malformation are usually paralysis of the legs and absence or weakness of controls of the bladder and bowels. The causes are still unknown and there is no cure. Approximately 80% of those with Spina Bifida also develop hydrocephalus, but this condition may occur independently.

**CONGENITAL DISEASES.** Children can be born disabled for a variety of reasons. Disability can result, if the mother is ill, during pregnancy (e.g. German measles), from the effects of drugs or other substances (e.g. thalidomide), from chromosomal abnormality (e.g. Down's Syndrome), or birth injury (e.g. cerebral palsy), or even where the cause is unknown (e.g. Spina Bifida, Cystic Fibrosis). Early ante natal care is of prime importance for the detection and prevention of such diseases.

**DEGENERATIVE DISEASES,** including Parkinson's Disease, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis. Some basic physical function is breaking down—it may be slowed or held by medical treatment but not reversed, although research goes on all the time. More care and assistance will be needed as the disease progresses. Mental functioning is not necessarily affected.

**CONDITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH AGEING.** These include strokes, coronaries, Parkinson's Disease, sight and hearing loss, arthritis and rheumatism. (Some of these conditions are accompanied by constant pain, which can be very wearing.) Families will often be called on to give extra help, and professional care may also be needed. Allow older people to do what they can for themselves. Remember, that "old people" are simply "young people" who have lived a long time and who find that their bodies are wearing out—it can be very frustrating to have a still active mind in a less active body.

**PHYSICAL HANDICAPS,** such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, paraplegia (both legs paralysed) and hemiplegia (one side paralysed), caused by for instance, birth injury, disease, eg. polio, or accidents later in life. Those affected may benefit from extra personal help, and might need aids, such as wheelchairs, crutches or sticks. Remember that being physically handicapped doesn't mean that a person's mental functions are impaired, and that it is totally inappropriate to treat a disabled person as retarded, just because he or she looks "handicapped". Be helpful, but not over-protective. Disabled people value their independence, even though it may be limited by circumstances. If you don't know how much (if any) help the person needs—try asking!

**SENSORY HANDICAPS,** such as blindness and partial sight, deafness and partial hearing, and speech impairments. Many hearing impaired people suffer from unpleasant and often continuous noises in the ear, known as "tinnitus". Remember that people with these handicaps are not necessarily impaired in any other way, that they are as quick to comprehend as you are. Try not to be embarrassed if communication is difficult. Say "I'm sorry I didn't understand that" rather than pretend you did. Don't "talk down" to blind people or shout at those who are hard of hearing—just speak clearly. Matter of fact acceptance of such a handicap is more appreciated by the handicapped person than over-eager and often unnecessary assistance.

**MENTAL HANDICAP** is a permanent condition in which the intelligence is impaired to some degree, from very mildly to profoundly. It is not medically treatable or curable, although training can improve the level at which that person functions. Encourage mentally handicapped people to learn as many new skills and do as much for themselves as possible. Give clear and simple instructions and check that they have been understood. Don't over-protect, and allow them to enjoy their maximum possible independence and have pride in their own achievements.

**MENTAL ILLNESS** — probably the greatest cause of lost working days in Britain, "mental illness" covers a wide range of disorders and mental states from stress reactions, e.g. mental breakdowns, through depression to acute psychosis, e.g. schizophrenia. Mental illness is much feared and little-understood: as with physical illness the range is from temporary and treatable conditions through to chronic states that are totally disabling. Many types of therapy can be successfully used in a variety of mental disorders, enabling patients to live ordinary lives. Remember that mental illness and mental handicap are completely different, and should not be confused with each other.

**RESPIRATORY DISEASES** such as bronchitis and asthma. A great many people in Britain are affected by respiratory diseases. These can be associated with particular occupations (e.g. miners), environmental pollution and smoking. Certain heavy work may be too much for people with respiratory complaints, and sometimes stress or changes in the weather can bring on bouts of these illnesses. Medical help will be needed in most cases.

**EPILEPSY.** A condition in which there is a disturbance of the electrical impulses to the brain, producing various effects, ranging from vagueness and mild dizziness, to falling down and (rarely) convulsive fits. It can be well controlled by medication. For safety, epileptics do not work with dangerous machinery, or drive unless cleared by a doctor. If you see someone having an epileptic attack, (quite possible as there are 300,000 epileptics in Britain), make him comfortable on his side until the attack is over.

**MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS** is a disease where the protective covering of the nerve fibres is damaged or destroyed, so that the nerve fibres are unable to fulfil their normal functions. Limbs become progressively weaker, the balance is unsteady, and both speech and sight may be affected. The cause is unknown and at present there is no cure. Warm moral support, as well as increasing practical help will be needed by sufferers and their families.

**MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY** is a wasting disease of the muscles, which are progressively weakened, causing gradual paralysis. It is a hereditary disease, for which there is no cure. Both adults and children can suffer from the disease but the severest form is that which affects young boys.

**ACCIDENTS.** Road accidents are a common cause of disablement, and can result in anything from broken limbs or disfigurement to spinal injuries, and serious brain damage. Many people are disabled in accidents at work or in the home. A little thought can help to avoid some of the hazards of everyday life. Don't drink and drive, and always wear a seat belt. Use safety gear when provided at work and minimise dangers in the home by keeping dangerous objects out of reach of children. Take care if doing home repairs or other potentially risky tasks. For instance, many back injuries can be avoided by lifting heavy objects in the correct way—in fact many common accidents need never happen.