

Fact Sheets



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Acquired Brain Injury
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DISABILITY FACT SHEET SERIES

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AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

FACT SHEET: Acquired Brain Injury

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with an acquired brain injury it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Always remember to keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- Give the person an opportunity to talk. Make time for them.
- Speak clearly and use shorter, clear direct sentences to be more easily understood.
- Explain acronyms or do not use them at all.
- Provide regular breaks if required to reduce the effects of fatigue.
- If the person has memory problems information may need to be repeated.
- Physically demonstrate concepts rather than simply explaining.
- Ask questions to ensure the person understands.
- Always provide opportunities for questions and provide further information.

Disability Overview

Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) refers to a type of injury to the brain that results in deterioration of cognitive, physical, emotional or independent functioning that happens after birth.

Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) can occur as the result of trauma to the brain from motor vehicle accidents, falls and assaults, or from non-traumatic (internal) causes such as strokes, tumours, aneurysms, infections, poisoning and other situations when the brain does not get enough blood or oxygen.

People who have an ABI may be affected in a variety of ways, including:

- Cognitive
- Sensory
- Physical
- Behavioural or personality changes.

Individual responses vary greatly, only specific skills or abilities will be affected and other intellectual abilities remain intact.

Implications

- People who have had a brain injury may display demanding, intolerant, or aggressive behaviour
- The person may rush into things without clearly thinking about the consequences
- Sometimes they may have difficulty paying attention or concentrating.
- For some individuals it reduces their social skills and affect the person's ability to function effectively in a social setting
- They may experience difficulty with self-motivation or initiating activities.
- Some individuals may experience physical disabilities, which often include reduced muscle control and fatigue



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FACT SHEET: Autism and Aspergers

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Verbal communication may be difficult. People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may take expressions literally (eg raining cats and dogs), so avoid ambiguous or colourful language. They may not understand body language.
- Use words that are flexible such as 'we will usually' or 'we may' rather than 'we will'.
- Provide guidelines such as one person to speak and the other to listen.
- Use simple and short sentence structures, and provide information in a logical order.
- Introduce new ideas gradually. Provide regular breaks and reduce the amount of information to be given at one time.
- Write down the information that needs to be communicated.
- Use diagrams and pictures where appropriate
- Break down tasks into checklists.
- Identify sensitivity to particular colours.

Disability Overview

Autism Spectrum Disorders (commonly referred to as Autism) describes a group of developmental disabilities which includes:

- Autistic disorder (sometimes called infantile autism or childhood autism)
- Asperger's disorder
- Atypical autism

The word 'spectrum' is used to describe the fact that no two people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder behave the same. People with Autism Spectrum Disorders display a range of possible characteristics and behaviours across three main areas of social interaction, communication and behaviour.

The characteristics that can be associated with autistic conditions are:

- engagement in repetitive activities
- stereotyped movements
- resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines. They may also experience sensory sensitivities, i.e. over- or under-sensitivity to sight, touch, taste, smell, sound, temperature or pain.

Autism Spectrum Disorders are lifelong disabilities that usually appear during the first three years of life. The causes of Autism Spectrum Disorders are still unknown, though recent research has indicated that there may be a genetic factor for many people, while for others it may be a result of damage or abnormal development in the brain and parts of the central nervous system before, during or soon after birth.

People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may have difficulties with social interaction and communication. For some individuals this is the result of not being able to process information or understand the meaning of body language or the spoken/written word.

Implications

A person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may:

- be frustrated when dealing with everyday challenges and the unknown
- be confused, anxious and vulnerable to depression
- have limited social skills and as a result have difficulty making friends
- have difficulty understanding things with multiple names or labels
- have delayed speech, repetitive or include abnormal patterns
- require assistance when dealing with conflict
- have difficulty with starting or sustaining conversations
- may display restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours
- have excellent skills for rote learning but have difficulty processing the information
- have sensitivities to sound, smell, sight, taste, pain and temperature
- have high level verbal skills but be unable to sign their name
- may display self-injurious behaviour

A person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may also have limited use and understanding of body language and as a result may not be able to:

- show their own expressions
- maintain eye contact
- interpret other people's feelings and emotions



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FACT SHEET: Hearing Impairment

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with a hearing impairment it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- To get a person's attention, place yourself where the person can see you and wave your hand or tap them on the shoulder.
- When talking with a person with hearing impairment, give instructions face to face, and talk slowly and clearly. Reduce background noise, and try to speak in quiet periods.
- Don't stand behind the person, or with your back to strong light or a window as they will not be able to see your face.
- Ensure that the person is concentrating on what you are saying.
- With a swivel chair the person can turn easily for lip reading.
- Try to use visual clues.
- Investigate assistive technologies for use in the workplace. For example, the use of vibrating paging and alerting systems, or TTY - a telephone for the deaf.
- Back up what is being said by using written communication.

Disability Overview

People who are deaf or hearing impaired are those who cannot hear at normal levels because of a variety of factors. Deafness and hearing impairment can be hereditary or may be the result of a range of factors, including physical damage, birth abnormalities, disease, prescription medicine, prolonged exposure to excessive noise levels or as part of ageing.

People who are deaf and identify with the Deaf community see themselves as a language and cultural minority not a disability group and may use a visual sign language to communicate.

In Australia, Auslan is the sign language used among signing Deaf people to communicate with each other. For further information view the Auslan Sign Language at <http://www.auslan.org.au/>.

People with a hearing impairment do not usually use a visual sign language but may use lip reading skills or assistive technology to assist speech comprehension and, in general, identify less with other deaf or other hearing impaired groups of people.

Implications

- A Deaf or hearing impaired person's ability to articulate verbally will depend on the degree of hearing loss, when that loss occurred, and assistive technology used and speech training they have received.
- Members of the Deaf community use Australian Sign Language (Auslan) as their first language and may experience some difficulty communicating in spoken and/or written English. To provide accurate and comprehensive communication between a hearing person and a signing Deaf person an Auslan interpreter is used.
- For people with a hearing impairment, it is important to understand that the use of a hearing aid will amplify sound so that background noises like the air conditioner or wind will sound louder, as well as any speech. It is crucial to make sure that background noises and other distractions are reduced when communicating.



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FACT SHEET: Intellectual Disability

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with an intellectual disability it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Speak clearly, using simple language.
- Check their understanding by asking them to repeat in their own words what you have just said. Be prepared to repeat instructions several times.
- If there is a support person address the person with a disability and not the support person.
- Break each task into steps and illustrate each step 1, 2 etc. Don't assume they will transfer knowledge gained in one task to another.
- Use visual cues – pictures or graphics – where possible.
- Provide lots of encouragement, and monitor on a regular basis.

Disability Overview

Individuals with an intellectual disability are those who have substantial limitations in intellectual function when compared to individuals of a similar age. They may also demonstrate difficulties with personal skills needed for everyday living.

Intellectual disability is a lifelong disability that can affect many different areas of a person's life. People with an intellectual disability may have difficulties with thought processes, learning, communicating, remembering information and using it appropriately, making judgements, problem solving, and social interactions.

The range of intellectual disability varies greatly from mild intellectual disability requiring low support, through to severe intellectual disability requiring complex support.

There are many causes of intellectual disability, but in the majority of cases, the reasons are still unknown. Known causes include:

- Brain injury or infection before, during or after birth
- Growth or nutrition problems
- Abnormalities of chromosomes and genes
- Babies born long before the expected birth date
- Drug misuse during pregnancy, including excessive drug or alcohol intake and smoking.

Implications

The person may need assistance with daily living tasks like handling money, planning meals, using public transport or personal care.

They may need assistance with:

- understanding detailed information
- following and understanding directions
- learning new information
- using and understanding spoken and written language
- completing documents



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FACT SHEET: Learning Difficulties

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with learning disability it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Meet in a setting that is comfortable and does not cause anxiety or distraction. Always remember to keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- Use visual aids like pictures, drawings and photographs.
- Ask the person about the most appropriate way of communicating with them.
- Use short, clear direct sentences to be more easily understood. Make instructions clear and brief.
- Avoid complex language or words that may be taken literally.
- Be patient.
- Rephrase information if it is not understood, or present in another way.
- Ask questions to ensure the person understands the information being discussed.
- Always provide an opportunity to answer any questions or provide further information.

Disability Overview

A learning disability refers to a variety of conditions. These conditions can affect the way in which a person takes in, remembers, understands and expresses information.

Learning disabilities range in severity and invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills:

- oral language (e.g. listening, speaking)
- reading (e.g. comprehension)
- writing (e.g. spelling, written expression)
- mathematics (e.g. problem solving, concepts)

People with a learning disability are intelligent and have abilities to learn despite difficulties in processing information.

The exact cause of learning disabilities is not known, in some cases it may be due to genetic, other congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors.

Learning disabilities may co-exist with other conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions.

Implications

- For some individuals a learning disability can lead to difficulties with organisational skills, social perception and social interaction.
- They may experience problems with reading comprehension, spoken language, writing and mathematics.
- A learning disability may make it difficult for a person to receive information from their senses.
- People with a learning disability may find it difficult to communicate what they know.



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FACT SHEET: Mental Health Condition

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with a mental health condition it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Always remember to keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- Give the person an opportunity to talk. Make time for them.
- Meet in a setting that is comfortable and does not cause anxiety or distraction.
- For a person who may become anxious or distracted, provide written instructions.
- Use shorter, clear direct sentences to be more easily understood.
- Use different words if the person is having difficulty understanding what you are saying.
- Provide positive feedback or comments, along with recommendations.
- Ask questions to ensure the person understands the information being discussed.
- Always provide an opportunity to answer any questions or provide further information.

Disability Overview

Mental illness or Psychiatric illness are terms used to describe a wide range of disorders that are considered to be related to the mind or brain in some way. Many conditions resulting in disorders of thought, emotion, perception and judgement can now be identified, diagnosed and treated and may include:

- Schizophrenia
- Bi-Polar Disorder
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Personality Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Panic Attacks

Mental illnesses may fall into two categories - Non-Psychotic & Psychotic. The common non-psychotic illnesses include depression and anxiety which involve exaggerated feelings of depression, sadness, tension or fear. The common psychotic illnesses include Schizophrenia and Bi-Polar Disorder which are known or thought to affect the brain and cause the person to lose touch with reality.

The exact causes of psychiatric and psychological disorders are not known. It appears to be a combination of genetic, biological, psychological and environmental factors. Drugs and stress may also create circumstances that make a person vulnerable.

A mental illness may have an impact on a person's behaviour, their thought processes, their feelings and moods. The specific personal experience of an illness may also vary from individual to individual. Recent figures suggest that one in five adults will experience a mental health issue at some stage in their life.

Although it is considered there is no cure for some mental illnesses, such as Alzheimer's Disease and chronic Schizophrenia, the ability to access medication, counselling and supports can assist to treat or manage the symptoms.

Implications

- A psychiatric disorder affects the thought processes, the emotions and the way a person organises knowledge (cognitive ability). For some individuals a psychiatric disability can hinder their ability to function affectively in a social setting.
- Some psychiatric and psychological conditions are recurring and appear regularly in the person's life as episodes. The person, and those that support the person will learn to recognise the signs of an episode occurring and intervene before it escalates.

Supporting a person who is displaying symptoms of a mental illness:

- Remain calm, do not panic or dramatise the situation
- Ask how you can assist the person
- Clearly explain your role or function, using clear and simple language
- Do not attempt to reason or talk the person out of their way of thinking- it is difficult to reason with a person that is unable to think clearly
- Talk to the person and help to calm them down
- Face the person you are talking to and maintain good eye contact
- Attempt to avoid personal details or asking irrelevant questions
- Assist the person to access supports or services they require



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FACT SHEET: Physical Disability

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with a physical disability it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Ask the person about the most appropriate way of communicating with them.
- Do not assume that people with a physical disability cannot comprehend because of physical appearance.
- Speak directly to the person and not with someone who maybe assisting them.
- DON'T SHOUT. Speak in a tone appropriate to the setting.
- Make eye contact. Where possible, position yourself at the same level as the person.
- Make sure the person has understood you. If necessary write the information down.
- Check with the person about use of adaptive technology to aid with communication

Disability Overview

A physical disability is one that affects the person's mobility and or dexterity. Physical disabilities fall under the following headings:

- Limited control of some or all voluntary muscles,
- Underdeveloped skeletal structure, and
- Dysfunctional joints

Each person will have different causes, symptoms and management strategies making it difficult to generalise physical disabilities. A physical disability may have existed since birth or it could be the result of an accident, illness, infection, disease, degeneration, medical condition or the result of congenital factors. Physical disabilities can also affect speech.

Chronic health conditions include arthritis, chronic fatigue syndrome, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, hepatitis, cancer, HIV/AIDS, kidney disorder. Some of these conditions are life-long, while others vary over time.

Chronic health conditions may cause fatigue, stress and difficulty with memory, handwriting and concentration. Mood swings and depression can be associated. Medication may also affect performance.

A person with a physical disability may require some assistance or the use of some sort of equipment to aid with mobility.

Implications

- Some disabilities are invisible, but will affect the person's ability to complete tasks.
- People with a mobility impairment rely on effective signage that is up-to-date and consistent in both style and placement.
- For people who use a wheelchair it is like a part of the person's body; do not lean or hang on to the chair.
- Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but do not assume a person with a disability will require or accept it.
- Make sure that there is a clear pathway for a person in a wheelchair and do not leave articles such as chairs or boxes in areas that may block access.



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FACT SHEET: Vision Impairment

Communication strategies

- When communicating with a person with a vision impairment it is important to acknowledge that each person is an individual and should be approached as such.
- Be aware that a person who is blind or vision impaired will be disadvantaged about knowing what is going on. Therefore describe what is happening. Do not leave people who are blind or vision impaired without telling them you are going.
- Remember the person can't see but they can hear perfectly well, so try not to speak loudly or slowly when communicating.
- When talking to a person with vision impairment don't stand with your back to a window as they will not be able to see you through the glare.
- Provide written material in at least a sixteen point font, particularly safety instructions. When choosing colours, look for good contrast, yellow on green or black on white, avoid instructions written in pale colours, avoid pastels.
- When giving directions use accurate and specific language. For example, ensure that your 'left and right' match their 'left and right'.

Disability Overview

There are many causes of vision impairment and each individual is affected differently.

An individual is considered legally blind if they:

- Cannot see at six metres what someone with normal vision can see at 60 metres.
- Their field of vision is less than 20 degrees in diameter rather than 180 degrees for a normal sighted person.

To be considered legally blind there must be no possibility of correcting a person's vision through treatment.

The term 'vision impaired' simply means an individual has some degree of sight loss. Some forms of vision impairment can be corrected through the use of glasses or contact lenses.

The four main eye conditions that lead to vision impairment include:

- Age-related Macular Degeneration
- Glaucoma
- Cataracts
- Diabetic Retinopathy

No two people have the same vision loss. People with the same eye condition may possibly have different levels of vision impairment. With information, support and aids a person who is blind or vision impaired may continue to lead active and independent lives in their own community.

Implications

Various forms of vision impairment may mean that a person is able to see well in one environment or situation but have difficulty seeing in another environment or situation. For example, a person with night blindness may be able to see in daylight but are almost blind at night or in darkened rooms.

People may have difficulty managing daily activities and moving independently in new or changed environments. Training in orientation and mobility, or assistance at work may be required.

Supporting people with Vision Impairment

Always ask first if help is needed. If the student requires assistance, touch the back of their hand with yours and allow them to hold your arm just below the elbow. Remember to walk on the side opposite their cane or guide dog.

Set up the workspace in a quiet spot outside traffic flow. Make sure that there are no projections at head height or eye level.

- Ask about any specific lighting needs. In general, surfaces should be well lit with minimal glare.
- Open and close doors fully rather than leaving them ajar.
- Advise if you have moved objects or furniture.
- Give the person a choice in using lifts, stairs, or escalators.
- Bright yellow lines painted along the edge of dark steps will assist the safety of all workers.

People who use a guide or mobility dog

A guide dog or any animal trained to assist a person with a disability will be highly disciplined. Do not feed, pat or talk to a dog that has its harness on as this will distract them from working. If the animal is inside, ask the owner of any special requirements for the dog i.e. water, exercise or toileting.

Remember also that Anti-discrimination legislation makes it unlawful for guide dogs to be refused entry to any building or public transport.

