

Types of Disabilities...

Disabilities You May Encounter



What Counts as a “Disability?”

Disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of life’s major activities. This definition is used by the U.S. government for collecting data and implementing laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Two Major Categories of Disability

There are many categories of disability identified by the medical community. For our purposes, we will consider two major categories that include a non-exhaustive list of common disabilities you are likely to encounter. Thankfully, we do not need to be medical professionals to effectively love and serve people with disabilities. Welcoming and embracing an individual is far more valuable than knowing about their specific type of disability. There are over 82,000,000 people with disabilities or chronic illness living in the United States today, and each one is a unique individual!

Physical disabilities may limit mobility, sensory input, energy levels, or fine motor skills, and cause debilitating pain. Some examples include...



- Spinal cord injury
- Missing limbs
- Muscular dystrophy
- Spina bifida
- Stroke
- Traumatic brain injury (TBI)
- Post-polio syndrome
- Blind/visually impaired
- Deaf/hearing impaired
- Chronic pain

Developmental disabilities include a diverse group of chronic conditions that are due to mental and/or physical impairments. Some examples include...



- Cerebral palsy
- Down syndrome
- Pervasive developmental disorder
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Childhood disintegrative disorder
- Fragile X syndrome
- PDD-NOS (not otherwise specified)
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Tourette syndrome

Impairment vs. Disability

An impairment describes any loss of psychological or physical function, while disability describes an impairment that prevents normal functioning. All disabilities involve impairments, but not all impairments are a disability.

To illustrate, consider this example. A person with a visual impairment might be unable to drive after dark. A person with a visual disability might be unable to safely walk in public spaces without the assistance of a guide dog or cane.

Disabling Spaces

Stop and think for a moment about the term “disabled.” Someone who uses a wheelchair, for example, is disabled in the sense that they are *not able* to walk. But it doesn’t mean much more than that.

Are they unable to drive a car? If they’re required to use foot pedals, certainly. Are they unable to use the public library? Only if the door to the library is up a flight of steps. By virtue of their construction, many spaces disable people with disabilities.

People’s attitudes and assumptions can also be disabling. For example, someone with a visual impairment or disability might be “disabled” by a social group that does not invite them to come to the movies because the group members assumes the person with the visual impairment wouldn’t want to go since “they can’t see anything.” Or a person with autism may find it difficult to form friendships because they cannot easily make eye-contact and are often misunderstood as being unfriendly.

How might our churches have disabling elements to their construction? Or how might our attitudes serve to disable someone from fully participating in the life of the church?

What Now?

Understanding the reality of disability and taking steps to make your church physically and relationally accessible are two different things. To learn the steps your church can take to welcome and embrace people of all abilities, visit joniandfriends.org/church and download *Start with Hello*.