Handout 3 - Different Types of Disabilities

A disability is a limitation placed upon an individual's capacity in a particular situation as a result of a physical, sensory (vision and hearing), speech, intellectual, medical, mental, learning/neurological impairment or a chronic health condition.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines disability in relation to its consequences for the individual and the impact the environment has on the experience of being disabled. It states that a person may have:

1. An impairment which is some abnormality in their anatomy or function eg a brain injury, loss of limb, loss of sight
2. This may result in a disability which is a loss or reduction in functional ability eg to think, learn, understand, see, hear
3. A handicap is the social or environmental disadvantage that a person may experience as a result for having a disability eg not being able to get into a building because there are no ramps for the person to go up when using a wheelchair, people with a hearing impairment not being able to communicate because other people do not understand their form of communication such as sign language.

Australia's Disability Discrimination Act (1992) defines 'disability' broadly as:
- Permanent or temporary
- Present from birth or be acquired later in life
- Attributed to a person but not exist
- Apparent or hidden
- More or less severe in its impact
- Associated with one or a number of other disabilities
- Associated with a range of different abilities.

It is important to use a plan that best meets the identified support needs of the individual person. The plan will need to incorporate strategies that meet the particular needs of that person. It will also address issues of communication where this is required.

Categories of disability vary considerably and it can be very difficult to make a valid comparison of the needs and impact of disability upon an individual and their families across the disability groups.

Disabilities can be complex. Not all disabilities arise because of the same conditions and not all conditions give rise to the same disabilities. More than one type of limiting condition may also occur simultaneously changing the nature of needs and the priorities or goals for the client.

When deciding on the most appropriate type of plan, a worker must ensure that the person's identified needs can be addressed when the plan is implemented. This would take into consideration the impact of the person's disability on their functioning.

The major categories of disability include:

**Physical:** These types of disability may be acquired before, during or soon after birth. They may also be the result of injury or disease at a later point in life.
Having a physical disability affects the physical body including mobility in moving from one place to another. Physical disabilities include:

- Amputation
- Spinal cord injury
- Spina Bifida
- Muscular Dystrophy
- Multiple sclerosis
- Cerebral Palsy
- Stroke.

Sensory: This includes conditions that affect the five senses particularly vision and hearing

Intellectual This includes disabilities where the individual:

Has an intellectual quotient (IQ) significantly below average
This means an IQ of about 70 or less. The IQ score is obtained from a standardised intelligence test.

Has difficulties with everyday personal, social and living skills
This may the ability to dress or bath without help; the ability to articulate thoughts; the ability to manage relatively simple life skills such as using public transport, reading writing, the ability to develop and maintain relationships.

Is assessed to have the above characteristics before the age of 18 years.


Other cognitive disabilities

There are a number of other disabilities that may develop in adulthood because of disease, accident or the aging process which interfere with the cognitive processes. They include:

- Alzheimers disease
- Dementia
- Brain injury
- Stroke and other organic brain diseases.

Psychiatric disability

Some people can experience disability as a result of having a mental illness. The psychiatric disorder or illness becomes disabling when there are problems in 3 or more areas of major life activity. These areas include:

- Self-care
- Receptive and expressive language
- Learning
- Mobility
- Self-sufficiency.

The disability may be caused by the:

- Direct manifestations of the illness eg hearing voices all the time
- Impact of the illness on everyday life and activity
- Additional restrictions placed on the individual by society’s response to the illness
- Side effects of medication.

Mental illness includes a wide range of disorders and is prevalent in the community. The majority of people who experience mental illness do not have a disability. Only a minority of people experiencing mental illness have severe chronically disabling disorders.