



Disability Definitions¹

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD): Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is a neurobiological disorder. Typically children with AD/HD have developmentally inappropriate behavior, including poor attention skills, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. These characteristics arise in early childhood, typically before age 7, are chronic, and last at least 6 months. Children with AD/HD may also experience problems in the areas of social skills and self esteem.

Cerebral Palsy: Cerebral palsy is a group of chronic conditions affecting body movement and muscle coordination. It is not progressive (i.e., does not get worse), though secondary conditions can co-exist and change through time. Though cerebral palsy cannot be "cured", therapy and training can help a person improve his or her ability to function.

Three Basic Forms of Cerebral Palsy

- **Spastic:** includes stiff and jerky motions; this is the most common form of cerebral palsy. For example, a person may walk in a "scissored" fashion, which means that the person walks with one leg crossing ahead and then the other.
- **Athetoid:** entails constant movements of the arms, legs, face, and tongue that are random, involuntary, and uncontrolled. People with this type of cerebral palsy find it difficult to maintain purposeful motions.
- **Ataxic:** is characterized by the inability to maintain normal balance. Problems with depth perception and speech are also associated with this form of cerebral palsy.

Less Common Forms of Cerebral Palsy

- **Tremor:** is characterized by the rhythmic shaking movements in one part of the body.
- **Rigid:** is evidenced by extreme spasticity as muscles contract slowly and stiffly.
- **Mixed:** refers to two or more forms already described.

Epilepsy/Seizure Disorder: Epilepsy, or seizure disorder, refers to a group of disorders of the central nervous system that are characterized by sudden seizures, muscle contractions, and partial or total loss of consciousness. Researchers believe epilepsy is caused by abnormal nerve discharges in the brain.

¹ Please Note: The purpose of this page is to provide general information only. Therefore, the definitions and suggested accommodations provided here should not be considered inclusive or necessarily applicable to all individuals with the disability in question.

Five Basic Types of Epilepsy/Seizure Disorders

- **Tonic-clonic:** Once known as grand mal, this type of epilepsy causes a loss of consciousness and is often accompanied by movements such as eyelid twitching to total body shaking. The tonic-clonic seizure usually lasts one to three minutes. The person often has a warning called the "aura" that a seizure is about to occur. The aura can be a taste, sound, feeling, or vision and can prepare the person for the seizure.
- **Absence:** Originally called petit mal, absence seizures are momentary losses of consciousness. The person may stop what he or she is doing, stare into space, drop something, or blink their eyes rapidly. These seizures last five to thirty seconds and may take place many times a day. Absence seizures are commonly associated with children between four and fourteen years of age.
- **Complex-partial:** Once known as temporal lobe or psychomotor, this type causes the person to lose consciousness yet still feel and do things during the seizure. The person might have tantrums or make repetitive movements like lip-smacking, picking at clothes, or rubbing hands or legs. These seizures can last a few minutes or several hours.
- **Status Epilepticus:** These seizures continue for a long time without the person regaining consciousness and can be life threatening.

Hearing Impairments: A hearing impairment is a hearing loss that prevents a person from totally receiving sounds through the ear. If the loss is mild, the person has difficulty hearing faint or distant speech. A person with this degree of hearing impairment may use a hearing aid to amplify sounds. If the hearing loss is severe, the person may not be able to distinguish any sounds. There are four types of hearing loss:

- **Conductive:** caused by diseases or obstructions in the outer or middle ear that usually affect all frequencies of hearing. A hearing aid generally helps a person with a conductive hearing loss.
- **Sensorineural:** results from damage to the inner ear. This loss can range from mild to profound and often affects certain frequencies more than others. Sounds are often distorted, even with a hearing aid.
- **Mixed:** occurs in both the inner and outer or middle ear.
- **Central:** results from damage to the central nervous system.

Learning Disabilities: A learning disability affects the way a person is able to understand or use spoken or written language. Learning disabilities can manifest in multiple ways, such as difficulty in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing math calculations. People with learning disabilities generally possess and are capable of the same level of intellectual achievement as a person who does not have a learning disability.

The term learning disability is used to cover a broad range of situations. Because there are so many different ways that a learning disability can impact someone, it is vital to develop strategies to maximize the successes that individuals with learning disabilities achieve. There is a great deal of overlapping between areas of learning. Therefore, children with learning disabilities may show a combination of characteristics. Approximately 5 to 10% of the population has a learning disability.

Learning disabilities are characterized by a significant difference in a person's achievement in some areas when compared to his or her overall intelligence. A student with a learning disability may show one or more of the following characteristics:

- Difficulty in an academic area (reading, writing, written expression, spelling, math calculations, or math reasoning).
- Memory or perception problems.
- Speech and language disorders.
- Attention problems, such as difficulty staying on task and being easily distracted.
- Hyperactivity - difficulty sitting still.
- Impulsivity - acts without thinking, poor planning and organizational skills.

Mental Illness: Mental illness is a disturbance of the mind that may interfere with normal behavior and make daily life difficult. Mental illnesses may affect one in five Americans at one point in their lives. There are numerous types of mental illnesses, ranging in severity from mild to disabling, the treatment of which may include counseling/therapy and/or medication to reduce symptoms. Some examples of mental illness are:

- **Psychotic Disorders:** A group of diseases characterized by disturbed or bizarre thinking and behavior, extreme withdrawal, and hallucinations. Schizophrenia is one type of psychotic disorder.
- **Mood and Anxiety Disorders:** This group of impairments can range from intermittently debilitating to severely handicapping. The major disorders of this type include: bipolar affective (manic-depressive) disorder; depression; obsessive-compulsive disorder; panic disorder; phobias; and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Organic Brain Disorders:** Illnesses such as brain tumors, hardening of the arteries, and injuries can cause mental illness. Types of organic mental disorders include delirium and intoxication syndromes.
- **Personality Disorders:** These disorders are defined by long term patterns of behavior and coping difficulties. There are 11 personality disorders, including paranoia, borderline, passive-aggressive, dependent, and antisocial.

Mental retardation: Mental retardation refers to substantial limitations in present functioning and is characterized by the following:

1. below average intellectual functioning (IQ of 70 or below).
2. limitations in two or more of the following areas:
 - self care
 - self direction
 - home living
 - functional academics
 - leisure
 - communication
 - health and safety
 - social skills
 - community use
 - work
3. manifestation before age 18.

Mobility Impairment: To date, there are approximately 8 million Americans who have some type of mobility impairment that necessitates the use of adaptive equipment such as a cane, crutches, walker, wheelchair, or scooter. A person with a mobility impairment simply uses different ways to get around. Often times, assistive devices help him or her overcome mobility obstacles. Mobility impairments may result from a number of different medical conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, and paraplegia. Temporary impairments, like broken legs, can also result in mobility impairments.

Muscular Dystrophy: The term muscular dystrophy refers to a group of disorders characterized by progressive muscle weakness and loss of muscle tissue. Muscular dystrophy includes many inherited disorders such as:

- Becker's muscular dystrophy (slowly progressive form of MD; affects legs and pelvis most severely)
- Duchenne's muscular dystrophy (similar to Becker's, but progresses more rapidly)
- Facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy (mild, slowly progressive form; face, shoulders, and upper arms affected)
- Limb-girdle muscular dystrophy

Disorders are distinguished by the type of inheritance (dominant genes, recessive gene, and so on), the age when symptoms appear, and the types of symptoms that develop. Because these are inherited disorders, risks include a family history of muscular dystrophy.

Symptoms:

- muscle weakness
 - progressive
 - frequent falls
 - delayed development of muscle skills
 - problems walking
 - difficulty using a muscle group (the specific muscle affected depends on the type of MD)
 - eyelid drooping (ptosis)
 - drooling
- intellectual retardation
 - present in only some types of muscular dystrophy
- floppy, decreased muscle tone (hypotonia)
- skeletal deformities
- muscle deformities
- claw foot
- claw hand

Spinal Cord Injury: A spinal cord injury (SCI) usually results from an acute traumatic event to the spinal column. Each year, 12,000 to 15,000 Americans sustain spinal cord injuries. Motor vehicle accidents account for nearly half of spinal cord injuries, followed by falls and gunshot injuries. Other causes of SCI include infections, multiple sclerosis, or tumors. Because different parts of the spinal column are responsible for different body functions, the degree of loss of function depends on the level of the spine at which the injury occurs.

Typically, as the point of injury to the spinal cord moves upward, the degree and extent of bodily function loss increases. Spinal cord injuries can be classified as:

- **Paraplegia:** loss of function in the lower extremities due to thoracic and lumbar spine injuries.
- **Quadriplegia:** loss of function in both the upper and lower extremities as a result of cervical and upper thoracic spine injuries.

A spinal cord injury can also be described as complete or incomplete:

- **Complete:** no functioning nerves remain below the level of injury.
- **Incomplete:** some function remains below the level of injury.

Sometimes the spinal cord is only bruised or swollen after the initial injury. As the swelling goes down, the nerves may begin to work again. The longer there is no improvement, the less likely it is that there will be any improvement. Conversely, if an individual shows some sign of recovery, the likelihood of improvement increases, but there are no guarantees that more function will return. Some individuals have involuntary movements, such as twitching or shaking. These movements are called spasms, and are not a sign of recovery. A spasm occurs when a wrong message from the nerve causes the muscle to move. The person cannot control this movement.

In addition to movement and feeling, a spinal cord injury affects other body functions. The lungs, bowel, and bladder may not work the same as before the injury. There may also be changes in sexual function. During rehabilitation, the rehabilitation team will help the person adjust and adapt to a new lifestyle. The goal of rehabilitation, therefore, is to help the person become independent.

Visual Impairment: Visual disabilities range from partial to total loss of sight. A person is legally blind if he or she sees with the better eye at 20 feet or less what a person with "normal" vision sees at 200 feet (20/200 vision). A person who is legally blind may have some vision, or may have no vision at all. A person who is visually impaired has eyesight between 20/70 and 20/200. The assistance that a person with a visual impairment requires depends on the degree of sight loss and when the loss occurred.

A person who is visually impaired may use magnifying glasses, enlarged print, or other strategies. A person who is legally blind relies more on the other senses to perceive the world, but still can be completely independent. This person may use a cane or a service dog, also called a "guide dog". It's important to remember that guide dogs aren't pets, but working animals that enable a person who is blind to get to work, go shopping, or go anywhere else that person chooses to go.