



UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

Surf Life Saving for People with a Disability



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Photograph by Anthony Rose

What is disability?

Disability refers to a health condition or impairment that can affect how a person interacts with the world around them. This might involve difficulties with movement, communication, thinking, or experiencing the world through the senses. It also includes the challenges individuals face when the surrounding environment or society is not set up to accommodate their specific needs.

This understanding combines the World Health Organization's view of disability, which emphasises the interaction between an individual's health condition and the barriers they face in their environment, with the idea that disability is not solely a medical issue.

According to the social model of disability, it's the result of the way society is organised, rather than an individual's health condition or impairment, that creates barriers that limit full participation and inclusion for people with disabilities. This broader perspective recognises the importance of creating an inclusive environment that considers the diverse needs and abilities of all individuals.

Key Facts and Figures in Australia:

Here is a snapshot of disability prevalence in Australia:

- 1 in 6 (18%) people in Australia identify as experiencing disability (about 4.4 million people)
- 1 in 3 (32%) people with disability experience severe or profound disability (about 1.4 million)
- For 1 in 4 (23%) people with disability, their main form of disability is mental or behavioural

The prevalence of disability generally increases with age. This means the longer people live, the more likely they are to experience some form of disability:

- 7.6% of children aged 0–14 experience disability
- 9.3% of people aged 15–24 experience disability
- 13% of people aged 15–64 experience disability
- 50% of people aged 65 and over experience disability (ABS 2019b).

The most common types of disabilities reported in Australia include physical disabilities, psychological disabilities, and sensory or speech-related disabilities.

Barriers Faced by People with Disability:

Despite Australia's efforts towards inclusivity, people with disabilities continue to encounter various barriers when accessing community activities, including participation in volunteering, sports and recreational pursuits. Some of these barriers include:

- Inaccessible infrastructure and facilities, such as lack of ramps or appropriate changing areas.
- Limited availability of adaptive equipment or support services.
- Negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability, leading to stigmatisation and exclusion.
- Financial constraints and limited access to affordable programs or services tailored to specific needs.

Negative Impacts of Exclusion on People with Disability

Exclusion from volunteering, sports, and active recreation can have profound and detrimental effects on individuals with disabilities, both on a personal and societal level. These impacts include:

- **Social Isolation:** Exclusion from community activities can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, negatively affecting mental well-being and overall quality of life.
- **Poor health and well-being outcomes:** Without access to inclusive sports and recreational activities, individuals with disabilities may experience limited opportunities for physical exercise and social connection, potentially leading to a decline in overall physical health and well-being.
- **Reduced Self-Esteem and Confidence:** Exclusion from volunteering and community engagement can diminish self-esteem and confidence, creating a sense of inadequacy and limiting personal growth and development.
- **Lack of Skill Development:** Inaccessibility to skill-building opportunities within the realm of sports and volunteering can impede the development of essential life skills, hindering personal and professional growth.
- **Underrepresentation and Marginalisation:** Exclusion perpetuates underrepresentation and marginalisation of individuals with disabilities in society, reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting the visibility of their talents and contributions.
- **Missed Community Contributions:** Excluding individuals with disabilities from volunteering roles deprives communities of diverse perspectives and valuable contributions, limiting the potential for inclusive and comprehensive community development.

Motivations for Involvement in Community Sport and Active Recreation:

Many individuals with disabilities actively seek involvement in community volunteering, sports, and active recreation for several reasons, including:

- **Physical and mental well-being:** Participation in sports and recreation activities promotes physical fitness and overall well-being, fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence.
- **Social inclusion:** Engaging in community activities facilitates social connections and promotes a sense of belonging within the larger community.
- **Skill development:** Participation in sports and recreational activities enables individuals to develop new skills, enhance self-esteem, and achieve personal goals, fostering a sense of empowerment.
- **Contribution to community:** Volunteering provides an opportunity for individuals living with disability to actively contribute to their community, fostering a sense of purpose and social responsibility.

Recognising that disability happens because the world isn't always set up for people with certain health conditions, and understanding the things that stop people from taking part, the bad effects of not being included, and what makes people want to join in, shows how important it is to make sure that everyone, no matter what they can do, has the same chances to take part and be included in surf lifesaving clubs and everywhere else in the community.

Sources and References:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability/prevalence-of-disability>

Australian Network on Disability - <https://australiandisabilitynetwork.org.au/resources/disability-statistics/>

Australian Human Rights Commission, "Disability Rights" - <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights>

Department of Social Services, Australian Government, "Disability and Carers" - <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers>

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