

More than meets the eye: invisible disability

I need time. This is about accessibility. You need to give me time to think. Time to understand. Time to respond. Time to have a back and forth conversation. Time to put things together. TIME. It's one of our biggest accessibility issues. ¹

What is invisible disability?

A word about language

In general the terms 'impairment' and 'disabled people' are preferred by disabled people.

But **Invisible Disability** is a term coined by those affected so we use this term to reflect that.

To define invisible disability in simple terms [it] is a physical, mental or neurological condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities that is invisible to the onlooker. ²

Invisible disability can include conditions such as ADHD and ASD [Autistic Spectrum Disorder]; chronic pain and illness; mental illness; cognitive dysfunction or learning difficulties. Consistent data on invisible disability in NZ is thin on the ground - partly because of definitions and partly people's unwillingness to disclose due to stigma. Nearly three quarters of people with a severe disability do not use assistive devices. Of the over 22,000 disabled people with higher support needs³ almost all have 'invisible disability'. This is the tip of the iceberg, but this issue clearly impacts on someone's ability to access quality recreation opportunities.

The right to participate

Article 30 of the UNCRPD enshrines the right to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport.



Figure 1 Learn Active <https://learnactive.co.nz/>

Disability and wellbeing

Those self-reporting a disability are almost twice as likely to have low personal wellbeing. This can be because of anxiety and depression, lack of access to resources and other factors not directly associated with the person's impairment. Poverty is another barrier to participation - more than two thirds of disabled people in NZ live on an income of below \$30,000 per annum, almost half of disabled youth are not earning or learning, and disabled children are particularly impacted.

Participation in recreation

There is no specific data on the participation rates of people with invisible disabilities, but the Active NZ survey data tells us that low socio-economic status has the greatest negative impact on participation in recreation and sport.

The value of recreation

The myriad benefits of participation in recreation run the spectrum from improved mental and physical health (including a lowered risk of life threatening conditions and increased longevity) to better social connectedness and active citizenship. Regular participation has the potential to change lives.

Barriers to participation

Learning or communication difficulties and low mental wellbeing are the two major barriers to participation or enjoyment in Sport NZ's Disability Active Recreation and Sport Survey.

Issues for people with learning difficulties

Issues	Explanation ⁴
Time	Pace of things can be a major barrier to participation – everything happens at speed There is an expectation of fast response rate especially for adults
Complexity	Verbal language, building or place layout, instructions and unwritten rules, or social mores can all be a challenge
Literacy	Low literacy levels in a highly literate society is a barrier to accessing information, signage, printed or via the web

Modes of participation

Disabled people value how they participate more highly than where. The diagram shows the range of ways people may choose to participate. We need to think more broadly about 'what's possible?'



Figure 2 Continuum of recreation participation; Lumin

For a detailed analysis of disabled people, sport and active recreation, please see Sport NZ Disability Active Recreation and Sport:

- [Background Report](#)
- [Summary and Recommendations](#)

References

- ¹ I need time – this is about accessibility; Wordpress Blog
- ² Invisible Disabilities Assn: What is an invisible disability?
- ³ Ministry of Health NZ (2015), Demographic Information on Clients using the Ministry of Health's Disability Support Services as at September 2013.
- ⁴ Yalon-Chamovitz, S. (2009). Invisible access needs of people with intellectual disabilities: A conceptual model of practice. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, 47(5), 395-400.

Case study

Five days a week and in most school holidays at [Learn Active](#), in Canterbury, you will find groups of young people aged 15-35 - almost all of whom have an 'invisible disability' including intellectual disability - taking part in a wide range of outdoor activities. Each term is devoted to a new skillset and exploration of the outdoor environment. The programme includes water-based activities, tramping, rock-climbing, rope-skills and bushcraft action. Trained staff and a rotating core of volunteers design a tailored programme and offer support as required for activities to build skills and confidence.

Principles into action

The invisibility of some disabilities creates many challenges. Including disabled people requires action at relational, community and societal levels. Some examples are below. For more detail, [click here](#).

Societal	Mental models, fostering attitudes Structural and socio-economic factors Seeing 'people like me' participating Changing policy and legislation
Community	Understanding and knowledge Promoting diversity and inclusion Integrative practice Valuing disabled people – economics of inclusion
Relationships	Expectations of capability Opportunities to learn through risk & failure Increased resources to families Removing stigma
Individual	Self confidence Improved health status Social and practical skills Feelings of safety and security

Useful Resources and Reading

[All Play Australia](#) - making the world fit for kids
 Appleton Dyer S, and Field A (2014) [Understanding the factors that contribute to the exclusion of disabled people](#), Synergia
 Coyne, P. & Fullerton, A. (2014) [Supporting Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Recreation](#)
 Disability Rights UK: Doing Sport Differently
 Disability Arts Online: [Disabled People not People with Disabilities](#)
 Invisible Disabilities Association: [But you look good!](#)
 Invisible Disabilities Cube (2017) [A youth perspective on invisible disabilities](#)
 Recreation Integration Victoria: Anatomy of Inclusion [infographic](#); How Can I Include People with Invisible Disabilities [infographic](#)
 Stuff.co.nz: [My social struggles: The reality of living with invisible disabilities](#)
 UK Office for National Statistics: [Understanding wellbeing: who has the poorest personal wellbeing?](#)
 Wellington City Council, MASH Trust and KITES Trust (2006) [Opening Doors](#)