

## Disability and Mental Health

The concept of disability is rapidly evolving to encompass a broad range of physical and mental conditions—both visible and invisible—that may have been present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. **Visible disabilities** refer to immediately noticeable physical features, like a wheelchair or seeing eye dog, while **invisible disabilities** include a spectrum of not so easily noticed disabilities, ranging from learning disabilities and processing disorders to chronic pain, brain injuries, hearing or sight loss, and digestive issues.<sup>2</sup>

The 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability found that 6.2 million—or 1 in 5—Canadians aged 15 and older have at least one disability, with over 2 million Canadians living with mental-health related disabilities.<sup>3</sup> The most common mental health-related conditions include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and severe stress disorders.<sup>3</sup> Compounding the problem, 4 in 5 Canadians with a mental health-related disability also have at least one other type of disability—often invisible. This is the case for 63% of those with a mental health-related disability who also live with a pain-related disability.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic 74% of those with a disability relied on others for help in completing household tasks. Public health measures and stay-at-home orders drastically limited access to support staff, increasing social isolation and resulting in a decline in perceived mental and physical health amongst those with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Among youth living with a disability, 3 out of 5 have a mental health-related disability, with females being twice as likely as males to have one.<sup>3</sup> Individuals with mental health-related disabilities are more likely than either those with visible disabilities or those without disabilities to experience physical or sexual assault at least once in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Among those with mental health-related disabilities, women are more than twice as likely as men to experience sexual assault.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, youth with invisible disabilities are at a much higher risk of not being in school or employed, potentially limiting opportunities for future fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 52% of those with mental health-related disabilities consider themselves disadvantaged in employment because of their condition, and nearly half of employed Canadians with a mental health-related disability believe that their conditions place limits on their career opportunities, in large part due to perceived stigma.<sup>3</sup>

Terms used for individuals with disabilities often unintentionally perpetuate stigmatizing stereotypes reinforcing outdated and inaccurate concepts. Person-forward language should be used, such as “person with [disability]” rather than “a [disabled] person”). Looking ahead, it is essential to cultivate awareness and inclusivity in language and behaviour, welcoming those experiencing disability into the center of the conversation and acting on the advice they have to offer as we move forward together as a community.

## Resources

<http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/>

<https://www.mbteach.org/mtscms/2022/02/04/disability-is-not-a-bad-word/>

<https://disabilitycenter.colostate.edu/inclusive-language/>

[https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability#\\_edn37](https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability#_edn37)

<https://canadianequality.ca/understanding-invisible-disabilities-in-the-workplace/>

## References

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2. Schmidt, L. (2022). *Understanding invisible disabilities in the workplace*. CEC.  
<https://canadianequality.ca/understanding-invisible-disabilities-in-the-workplace/>
3. Statistics Canada. (2017). Canadian survey on disability. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181128/dq181128a-eng.htm>
4. Statistics Canada (2020). Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians living with long-term conditions and disabilities. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200827/dq200827c-eng.htm>
5. Jackson, A. (2017). *Work and labour in Canada: Critical issues* (3rd ed.). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.