

HIDDEN DISABILITIES

Disability - A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such impairment, or a perception of such impairment. Examples of impairments: asthma, tuberculosis, AIDS, cancer, angina, diabetes, hypertension, stuttering, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, dyslexia, blindness or vision impairment, deafness or hearing impairment, and paralysis.

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) is intended to extend Civil Rights to individuals with disabilities that limit major life activities, including both applicants for employment as well as those already employed. The act mandates that modifications be made to the work environment or in the way things are usually done to enable an otherwise qualified employee with a disability to perform the tasks necessitated by the position. Job restructuring or equipment adjustments are examples of two such changes.

Disabilities are either “visible” or “hidden.” An individual with a “visible,” or apparent, disability does not usually have to disclose his or her need for accommodations that provide access to the benefits and privileges of employment that come as a result of successfully completing essential job functions. Examples of visible disabilities include physical or mobility impairments, blindness, or deafness. “Hidden disabilities,” on the other hand, are usually not apparent and therefore cannot be directly inferred through observation. Nonetheless, these hidden forms of disability frequently require careful management and accommodation. People with hidden disabilities must usually voluntarily disclose that information before others can acknowledge and accommodate their disabilities.

Hidden disabilities can include (but are not limited to):

- learning disabilities
- epilepsy
- diabetes
- schizophrenia
- AIDS
- hearing impairments
- chronic fatigue syndrome
- cardiovascular disease
- psychiatric disorders
- cancer
- arthritis
- traumatic brain injury
- asthma
- low vision
- allergies
- chronic pain

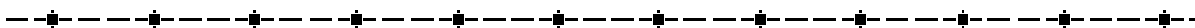
In fact, the most common types of disability in the U.S. fall into “hidden” categories: heart disease, which ranks first, affects 7.9 million Americans and accounts for 13% of all disability reported. Back problems rank second (7.7 million), followed by arthritis (5.7 million), orthopedic impairments of lower extremity (2.8 million), and asthma and diabetes (2.6 million each). Mental disorders rank seventh (2.0 million), followed by disorders of the eye (not including visual impairments), and learning disabilities/mental retardation (1.6 million each). Cancer and visual impairments each limit 1.3 million Americans, while orthopedic impairments of the shoulder and/or upper extremity limit 1.2 million. Hearing impairments affect 1.2 million (from *Disability in the U.S.: Prevalence and Causes, 1992*). Similar statistics can be observed among the 272 Yale students who have registered with the University’s Resource Office on Disabilities: 103 have visible disabilities while 169 report some form of hidden disability, including chronic fatigue syndrome, cancer, narcolepsy, diabetes, respiratory illness, and psychiatric illnesses. Among employees at Yale who have requested some disability-related accommodation are individuals with multiple sclerosis, emotional disorders, or recovering alcoholics.

Often individuals with hidden disabilities cope with chronic pain and high levels of fatigue, or take medications that affect their ability to perform in some manner. They develop ways of coping with their disabilities while addressing the demands of a job or school, frequently believing that because they don’t “look” disabled, they are not in need of (or eligible for) accommodations made on their behalf.

Though the accommodations that are made for visible disabilities tend to be somewhat self-evident, like ramps for wheelchairs, it can be far more difficult to envision the types of accommodations that might be made for hidden disabilities. Yet many of the modifications or allowances that would address the needs of this latter group are found to have little if any costs attached to them, yet can make the difference between an individual who is able to perform at his or her best, and one for whom performance becomes an impossibility.

Increasingly the literature on disability is providing information and subsequent recommendations to meet the needs of people with hidden disabilities. Low vision problems can often be successfully compensated for through better web design and personalized computer settings. A telephone with volume adjustments can enable individuals with hearing impairments to carry on phone conversations. Permitting several brief, but more frequent breaks in order to eat small meals throughout the course of the day can assist a person with diabetes in adhering to specific dietary recommendations. Anxiety disorders, which can affect concentration and interpersonal communication, are often made less daunting by breaking large projects into smaller tasks and permitting flex-time. The common theme throughout this literature is the recognition that the most difficult, yet important factor in living with a hidden disability is identifying those accommodations that would likely result in a more productive work life, and trusting an employer to realize that accommodating a hidden disability can result in a far more rewarding and successful experience for both employee and employer.

Listed below (in no particular order) are examples of websites that provide general information about disabilities, as well as several which specifically address problems and suggest solutions for dealing with hidden disabilities.



Accommodating Employees with Hidden Disabilities (from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy): <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/ek00/hiddenemp.htm>

Publications from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy:
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/media/reports/main.htm>

Government/Legislative Resources: <http://www.makoa.org/gov.htm>

Information and technical assistance on issues involving the Americans for Disabilities Act:
<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

Answers to frequently asked questions about the American for Disabilities Act:
<http://consumerlawpage.com/brochure/disab.shtml>

National Coalition for Disability Rights: <http://www.adawatch.org/>

National Council on Disability (an independent federal agency making recommendations to the President and Congress on issues affecting Americans with disabilities): <http://www.ncd.gov/index.html>

USBLN – US Business Leadership Network (promoting “best practices” in hiring, retaining, and marketing to people with disabilities): <http://www.usbln.com/index.html>

JAN – Job Accommodation Network (in support of the employment, including self-employment and small business ownership, of people with disabilities): <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/ideas.html>

Employer's Guide to Hidden Disabilities (Office of Career Development and Placement, Muhlenberg College):
<http://www.muhlenberg.edu/ocdp/emplguide/toc.html>

Transcript from a televised discussion about depression (including former first lady and mental health advocate, Rosalynn Carter; actress Mariel Hemingway; actress Mariette Hartley; Dr. Kay Jamison; T.V. talk host Dick Cavett; and former CNN CEO Tom Johnson): <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0305/28/kl.00.html>

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law (a national legal advocate for people with mental disabilities):
<http://www.bazelon.org/issues/disabilityrights/>