



### Adjusting to a Disability

Adjusting to a sudden disability (vs. a more gradual one) can be emotionally traumatizing. Sudden permanent disabilities may occur due to accidents, the onset of illnesses, a deteriorating medical condition, and any combination of life factors.

A majority of those with disabilities acquire them during life—with an estimated 80 percent of individuals with disabilities having been born without them.

A sudden disability may be physical or mental.

A physical disability involves challenges with mobility, movement, and other bodily-related functions.

A mental health problem with long-term effects (12 months or more) on a person's ability to function in the normal day-to-day is considered a disability.

#### Four Basic Adjustment Phases to a Long-term or Permanent Disability

**Denial:** The initial shift to a physical disability may evoke shock—both physical and emotional. This state may last for a few hours to several days.

**Shock:** Following shock may be denial, which may last up to several months. This mental defense mechanism allows for the individual to adjust to the injury.

**Anger and Depression:** The next phase would be anger and depression, which is an understandable reaction to sudden changes (losses, changes in social status). This phase may include a range of emotional responses: anxiety, withdrawal from others, grief, hostility, self-blame, feelings of worthlessness, and even thoughts of suicide.

**Adjustment and Acceptance:** The last general phase involves adjustment and acceptance of the disability. In this stage, the person gives up false hopes and has a more realistic sense of adaptation to the new roles based on the disablements. The individual accepts and acknowledges the permanence of the physical disability.

Psychologists suggest that the above stages are not particularly orderly. People go through these stages at different paces. Professional supports may enhance people's abilities to cope with each phase and to resolve difficulties they're facing. The changes to self-image may be pretty extreme. The above addresses internal psychological changes.

#### Survival Mode

There are many practical adjustments to a disability related to housing, food, finances, hygiene, and transportation. There are many public service agencies to contact for relevant information and services.

The adjustments to the changes may cause plenty of frustrations because some tasks

that used to be easy no longer are. People with new disabilities have to relearn a lot of what they may have done without thought earlier.

Some people will need primary caretakers to provide necessary support for things like food preparation, feeding, bathing, or transportation. There are friends and family and professionals to contact for support and assistance.

### **Finances**

A new disability often means a drop in wages or income with an increase in the cost of day-to-day life at the same time. Those with disabilities may be entitled to state aid—so the proper government offices will have to be contacted. The costs of some types of equipment used to mitigate disabilities can possibly be offset by some types of medical insurance. Also, if changes need to be made to a home for accessibility, that will also involve further costs. The work of setting up a working budget will likely involve various challenges given the new circumstances.

### **Social Adjustments**

Sudden life changes like permanent disabilities result in a variety of social adjustments—with family, friends, and colleagues. Relationships often have to be re-negotiated with the new realities stemming from disabilities.

### **Protection against Discrimination**



Those with disabilities are protected against discrimination by law. Service providers need to ensure access and a lowering of barriers to their services. There also need to be reasonable mitigations for those enrolled in school and with a formally assessed disability.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (under the US Department of Justice's responsibility) (<http://www.ada.gov/>) defines plenty of information on federal resources and disability rights laws (<http://www.ada.gov/publicat.htm#Anchor-14210>).

### **The Goal of an Independent and Productive Life**

People with disabilities live fulfilling and productive lives daily. The work necessary to get to this point can be difficult, and progress may be slow—but many do live full lives with friends, family, and colleagues. Many maintain careers and hobbies.



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