

# INTERNATIONAL DAY OF

## people with disabilities

Tomorrow marks the International Day of People with Disabilities, a day dedicated to promoting the rights and well-being of individuals with disabilities and raising awareness about their challenges. On this day, we take the opportunity to celebrate the achievements and contributions of people with disabilities, as well as to highlight the need for greater inclusion and accessibility in our communities.

As we mark this important day, we want to express our support for the millions of people around the world who face challenges related to their disabilities. Whether it's through increased accessibility, more inclusive policies, or simply raising awareness, we can all play a role in making the world a better place for people with disabilities.

This year, we have chosen to focus on invisible disabilities and put together a range of resources for our team on how we can better accommodate invisible disabilities in the workplace. We hope you find this helpful and, hopefully, we can co-create an environment where everybody of all abilities feel safe and supported.

## **But You Don't Look Sick: How to Be Inclusive Of Invisible Disabilities**

An invisible illness or disability is a chronic health condition that does not seem evident to the public. Invisible illnesses or disabilities can range from physical disabilities such as deafness, diabetes, or epilepsy, while mental health conditions or learning disabilities can also be classed as invisible disabilities. If an illness affects someone's ability to live a normal life, but it is not immediately apparent to somebody without specific knowledge of the condition, it can be classed as invisible.

Sometimes, an invisible disability can cause more distress or difficulties for the individual as they move through life with people if they have the same abilities as non-disabled people. They often feel misunderstood, as people will unintentionally assume that they can do things without difficulty when they may need extra help or support to access certain things.

### **What is an example of the challenges faced by somebody with an invisible illness?**

If somebody is deaf or has hearing loss but has no visible signs of a hearing aid or cochlear implant, somebody may ask somebody to move aside for them in a shop and grow frustrated if the person does not move. Similarly, if somebody is partially sighted, they may be less likely than a blind person to use a stick and may bump into people. In both examples, they may face frustration from the general public. To be inclusive, we should always remember that if somebody unintentionally bumps into us or does not move for us, they may have sensory issues rather than assuming they are rude or inconsiderate.

People with type 1 diabetes can lose consciousness or have a seizure due to low blood sugar. As hypoglycaemia can present similarly to being drunk or on drugs, they may face difficulties getting help from the public. If somebody seems intoxicated, if it is safe to do so, we should check on them to make sure they do not have a medical need such as diabetes. This support could potentially save their life. Unfortunately, many people experiencing extreme hypoglycaemia can be left in danger due to the assumption that they are drunk because they don't visually appear to have a disability.

One other example are long-term health issues that affect energy levels and cause chronic pain. Often, people with these conditions will be faced with accusations of laziness, or people will assume that they should be able to do things at a 'normal' pace to non-disabled people, perhaps because they are younger or appear fit and well. This assumption can cause distress, as people with these conditions often experience guilt and shame for not being able to 'keep up' with others. To be inclusive, we should assume that others are always working within their abilities and that if somebody takes longer to do something, they are working within their capacity and energy levels. As we never know what is going on for people in their personal life, this is a good general rule to follow.

## How can we be more inclusive of invisible disabilities?

- Never ask somebody outright if they have an invisible illness. If somebody would like to disclose this to you, they will. People with invisible disabilities often experience many forms of ableism (direct or indirect) and may be less likely to want to disclose this. Having an inclusive environment (especially in the workplace) can ensure that people feel safe to disclose their disability when they feel safe to do so.
- If you find out somebody has an invisible illness, try not to treat them differently but do ask if they have any additional needs that they would like you to know about or if there is any way they need support. In a work environment, this can be helpful, as sometimes people will be less likely to ask for help and may not want to 'burden' their colleagues.
- If somebody has an invisible illness and suddenly has something that makes this illness 'visible' (such as a diabetes pump), try not to ask about it unless you know the person well. While some people don't mind talking about their condition, others can find it difficult. If you wouldn't ask somebody you don't know in a wheelchair about their wheelchair, apply this to other disabilities, too. People who are non-disabled tend to want to live their lives the same way you do but may need extra time or support.
- If you are unsure about how to be around somebody with an invisible illness, do your research – as a primarily able-bodied society, it is up to us to educate ourselves and make the world more inclusive. Having a disability of any kind can already be draining and asking people with disabilities to also spend their time educating others can be challenging. Some people will be happy to educate, but this should not be the assumption.

## Where can I learn more about invisible disabilities?

There is plenty of information available on invisible illnesses, including resources created by people with lived experience.

To find our list of resources, [click here](#).