



Invisible Disabilities

Persons with invisible disabilities often struggle with how to identify themselves in order to access accommodation or services. Do you tell someone that you have a disability or do you hope they will notice? Visible disabilities can generate an unsolicited response, such as offering a seat in a bus or moving to the head of a queue. Asking for services is made easier when the person who is being asked to provide the service can see the disability or a wheelchair or a cane. However, the opposite may also be true. Brain injury can result in problems with balance and mobility. A person so afflicted can be accused of being intoxicated in public and treated very negatively. Services may be denied, or sometimes security or police notified. Speech difficulties resulting from brain injury may result in similar treatment. Persons with brain injury and their caregivers may report difficulties with accessing services and be at the receiving end of discrimination based on external factors. This only makes an already difficult situation worse. Accessing employment is made much more difficult if such discrimination is practiced by employers.

Persons with profound hearing loss or deafness face similar conditions. They must choose to identify or not, and face attitudinal issues from others. It is often assumed that hearing aids solve all hearing problems for the 'hard of hearing' and that signing solves the problems of those totally without hearing. This is simply not the case. One of my students who is profoundly hard of hearing has faced frequent discrimination in obtaining rental housing, by impatient or rude clerks in stores or by prospective employers who think a deaf person is unemployable. A deaf colleague was denied a solo hotel reservation, as the hotel was afraid that she would not be able to hear fire alarms. When reminded that this was discrimination and illegal, they reluctantly agreed to allow her to stay. In the morning, when she did not respond to a telephone wake-up call, emergency services were called, including the police, who were about to break into the room when she opened the door to see what the fuss was about. They just assumed that she was incompetent and unable to look after herself because she was deaf.

Whether visible or invisible, persons with disabilities face regular discrimination and profound difficulties accessing and maintaining employment. This issue of the IJDMR gives voice to these and other issues, as Disability Management principles are applied to assist those living and working with brain injuries and deafness.

Henry Harder, EdD
University of Northern British Columbia