

Living with a disability

Whether you're disabled or a disability has affected a member of your family, a mental or physical disability will change your life. As with any major life change, you will face many challenges. Use the tips below to begin to come to terms with your new normal and start living your life with balance, strength and optimism.

Don't allow yourself to be defined by your disability – Define yourself! It's easy to fall into a state of discouragement, even despair. While it's healthy to grieve for your loss, do not allow your grief to consume you or permanently define who you are. Despite the ups and downs inherent to the bereavement process, it will be important ultimately to accept the new you.

Make appropriate accommodations at home – From wheelchair ramps and grab bars to screen readers on your computer and voice-activated controls, home modifications and technologies exist to make life easier. Funds to help pay for assistive devices are available through the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's [Assistive Device Program](#) as well as from various organizations such as [The March of Dimes Canada](#). Your loved ones may also be able to help you make your home more accessible. Whenever possible, take advantage of assistive devices and optimize your living spaces. In addition to home modifications, consider your home care options. Start by checking with the [Canadian Red Cross](#) which provides personal support and homemaking services to help seniors and people recovering from an illness or injury live independently.

Accept help but strive to become self-sufficient – At first, you will likely need help from others. Accept help with grace, but try not to become dependent on others. What skills do you need to develop? What aspects of your life do you want back? Be creative and willing to adapt. For example, if you're wheelchair-bound and miss doing your own grocery shopping, try using the local shuttle bus and the grocery store's motorized cart, or order your groceries online and have them delivered.

Find meaningful work – Whether you're back on the job or getting ready to return to work, finding meaning in your contributions, either on the job or as a volunteer, can be extremely satisfying. It will also give you a sense of purpose and help you to further develop your independence. Look for ways to make work more meaningful to you. Whether it's a contribution to others, a sense of accomplishment for a job well done, or a feeling of belonging to a larger community, take the time to appreciate the intangible value that work and volunteering bring to your life.

Take care of your mental and physical health – According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, while mental illnesses constitute more than 15% of the burden of disease in Canada, they receive only 5.5% of health care dollars. Make mental and physical health your top priority by:

- Paying attention to how you feel
- Getting regular check-ups and preventive screenings
- Exercising
- Avoiding cigarettes and illegal substances
- Limiting alcohol consumption
- Sharing any concerns with your health-care provider

Seek inspiration from others

"It is a waste of time to be angry about my disability. One has to get on with life and I haven't done badly. People won't have time for you if you are always angry or complaining" – Stephen Hawking

"I have a Disability yes that's true, but all that really means is I may have to take a slightly different path than you" – Robert. M. Hensel

Living with a disability may not be the path you would have chosen for yourself or a loved one, yet here you are on that path. It's up to you to decide what attitude to adopt, and therefore influence where that path will take you.

Working with a disability

dis·abil·i·ty *noun* \,dis-ə-'bi-lə-tē\
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a condition (such as an illness or an injury) that damages or limits a person's physical or mental abilities; the condition of being disabled
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The International Labour Organization, an agency of the United Nations, issued a report in 2007, [Equality at Work: Tackling the Challenges of a Disability](#), that challenged the concept that people with disabilities are less productive than their non-disabled counterparts. In fact, the report suggests that they may even be more productive in some jobs than non-disabled people. If you have a mental or physical disability and want to go back to work, take heart – it is possible to excel on the job even with a disability.

Work performance and productivity

A growing body of evidence shows that [workers with disabilities meet or exceed the job performance](#) of co-workers without disabilities. However, working with a disability has its own unique set of challenges. For example, your disability may require reasonable accommodations from your employer, or your co-workers may prejudge your abilities based on misconceptions and stereotypes.

Accommodating a disability

Your employer may need to make changes based on your disability. In Canada, employers are legally obligated to make reasonable accommodation through the [Employment Equity Act](#). Under paragraph 5(b) of that Act, employers must make "such reasonable accommodations as will ensure that persons in designated groups achieve a degree of representation in each occupational group in the employer's workforce that reflects their representation in society." An example of a reasonable accommodation is modifying a work schedule or making available adaptive technology such as a screen reader for the visually impaired.

Overcoming stigma at work

While you can't control what others think, you can fight stigma and lay the groundwork for a successful working relationship with others. Unfortunately, many conditions, including mental disorders, epilepsy, deafness, visual impairment and others remain stigmatized. Some of your co-workers will be compassionate due to their own experiences with mental or physical disabilities, while others will be influenced by myths and misconceptions. It's helpful to be open about your condition. Educating others both with facts and by your actions can make a big difference in how you are perceived.

Your disability doesn't define who you are or what you're capable of, nor should the misperceptions of others. Assuming you're otherwise qualified and ready to return to work with reasonable accommodations, the future has great potential.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at **1 800 387-4765** or visit workhealthlife.com.