

Hidden disabilities



Disability Awareness for All

● What is a hidden disability?

A disability that isn't immediately obvious to other people. Sometimes the term 'invisible disabilities' is used to describe this kind of condition. However, this isn't accurate as the disability is often visible, we just don't recognise it and may be mis-labelled often with a social judgement, e.g. lazy, stupid, irritable.

Hidden Disabilities can include...

- Neurodivergent conditions:
 - ADHD
 - Autism
 - Dyslexia
 - Learning disabilities
- Chronic health conditions
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Crohn's
 - Diabetes
 - M.E./Chronic fatigue syndrome
 - Chronic pain
 - Fibromyalgia
- Mental illness
 - Bipolar disorder
 - O.C.D.
 - Schizophrenia



People with hidden disabilities often display behaviours that are misunderstood and labelled with prejudice, e.g. lower frustration thresholds, socially inappropriate behaviours, lower energy levels. Not everyone with these conditions will consider themselves disabled and those that do may not want others to perceive them as disabled.

- Sunflower lanyard
 - A simple visual indicator with a positive symbol to show that someone might need extra time, additional support, or simply patience and understanding.
- Sometimes hidden disabilities are dynamic disabilities.
 - People experience barriers and obstacles in some spaces but not in others.
 - They may experience varying severity of symptoms at some times and not others.
 - It can be unpredictable.
- Masking
 - Masking describes when a person conceals their disability to meet normative expectations and 'blend in'.
 - This is often done to avoid prejudice, discrimination, and stigma.
 - Everybody masks in some way, e.g. politely pretending we have heard or understood what someone else is saying.
 - Often the ability to mask relies on the person with hidden disabilities being at their peak health-wise, i.e. generally good health, slept well, well-fed.
 - Being ill, hungry, sleep-deprived can compromise the ability to mask.
- Expectations
 - Often disabilities are hidden because we have socio-normative expectations of the ways people should think and behave in certain situations,
 - We can start to make our world more welcoming and inclusive for people with hidden disabilities by recognising, confronting and challenging these expectations and 'lowering the bar' for criteria how to participate.
 - To ensure everyone feels welcome and able to participate, we need to celebrate each person for who God has created them to be.



Case study

- Andrea is coeliac.
- Andrea has made her dietary restrictions known to the minister, who usually make sure there is gluten free bread available at communion.
- Last week her minister was off ill and when she went to the front for communion, there was only one loaf of bread. She felt embarrassed to ask if it was gluten-free and just folded her hands to indicate she would like to receive a blessing rather than the bread and wine.
- Her minister continues to be ill and Andrea isn't sure what to do. She thinks she will stay at home instead of going to church until they are better.

Church conversation starters

- Do you know anyone with a hidden disability?
- Have you seen anyone wearing the sunflower lanyard?
- How can you know if someone has a hidden disability?

Hint: they might not wear a sunflower lanyard or want to volunteer the information.

- How could you make your church a welcoming and affirming space for hidden disabilities?
- What expectations are implicit in the ways you meet as a church?
- What expectations might create barriers for people with hidden disabilities?
- How can you celebrate each person God brings into your community?
- How can you help someone who has a hidden disability but it isn't known?

Now that you have had sometime to think and reflect on your church setting and disabilities have a go at the church audit. This will help you gain a perspective for disabilities and to try to ensure your church is as disability friendly as possible.

