



Autism and Intellectual Disability



The **Inclusive**
Workplace

What is a disability?

Many people think about disability as a difference in a person's body and the way it functions. This is true, but it's not the whole story. A disability happens when there is a **mismatch** between the characteristics of a person and the characteristics of their environment. This mismatch impacts the person's ability to do daily activities and participate in their community.



Labels like **intellectual disability** or **autism spectrum disorder** are used to describe certain groups of characteristics. These labels create a shared understanding of how someone with that disability might think, understand, communicate, talk, walk, and interact. Labels don't tell us everything about a person.

People with disabilities are as diverse as people without disabilities. Each person has unique skills and strengths. Recognize the limits of a label and get to know the person.

What is autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability that usually exists from a young age (often before age 3).

Autism affects a person's social communication and behaviour (how a person interacts with others, how they experience the world, and how they process information).

Chances are you already know or work alongside someone with autism.

One in 66 people in Canada has autism, making it one of the most common neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Autism is a spectrum, which means that not all individuals with autism share the same characteristics or are impacted by these characteristics to the same degree. In fact, the characteristics of autism may change depending on the situation and the type of supports provided. People on the autism spectrum may need little to no supports in some areas of their life but require substantial supports in other areas of their life.

Autism is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of people. People who are on the autism spectrum are as diverse as people without autism.

What is an intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is a lifelong disability that usually exists from a young age (usually before age 18). Intellectual disability affects a person's intellectual functioning (how they learn, reason, plan and problem-solve). This impacts how they learn the skills needed for everyday life (sometimes called adaptive functioning). Approximately 1–2 percent of the population in Canada has an intellectual disability.



People with an intellectual disability may learn in different ways or take longer to learn new skills. Getting to know the person is the best way to understand how they learn and how to support them.



Not all people with an intellectual disability are impacted to the same degree. The type and amount of support someone needs will vary from person to person.

It is possible for someone to have an intellectual disability and be on the autism spectrum.

People from any race, ethnicity or socioeconomic group can have autism or an intellectual disability.

Autism and intellectual disability are not illnesses or diseases. They are forms of human diversity—different ways of being that add to the richness of our workplaces and society.

Does language matter?

Language is **powerful**. Words used to describe or refer to a person's disability should be respectful and promote dignity.

Person-first versus identity-first language

Some people prefer the use of **person-first** language, which places the emphasis on the person, not the disability.

Person-first language supports the idea that someone's identity is more than solely their disability. For example:

- Tammy is a person **with** an intellectual disability.
- Tammy **has** Down Syndrome and an intellectual disability.

“ Hi, I'm Tammy. I **have** an intellectual disability.”

For some people, their disability is a key component of their self-identity.

Some disabilities have rich cultural identities associated with them.

Some individuals may prefer **identity-first** language.

For example:

- Jacob is an **autistic** student.

“ Hi, I'm Jacob. **I'm autistic.**”

When in doubt about preferred language, **ask** the person with the disability. **Remember:**

- People with a disability are everyday people.
- Refer to the person's disability only when it is relevant.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not their support person or interpreter.
- Do not portray people with a disability as inspirational based solely on their disability.
- Avoid images and words designed to evoke pity or sympathy.
- Do not treat or portray people with a disability as childlike.
- People with disabilities are not a homogeneous group. Needs and experiences differ between and within the disability community.
- Some people experience intersecting discrimination because of gender and sexuality (LGBTQ2S+), incarceration, Indigeneity, mental illness, migrant status, poverty, or race added to their disability. Avoid making assumptions or generalizations.



Instead of ...

Use this ...

Disabled, handicapped, crippled, special needs	Person with a disability
Retarded, mentally retarded, mentally challenged, developmentally delayed	Person with an intellectual disability
Crippled by, afflicted with, suffering from, victim of	Person who has... Person with...
Confined, bound, restricted to, dependent on, in a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair (or walker or cane or other mobility device)
Handicapped parking, disabled parking	Accessible parking
Handicapped washroom, disabled washroom	Accessible washroom
Normal	Person without a disability
Downs	Person with Down Syndrome
Those people, special	People

Ready to learn more?

Ready, Willing & Able's eLearning course [Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder & Intellectual Disability](#) will help you learn more about the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder and intellectual disability and how these characteristics may present in the workplace.



Sources

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