



Bringing Visibility to Invisible Disabilities

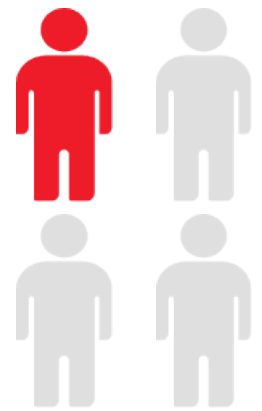
Your Guide to Supporting Employees Who Are Struggling Silently





The word “disability” often elicits a picture of an individual with mobility impairments. The truth is that many disabilities include conditions that are not always apparent to the outside world.

Roughly one in four adults in the United States live with a disability, ranging from visible physical limitations to hidden cognitive impairments. As offices, storefronts, and workspaces reopen it’s important to understand what invisible disabilities are, how these conditions affect employees, and how workplaces can be more inclusive of all abilities.



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What Are Invisible Disabilities?

With the large number of health-related conditions and neurological disorders that silently limit one's ability to navigate daily life, it's difficult to capture a complete list of the invisible disabilities that may be affecting employees. However, it's crucial that workplace leaders and management teams have an idea of the mental, chronic, and physical health conditions that classify as invisible disabilities.

Mental Health

- Anxiety disorders
- Mood disorders
- Psychotic disorders
- Personality disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Eating disorders

Chronic Disease

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Cystic Fibrosis
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
- Osteoporosis
- Rheumatoid arthritis

Physical Symptoms

- Visual impairment
- Hearing loss
- Chronic fatigue
- Chronic pain
- Epilepsy
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)


While mental health issues often qualify as invisible disabilities, a high correlation also exists between the presence of disability and the onset of mental health challenges. According to the [CDC](#), adults with disabilities experience mental distress at a five times higher rate than non-disabled adults. The [social determinants of health \(SDOH\)](#) experienced by people living with a disability, like societal constraints and stereotypes, role changes, economic stress, environmental barriers, and limited or lack of access to physical and mental healthcare, put them at exceptionally high risk for depression. It's estimated that individuals with disabilities—especially those who navigate life with physical limitations—are [three times more likely](#) to develop depression. This increased risk to mental health underscores the vital importance of destigmatization, acceptance, flexibility, and access to the appropriate resources and support systems in the workplace.

Barriers to Inclusion:

In many cases, if an employee does not directly disclose their struggle with a disability, it's all too easy for coworkers, management, and leadership teams to overlook the possibility that one's limitations might be contributing to certain behaviors, absences, or missed deadlines. In an ideal world, affected employees would be forthright in sharing their health issues and personal needs with their employers.

Unfortunately, those who struggle with invisible disabilities often feel uncomfortable disclosing any information related to their illness for fear of facing discrimination. Some of the barriers these individuals might face include:

- **Stigma** associated with being “disabled”
- **Ignorance** or lack of understanding from others
- **Hero worship** which, despite positioning the individual as brave or heroic, singles them out for their differences
- **The “spread effect”** or the assumption that a limitation in one aspect of living carries over to all other areas of functioning
- **Stereotypes** associated with certain conditions or any other positive or negative preconceived notions that ignore the individual, their personality, and unique experiences
- **Denial** that a person is living with a disability because they “seem normal”
- **Fear** that one might say or do something wrong when interacting with an affected individual, so they avoid them entirely



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In the United States, sixty-one million people are experiencing some kind of functional impairment associated with a disability. The question for us must be: How can we be more inclusive?”

Dr. Jessica Isom, Virgin Pulse
Science Advisory Board



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In an organizational sense, equity is really focused on bridging that gap between the haves and the have nots to ensure that minority and majority groups have equitable access to opportunities and resources in the workplace.”

Dr. Jessica Isom, Virgin Pulse Science Advisory Board

Building a More Inclusive Workplace:

A truly diverse and inclusive workplace must include accommodations that provide all employees the opportunity to feel and perform their best and to find success despite any personal limitations. Inclusion in the workplace can mean many things for different populations, such as offering flexibility for working parents who struggle to find childcare or educating employees on microaggressions. Since the type and severity of one’s disability and limitations, preferences, and job function can vary significantly within the same workforce, organizations will need to consider new processes, training, and employee resources that can be implemented in the short term while planning modifications to the physical workplace environment that enables all employees to maximize their potential.

What organizations can do to create a more inclusive culture for differently-abled employees:

- Introduce new hires to the available employee benefits to increase utilization of physical, mental, and social health offerings during the onboarding process.
- Talk openly about hidden health issues in the workplace. Not only will this drive awareness about the invisible conditions that may exist within the workforce, but it will also help to identify and address any preexisting stigma or stereotypes that prevent affected individuals from feeling fully included.
- Emphasize abilities rather than limitations.

- Focus on the need for accessibility, not the disability itself.
- Avoid any language that implies stereotypes, both negative and positive. For example, when a coworker or manager allows their expectation of an employee’s disability to define that person, it ignores the uniqueness of the individual.
- Encourage individuals living with any disability to advocate for themselves while being available for support if needed.

Remember that organizational leaders and team members may not even be aware that an impairment exists because of the stigma related to disclosure. Therefore, fostering an organizational culture that invests in trust between the employee and employer as well as across employee populations is crucial. Suppose employees feel supported, included, and have easy access to valuable resources and accommodations. In that case, they are more likely to feel comfortable disclosing their disability and asking for assistance when needed, allowing them to bring their best selves to work each day.

Most importantly, the employee should never be labeled as the problem because it can shape how solutions are offered. An inclusive culture seeks to embrace the diversity of the workforce—from age to learning styles to cultural backgrounds to gender identities to health status—without singling out any one group or individual.

Catering to every health and wellbeing need of each workforce member can be challenging and overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. Whether the goal is to simply support wellbeing with daily habit tracking, wellness tips, and keeping employees connected or to launch company-wide wellbeing challenges, integrate partner resources, provide virtual or onsite one-on-one live services, or help employees manage chronic conditions, it can all be found in our Homebase for Health®.

By bringing all of the available tools, resources, and benefits into one easy-to-navigate digital platform, employees will be able to access the supports they

need whenever they need them. What's more, AI-driven software and predictive analytics that learn about the user to issue intelligent recommendations based on an in-platform health assessment and app interactions can guide employees to the benefits and tools that best address their health and wellness needs, even for those who don't feel comfortable disclosing their limitations to their employer, managers, or coworkers.

Employers—it's time to make health and wellbeing more accessible to everyone. [Talk to a wellbeing expert](#) and start building your [Homebase for Health®](#) today. It's critical to the health and wellbeing of workers and your business.

