



Southern Volunteering (SA) Inc

Engaging Volunteers With Hidden Disabilities



What is a Hidden Disability?

A hidden, or non-visible disability is a disability that may not be immediately apparent to others. These disabilities can be temporary, situational or permanent.

Some Examples of Hidden Disabilities

- Autism
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Aphasia
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
- Chronic Pain
- Coeliac Disease
- Crohn's Disease
- Dementia
- Diabetes (Types 1 and 2)
- Dyslexia
- Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome
- Endometriosis
- Epilepsy
- Fibromyalgia
- Haemophilia
- Lupus
- Mental Health Conditions
- Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
- Myalgic Encephalopathy/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS)
- Narcolepsy
- Ostomy
- Parkinson's Disease
- Partial Hearing/Vision Loss
- Stuttering
- Ulcerative Colitis

Living with a Hidden Disability

Living with a hidden disability can be complex and often difficult, as the condition is not immediately visible to others. Below are some of the feelings and experiences people living with hidden disability commonly report:

Feeling Misunderstood

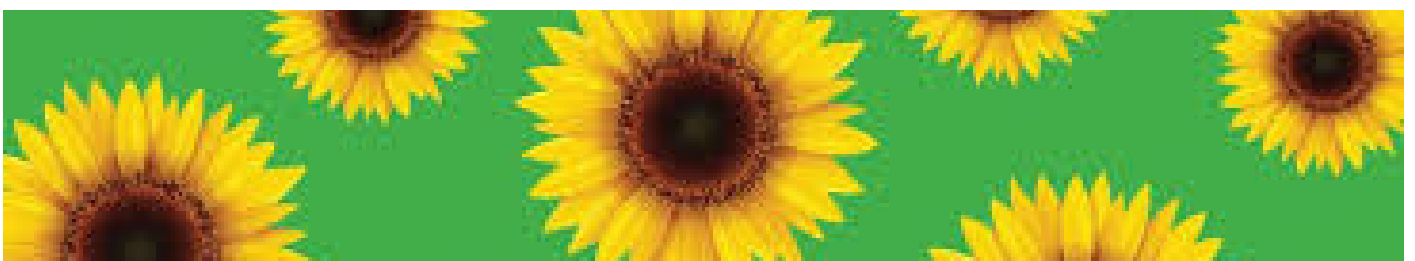
Because the disability isn't visible, others may assume the person is fine or exaggerating. This can lead to people being judged for needing support or using disability aids sporadically. Not being believed or understood can make people withdraw socially. Some avoid asking for help or stop participating in activities they once enjoyed.

Unpredictability

Hidden disabilities often fluctuate. Someone might seem capable one day but struggle the next. This inconsistency can cause guilt or frustration, and sometimes suspicion from others.

Having to Explain Constantly

Many people feel pressure to "prove" their disability to employers, colleagues, or even friends and family. Others choose not to disclose it, which can feel isolating and exhausting.



Engaging a volunteer with a hidden disability

Some individuals who have a hidden disability will disclose this, others may prefer not to.

For general good practice volunteer management, is it helpful to include a question in your recruitment process that asks how you might offer additional support to make someone's volunteering experience the best it can be. For example "Is there anything you would like us to be aware of, so you can have a rewarding volunteering experience with us?" This gives people the opportunity to express any support needs they may have.

Example supports that people with hidden disabilities may need:

- **Flexible breaks and easy access to bathrooms, especially for people who have disabilities that affect their bowels and bladders**
- **Clear communication and assistive technology e.g. someone with hearing loss may need closed captions for online meetings or need the people they work with to face them when speaking, or someone who struggles to read may need picture or video instructions**
- **Supports that assist with their disability. Examples might be noise-cancelling headphones, energy-conserving tools such as grabbers or document holders, hot water bottles or heat pads for pain relief**
- **Breaks for monitoring health (e.g diabetics may need this to check blood sugars) or to take medication. They may need fridge space for medication.**
- **Flexible participation. As the impact of hidden disabilities often fluctuates, a person may have periods of feeling well and times when their symptoms are more difficult.**

Individuality

No two people experience a condition in exactly the same way and their needs may differ. The most practical support is often simply asking the person what support works best for them and responding with assured confidentiality, flexibility and respect. People with hidden disabilities often develop strong coping skills and creativity in managing daily life.

Interaction With Others

It is not just your responsibility as a Volunteer Manager to embrace diversity in your volunteer teams. It's important that volunteers support and accept their peers who have hidden disabilities, whether they are aware of the disability or not. All volunteers should be informed that other volunteers they work with may need extra flexibility, occasional or additional breaks, or alternative ways to complete their tasks. This can be added to every volunteer's induction or included in the organisation Volunteer Handbook.

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is an internationally recognised symbol that people can wear (usually as a green lanyard with yellow sunflowers) to discreetly show they have a hidden disability, and that they may need extra support, understanding, or patience. It is worthwhile educating your volunteer team about it. The more people who know what the Sunflower means, the more welcoming and accessible everyday life becomes for people living with hidden disabilities.



For more information visit <https://hdsunflower.com/au/>

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