



ADJUSTMENT TO DISABILITY

Sometimes traumatic injury results in permanent disability or chronic illness. Disability has been defined as the inability or difficulty in performing some tasks or roles. It is considered to be the consequences of physical or mental impairments.

In contrast, handicap refers to a social disadvantage that results from impairment or disability. The distinction between these terms remind us that traumatic injuries occur in the context of the wider social environment.

Adjustment to disability can be a long and difficult process. It includes learning new ways of doing things, and using residual strengths to compensate for weaknesses. An individual's strengths can come in myriad forms, including physical, emotional intellectual, social support networks, and financial resources. Yet the constellation of strengths as well as the type and severity of disability is unique for each person.

Adjustment to disability can often involve changes in self-image, where a person may modify their ideas about what makes them a unique individual or how they may appear to others as a result of their injuries and disability.

For example, a skilled basketball player may, following a disabling injury, draw upon his other strengths and skills to become a basketball coach, or joining a wheelchair basketball league.

Stages of Adjustment

Change engenders grieving. For many who live with a disability resulting from a traumatic event, grieving is a significant part of the adjustment process. Grieving for losses may also be necessary to help modify dreams and expectations of the future.

According to Nancy Kerr (1961), the stages of adjustment to disability are:

Shock

"This is a bad dream. This isn't me. I'll soon be back on track."

The individual still thinks he or she is as able to do things just as before. They are still striving for the same goals as before the traumatic event.

Expectation of full recovery

"I'm sick, but I'll soon be well."

In this stage, people often are searching for a cure and are pre-occupied with their physical condition, overestimating the meaning of small recoveries. People often focus on stories of miraculous recoveries.

Full recovery is still the only goal and people often reject the possibility of ongoing disability. They see the disability as a barrier cutting them off from everything they consider worthwhile.

Mourning

"All is lost."

The individual realizes that the disability is permanent and begins to mourn their losses. They feel a profound loss of control and powerlessness.

They may feel angry, depressed, anxious, alienated and abandoned. They may withdraw into themselves. Counseling may help the person examine their feelings and eventually move on. As the individual learns to cope with the disability the psychological barriers of the disability are pushed back and they begin to set new goals.

Adjustment

“It’s different. This is my ‘new normal’ way of doing or thinking about things.”

The individual now sees the disability as one of their many personal characteristics. The disability is now integrated with their other personal assets and liabilities. Reinvestment in a new reality can be a positive sign of healthy adjustment.

Adjusting to losses does not necessarily mean accepting them, or giving up hope for improved functioning.

To each his (or her) own!

Each person approaches adjustment in his or her own way. For some the journey is a private affair. Others seek counseling to facilitate the grief process, make meaning of the situation, and to look forward to making new life goals.

Many turn to peers in self-help groups or disability-specific associations, such as the Amputee Association, Parquad, or People with Disabilities International Inc. These groups can provide companionship and assistance in accessing resources to facilitate access to the world for the physically disabled.

For further reading:

References

- Kerr, N. (1961). Understanding the Process of Adjustment to Disability. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 27(6), 16-18
- New South Wales Health Department. (12 March 2002). *What is Trauma?*

<http://www.swsah.nsw.gov.au/livtrauma/public/psycho/adjustment.asp>