Mental health of those suffering with physical or learning disabilities
When somebody is physically disabled or learning disabled many people may unintentionally overlook their potential for mental illness. This is unfortunate as this group of society is at times more at risk of mental health problems. This brochure will briefly look at some of the reasons why these conditions lead to mental illness, and in some cases, why mental illness can cause the disabilities. We are aware that in many cases mental illness is a disability, highlighted by Chinese research showing that 24% of people with a mental illness are moderately or severely disabled by their mental health condition. But for the purposes of this brochure we will be looking solely at physical and learning disabilities.

As with many sub-sections of the global population, statistics are often hard to come by. This can be due to a number of reasons, but one major reason is that many countries worldwide have a history of hiding those who are disabled away from the general population. This, coupled with cultural shame associated with disabilities in some nations, leads to unrepresentative statistics and problems with findings. This is unfortunate, as these areas where the disabled are treated poorly are likely to have the worst statistics for mental health. These are the areas which need the most improvement. Luckily many countries now have laws to prevent the discrimination of the learning and physically disabled, and other countries are becoming more accepting.

**Learning disability and mental health**

There are a number of different types of learning disabilities that range in severity. Some may require full time care, whilst other conditions, with the correct support, allow the sufferer to live independently in day-to-day life. For the purpose of this brochure, we will look at learning disability as a whole, not the individual conditions.

As a whole, learning disabilities are defined as a reduced intellectual ability, and a difficulty with everyday activities that lasts a lifetime. Those with learning disabilities may take longer to learn new skills and may need more support with complicated information and new tasks. Unfortunately, findings suggest that by having a learning disability, a person has an increased likelihood of a mental illness. This not only causes further problems for the sufferer, but also creates another element for those who are carers, which in many cases, are family members. It is important to note that those with learning disabilities can experience the full spectrum of mental disorders, much like the rest of the population.
What causes increased levels of mental disorder in this group?
The reasons for the increased levels of mental health problems in this
group are not fully understood, and a number of theories have been put
forward. Some theories focus on the genetic and biological aspects of
learning disabilities, suggesting that these may cause a person to be more
predisposed to mental illness. Other theories focus on environmental
factors and social experiences that those with learning disabilities
experience. These experiences are seen as the potential cause for mental
health problems in most of the general population, but unfortunately, are
likely to be seen in increased numbers in those with a learning disability;
this would explain the increased instances of disorders in this group.

Social support is key for healthy mental health, but unfortunately, many
people with learning disabilities may find establishing relationships can be
problematic. A UK study has found that, in childhood, those with learning
difficulties are often socially excluded, and 8 in 10 children in this group
are bullied. Bullying is not only socially isolating, but also opens the child
up to prejudice and discrimination, which unfortunately, may continue
into adulthood, and is another risk factor for mental illness. Economic
status has also been found to be associated with worse mental health
outcomes in this group. UK researchers have found that half of families
with a disabled child live in poverty. Whilst this may be a result of needing
to work less to care for the child, increased poverty can lead to increased
stress which can have detrimental impacts on mental health. This can also
lead to social exclusion if family members need to be working extended
hours, thus keeping them out of the home. When moving out of childhood,
a learning disability can inhibit some sufferer's abilities to live alone, and as
such, they may lose their sense of independence which has been shown to
be a major risk factor in developing mental health problems.

How common are mental disorders in this group?
Mental health disorders (and associated problems) is a fairly sizeable
problem in those with learning disabilities. In fact, one UK study in 2007
found that 54% of their sample of 1023 people with learning disabilities
had a mental health problem. Using other larger samples it has generally
been accepted that between 25-40% of those in the UK with a learning
disability have a dual diagnosis with a mental health disorder, which is
an alarmingly high percentage. In the USA, the estimated percentage is
thought to be similar to the UK, with USA researchers proposing estimates
between 30-35%. Australian researchers suggested that disabilities in
general are not all uniform when it comes to the risk of mental health
problems; but they did highlight fairly consistent research showing
intellectual disabilities as having an increased risk of problems. This
highlights how much of a global issue this problem has become.

When looking into age groups it seems that this disparity in diagnosis
starts in young life and persists throughout most age groups. Evidence out
of the UK shows that children with a learning disability are over four times
more susceptible, (36% compared to 8%), to mental health problem than
their peers. Canadian studies show this pattern continues into late teenage
years and mid-life, with researchers finding those with a learning disability
were more than twice as likely to report high levels of depression, anxiety
and suicidal thoughts, than their age matched peers. This difference
was greater in those aged between 30-44 years compared to those aged
15-21 years. When it comes to older adults in the UK, it is also thought
that learning disabilities make a person substantially more susceptible to
dementia. In those aged 65 years of age or older, 21.6% of those with a
learning disability had dementia, compared to 5.7% of their peers.
Problems with statistics

Unfortunately there are two main reasons why these statistics are likely to be largely unrepresentative of the real problem. The first is with the way systems are set up in many countries. Learning disabilities and mental health problems are often dealt with by different departments of the health service, meaning funding is also kept separate. This makes it more difficult for clinicians to treat a person under both services together, leading to a disconnecting of treatment and a reduction in reporting. The second problem, which is likely to be a bigger issue than the dividing of departments, is something referred to as ‘Diagnostic Overshadowing’. This simply means that a clinician may overlook or minimise a mental health problem in those with learning disabilities. This may be because they feel the learning disability should be the focus of treatment, or they may incorrectly assume the mental health problems are simply part of the learning disability. This not only affects the statistics we have available but can also prevent people suffering from receiving the treatment they need.

Physical disability and mental health

A physical disability is any type of physical condition that significantly impacts one or more major life activity. It is virtually limitless as to what a physical disability can be. An injury may constitute a disability to one person, but not another; it all depends on whether the injury impacts their daily life. For an injury to be considered a disability, it must impact mobility, work tolerance, self-care or communication. Some disabilities may affect all of these. When we are talking about disabilities in this brochure, we are referring to those that are longer term and have resulted in permanent life changes; not conditions that result in temporary disability.

What causes increased levels of mental disorder in this group?

When looking at the causation of increased mental health problems in the physically disabled it is important to be aware that many studies cannot imply causation; instead we are simply highlighting a relationship. This is because it is difficult for studies to state that the disability caused the mental health problem as, in many cases, data is not available for the period prior to the disability. It is also important to note that there is a great deal of variability for how people react to becoming physically disabled, and that whilst experiences may cause some people to develop mental disorders, this is not the case for all sufferers. In fact one Australian study has found that 65% of those with a physical disability did not experience reduced mental health after the disability onset.

When we look at the reasons why some disabled people may experience greater mental health problems, we tend to focus on environmental and socio-economic factors, in a similar approach seen when discussing learning disability. One area
to look at is the experiences after the onset of the disability. Primarily here we focus on the potential financial implications of the physical disability and the social isolation it may cause.

Financially, a physical disability can prevent a person being able to work and therefore leaves them relying on the state for an income. Also, in many countries without Universal Healthcare, a long term disability can create an influx of medical bills. Both of these financial situations are likely to cause an increased amount of stress and anxiety which may become severe enough to be classed as mental disorders.

A physical disability may also lead to social isolation as it can prevent some people from leaving the house, or experiencing things they were previously able to do. It may also cause a loss of independence, especially if the disability requires the care of family members or professionals. This can lead to great feelings of helplessness and depression. Another experience after onset that may impact mental health is the services that are available. Canadian researchers have found that children underuse specialist mental health services when they are suffering from chronic physical conditions. This is unfortunate; if these services are utilised earlier in the process it may help to relieve some of the impacts that the physical illness may have on mental health later in life.

The other area we look at is information prior to the disability onset, such as age, employment status and social background. This is important, as Australian researchers have found that those who were younger and unemployed prior to injury, with lower educational attainment, were most likely to experience a significant mental health deterioration after the onset of a physical disability. This is an interesting point as it shows that these people may have already been susceptible to mental health problems and unfortunately physical disability was the event that triggered onset.

**How common are mental disorders in this group?**

Mental health disorders are unfortunately fairly common in those with physical disabilities. UK researchers have found that 30% of those with a long term physical condition also have a mental health problem, and 46% of people with a mental health problem have a physical condition. This statistic increases in Australia, where 59% of people with a common mental health disorder also have a physical condition; researchers here also confirmed that those with physical conditions were at a significantly greater risk of disorders than the general public. Canadian researchers have looked at chronic illness and disability in children and have also found that this age group is significantly more at risk of mental health conditions, finding them to have three times the risk of developing a disorder, compared with their non-disabled peers. This mimics findings in adults and shows the risk that disabled children may be affected by mental health problems throughout their lives. Long term studies have found that the psychological distress initially experienced as a result of a physical disability does gradually reduce, but four years after the disability onset, people still have a distress level higher than prior to the disability.
In 2012, a joint research team in the UK highlighted that those with physical conditions are particularly at risk of anxiety and depression. This finding was also seen in the Australian Mental Health Survey. This showed that 29% of people with a disability reported an anxiety disorder and 17% reported an affective disorder in the twelve months prior to the 2008 survey. That's in sharp contrast to the general population who reported a 12% prevalence of anxiety disorders and 4% prevalence for affective disorders. This highlights that those with a physical disability are at a substantially higher risk of these conditions. This is not a new finding; studies back in the 1980s in Canada found those with physical disabilities showed more depressive symptoms, regardless of gender. With data showing these findings thirty years ago, it is concerning to see this group of society still showing these elevated symptoms. It highlights the need for comprehensive mental health programmes in the treatment of physical disabilities.

Mental health issues as a cause of physical disability

We have discussed how having a disability can impact a person's mental health but it is important to also highlight that having a mental health disorder can also increase the likelihood of becoming disabled. It can also increase the likelihood that an illness or impairment will have a disabling effect. Estimates suggest that the effects of poor mental health on physical illness costs the UK NHS £8 billion a year. This is a staggering sum and highlights how much of an effect mental health issues can have on physical health. Australian researchers support the idea that a mental illness increases the risk of a physical disorder, finding that 29% of people with a mental disorder reported disability, compared to 12% of people without a disorder. This research also highlighted an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and stroke amongst those with mental health problems. It has also been found that having a mental health problem when a disability develops is detrimental to the outcomes of the disability. It often leads to poorer functioning, additional complications, and increases the likelihood that a person will remain disabled.

There are a number of reasons why a mental illness increases the risk of disability. One major reason being the behaviours exhibited due to the symptoms of disorders. Unfortunately there are a great number of mental health conditions that cause behaviours that result in long term damage to the body, including alcohol and substance abuse, self-harm, and eating disorders, to name a few. This can mean that a mental health disorder is treated and managed, but the sufferer is left disabled by the behaviours it caused. Linked to behaviours, another potential reason for the onset of disability is that sufferers from a mental health problem are unlikely to seek treatment for early physical symptoms, and are unlikely to adhere to treatment plans once they have been diagnosed. There is also the potential for them to seek treatment in a timely fashion but be misdiagnosed. This may be due to a difficulty in explaining the symptoms they are experiencing, or a potential disregarding of the symptoms by a healthcare professional, due to an incorrect assumption that they are part of the disorder.

If you believe that you or somebody you know is suffering from a mental health disorder and a disability, then it is important to seek treatment as soon as possible. Remember that mental health problems are not part of most learning or physical disabilities and should be treated like they would be when seen in the general population. If you are already receiving treatment for a disability but feel you need help with your mental health, then please do raise this issue with your health care team as soon as possible so you can get the treatment you are entitled to.

For more information on living with mental health problems please visit our website www.shawmindfoundation.org
The Shaw Mind Foundation
The Foundation Centre, Navigation House
48 Millgate, Newark, Nottinghamshire
NG24 4TS, United Kingdom

fundraising@shawmindfoundation.org
www.shawmindfoundation.org

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Registered address: The Shaw Mind Foundation, The Foundation Centre, Navigation House,
48 Millgate, Newark, Nottinghamshire NG24 4TS United Kingdom