

Health and Wellness: Emotional Health and Disability Pride

2009

December 03 is the United Nations' annual **International Day of Persons with Disabilities**, which aims to widen awareness of disability issues. Globally, persons with disabilities face stigma and discrimination as well as denial of basic human rights including food, housing, health care, education and employment.

Independent Living Canada is marking the day by focussing on Health and Wellness. Health and wellness are not the same as the presence or absence of a disability; they are broader concepts that have a direct impact on everyone's quality of life. Persons with disabilities can be both healthy and well.

Did you know?

- Discriminating against people or treating them unfairly because they have a disability is called **ableism** and is **against the law**
- Having negative attitudes about people with disabilities, believing in stereotypes or being afraid of people with disabilities is also ableism
- It is still common to hear comments like "that guy's a retard" or "that student is special needs." This kind of language is harmful to the emotional health of people with disabilities because it ignores their **personhood** and instead talks about them like **objects**
- People with disabilities are often **invisible** (absent from media, literature, history) and **excluded** (absent from discussion, debate, decisions). When this happens it sends a message that people with disabilities do not matter, cannot contribute and should not participate
- The messages sent by **exclusion, invisibility, ableism** and **objectification** are repeated so often that many people with disabilities believe them; this can create **poor emotional health** through lowered self-esteem and self-respect, decreased motivation, and increased risk of harmful thoughts or behaviours
- These messages can contribute to the development of secondary conditions or disabilities (for example: depression, anxiety and sexual dysfunction) in persons with disabilities (see Information Sheet #1)
- Recent studies show that the emotional well-being of teenagers with disabilities is worse than the emotional well-being of their nondisabled peers¹

Some Solutions

- Emotional well-being is having confidence that you can handle whatever comes your way, feeling that your life has meaning and purpose, and achieving a sense of fulfillment²
- All people feel sad, angry or discouraged some of the time, even if they have high emotional well-being; but if you feel this way a lot of the time you might want to talk about it with someone you trust and respect
- Disability Pride is part of the path to emotional well-being because it
 - Rejects the idea that disability (or that a person with a disability) is in any way bad, less-than, shameful, or abnormal. **Be proud of who you are!**
 - Refuses the pity, shame and scorn of individuals and of society. **No pity!**
 - Teaches to accept the way you look, act, think and feel. **Your differences are interesting, valuable, normal and desirable!**
- People with disabilities are human beings. Using **person-first language** (for example, “people with intellectual disabilities”) instead of language that **objectifies** (“the developmentally disabled”) is a recognition of a person’s humanity and dignity
- Remember that you do not need to “overcome” your disability; instead, society needs to “overcome” its attitude about disability
- Join the Disability Pride movement! There are many groups around the country that are actively working to spread the Disability Pride message
- Independent Living Centres have staff and volunteers who can help you learn to fight back when you are being treated in a way that is harmful to you
- There are laws in Canada and in your province that protect people with disabilities from being treated unfairly or unequally by individuals, businesses and organizations. To learn more about them you can contact your local Independent Living Centre

To locate an IL Centre near you, go to www.ILCanada.ca
or call 613.563.2581 or email info@ilc-vac.ca

1. Boyce, W., D. Davies, S. Raman, J. Tynjälä, R. Välimaa, M. King, O. Gallupe and L. Kannas. “Emotional Health of Canadian and Finnish students with disabilities or chronic conditions. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, v. 32 (2), June 2009, pp. 154-161.

2. “Psychological and Emotional Health.” *Disabled World*. <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/psychological/psychological-health.php> Retrieved 16 November 2009.