

# The Psychological Impact of Acquiring a Disability



Life after acquiring a disability can be an emotionally difficult time. The feelings of grief, loss and acceptance are common. Working through grief and embracing new changes to daily life are important steps in accepting living with a disability. Understanding what resources are out there and learning as much as possible about one's disability can help.

Dwelling on what has been lost is a normal part of the acceptance process, but it can become harmful in excess. Focusing on future goals will help individuals acclimate to their new normal. Understanding that individuals with disabilities have rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) can help someone new to disability understand that they can continue to participate independently in society.

Nearly **26%** of adults in the U.S. have some type of disability

Disabilities can be obtained through traumatic accidents, chronic illnesses, or other life-changing circumstances.

A new disability can change a person's life, both physically and mentally.

## Experiencing Grief

For many, acquiring a disability is followed by a grieving period. Grief can cause intense emotions like sorrow, fear, rage, anxiety, mental and physical discomfort, as well as feeling alienated. Depression and posttraumatic stress disorder are common for people who acquire a disability.

The grieving process is common and an important process during the adjustment period. Individuals should give themselves time to mourn and acknowledge that they have suffered a major loss. Many lose a component of themselves and some of their future plans as a result of a disability. Try not to ignore or suppress these feelings.

It is difficult to work through grief without feeling pain or learning how to cope. It is also important to understand that people will go through a variety of emotions. This is normal and different for everyone. This experience can be unpredictable and will contain emotional highs and lows. With time, the lows become less intense, and individuals begin to find their new normal.

Acquiring a disability can also bring about a loss of physical comfort, vigor, mobility, and independence. One can lose the ability to participate in some activities. Employment opportunities, financial stability, body image perception, and a sense of self can all be impacted by having a disability.

## Adapting to Life with Disability

Research shows that most people at least partially adapt to getting a disability. An idea exists that people have a general baseline level of happiness. This varies from person to person and will return to baseline as they navigate positive and negative experiences in life. Research suggests this is true of adjusting to life as a person with a disability.

### 4 Stages

Shock

Denial

Anger/Depression

Acceptance

**Shock** can last for a few hours or much longer. A state of numbness, both physical and emotional, is typical.

**Denial** is a defense mechanism that gives an individual space to gradually get used to the idea of their new circumstances. Denial can last anywhere from three weeks to two months.

Denial can become problematic, but only if it begins to interfere with a person's life, treatment, or rehabilitation efforts.

## Anger and/or depression

are feelings which can occur when an individual begins to feel like they are being treated differently because of their disability. Grief may also occur in this stage.



**Adjustment and acceptance** do not mean an individual with a disability feels happy about their circumstances. During this stage, an individual gives up on false hope they may have had. They start to understand what their new normal may look like. At this point, the individual accepts and acknowledges the permanence of their condition.

## Coping with Grief

It is important to note that not everyone experiences each of these stages and there is no particular order each stage should follow. The stages are not linear but are a guide to better understand the process of adapting to life with a disability.

Social support is key to adjustment and has been associated with well-being for people new to having disabilities. Communicating feelings and experience with family and friends is helpful.

Social support is linked with better mental and physical health and with improved outcomes following trauma.

One effective support system is other individuals who have successfully confronted similar experiences, providing positive role modeling and approaches for adjusting.

It is not healthy for individuals to focus too much on the past and to ruminate over what they have lost. In doing so, they focus on heartache, pain, loss, what they can no longer do, viewing themselves as inadequate.

Dwelling on what used to be or activities that used to be easy can be problematic.



Individuals who focus on coping, on the other hand, have active roles in their own lives and their community. This helps to prevent devastation resulting from their new circumstance.



This doesn't mean that these people gloss over the challenges they face, but that they can deal with the situations that arise instead of pretending that they don't exist.

### **Individuals benefit from focusing on what they can do.**

They can benefit from learning as much as possible about their newly acquired disability. Understanding their rights under the ADA can further empower a person with a newly acquired disability to feel a sense of optimism while considering their future.



Getting into  
**COUNSELING**  
is crucial

Both individual and group counseling can be extremely beneficial.

One important aspect of group counseling is the mixture of newly disabled individuals with experienced individuals who have gone through the stages of grief and adjusting their lives.

These people can offer support and share their experiences.

# RESOURCES

ADA Centers (Tel: 800-949-4232) can explain rights and responsibilities under the Americans with Disability Act pertaining to employment, access to state and local government, access to places of public accommodation, and telecommunications.

The U.S. government offer direction to a variety of federal, state, and local housing programs that can assist with:

- Finding an affordable place to live, modifying an existing home, or helping develop skills to live independently.
- Individuals can also find information on assistance from the government with medical bills and insurance options.

Most hospitals have a care coordinator responsible for assisting patients with their discharge planning. Care coordinators:

- Work with social services to assist with any support that is needed;
- Provide information about the disability including:
- Relevant organizations, support groups, or resources;
- Information about entitlement to any benefits;
- How to get support and/or equipment.

Contact your local Center for Independent Living to get information on acquiring a service animal in your area.

The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation offers free resources to individuals living with paralysis. The foundation helps individuals connect through peer mentoring, finding local resources, virtual support groups, and Quality of Life grants.

Rehabilitation counseling services work with people during the adjustment period.

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is one of the largest disability resources in the country, assisting individuals with a disability who want to work.

DVR provides individualized services to allow individuals to reach their employment goals and live independently.

Check out the original report:  
<https://rmad.ac/g4e>

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