

Pleasurable's What are Cognitive Disabilities?

What was cognitive disability?

- In the USA, we used to use "cognitive disability" to mean what we now call "intellectual disability." [\[source\]](#)
 - Some places in the world, such as Australia, still use the term "cognitive disability" to mean "intellectual disability."
 - In the UK, "general learning disability" refers to what the USA calls "intellectual disability."
- "Intellectual disability" is also formerly known as "developmental delay" or "mental retardation" (the latter word, being highly offensive, is now no longer acceptable to use).
- Intellectual disability does not refer solely to congenital disorders.
- Congenital disorders, also known as "birth defects," are conditions that are present at birth. There are two main categories: structural and functional / developmental. Structural refers to disorders of the shape or build of the body. Functional / developmental refers to problems with how body parts or body systems work or function. [\[source\]](#)
 - Some better-known examples of congenital disorders which do not cause intellectual disabilities are: vision loss or blindness, hearing loss or deafness, and muscular dystrophy.
- In the USA, intellectual disability is generally considered to be a form of developmental disability (disorders that develop between birth and the age of 22). [\[source\]](#)
 - Other forms of developmental disability include: ADD/ADHD, autism, cerebral palsy, Fragile X syndrome, language disorders, learning disorders, Tourette syndrome [\[source\]](#), and some forms of epilepsy.
- IDD or I/DD is a blanket term that means Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. I/DD is generally used to describe when people have both intellectual disabilities and other disabilities.

What is the difference between the specific cognitive disability, which is now known as intellectual disability, and the more broad categorization of cognitive disabilities as a larger group?

Intellectual disability

- Intellectual disability is a diagnosis that refers to someone's lower than average ease of ability to understand or learn and to adapt to new or stressful situations.
- Intellectual disability is a term that refers to all disabilities of the intellect.
- Intellect, or intelligence, is a part of cognition, which makes intellectual disability a type or form of cognitive disabilities.

Cognitive disabilities

- "Cognitive" means of, relating to, being, or involving conscious thought-based activities of the mind such as thinking, reasoning, remembering, and perceiving.
- "Cognition" refers to all cognitive mental processes and functions [\[source\]](#). This includes "acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses" [\[source\]](#) ("the senses" refer to perception).
 - Some cognitive processes and functions are: imagination, intelligence, perception, and thought; comprehension and production of language; the formation of knowledge and memory; and executive function (decision-making and problem-solving; computation and reasoning; evaluation and judgment; and attentional control, cognitive inhibition, inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility).

What are cognitive disabilities?

In the USA, using the plural to refer to cognitive disabilities generally refers to a category of disability rather than a specific cognitive disability.

As cognitive disabilities are disabilities that impair cognitive function and processes, there are many forms of cognitive disabilities, including the below.

- Acquired brain injuries: traumatic brain injury (falls, vehicular accidents, sports, and other impact injuries to the head) and non-traumatic brain injury (stroke, brain tumors, aneurysm, infection, poisoning, hypoxia, ischemia, encephalopathy, substance abuse). [\[source\]](#)
- Amnesias. [\[source\]](#)
- Cognitive disorders, also known as neurocognitive disorders, which according to the DSM-5 are delirium, mild neurocognitive disability (also known as mild cognitive impairment or MCI), and major neurocognitive disorder. The DSM-5 makes a distinction between mood disorders / psychiatric disabilities and cognitive disorders. [\[source\]](#) and [\[source\]](#)

- What are known under the DSM-5 as “mild” and “major neurocognitive disorders” are actually descriptors of symptoms stemming from other conditions, including neurodegenerative diseases.
- It’s important to note that not all neurodegenerative diseases have traits of neurocognitive disorders and not all neurocognitive disorders are caused by neurodegenerative diseases.
 - Some neurodegenerative diseases that cause neurocognitive disorders are: Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, and Huntington’s disease.
 - Some non-neurodegenerative conditions that cause neurocognitive disorders are: vascular disease and traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Executive dysfunctions and frontal lobe disorders. [[source](#)]
- Intellectual disability. [[source](#)]
- Mental illness that is serious and persistent. [[source](#)]
- Neurodevelopmental disabilities such as ADD/ADHD, auditory processing disorder, autism spectrum disorders, developmental language disorders (also known as specific language impairment, language delay, or developmental dysphasia), learning disabilities or learning disorders (known in the UK as “learning difficulties”) such as dyscalculia (math disorder), dysgraphia (writing disorder), dyslexia (reading disorder), dyspraxia (physical or motor coordination disorder), and nonverbal learning disability (also known as visual-spatial learning disorder); and sensory processing disorder. [[source](#), [source](#), and [source](#)]
- Other (usually acquired) speech and language disorders such as dysphasia (also known as aphasia, which is the difficulty comprehending or formulating language). [[source](#), [source](#), and [source](#)]
- Stroke (in some, but not all cases). [[source](#)]

Note: Some learning disabilities are neurodevelopmental while others happen later in life as a result of changes in the brain from dementia, stroke, traumatic brain injury, and other causes. When this happens, the learning disability is known as “acquired.”

Note: There are disabilities, particularly autism, which get labeled as “neurodevelopmental” disorders and get grouped into the I/DD (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) category particularly by psychiatry/psychology, but 1) autism is not unto itself an intellectual disability (and therefore not a “cognitive disability” as defined by the old use of the term in the USA) and 2) many autistic people refute the term “neurodevelopmental” and instead use “neurodiverse” or “neurodivergent.”

Who is considered neurodivergent?

Neurodivergent, as defined by Nick Walker, PhD (author of [Neuroqueer Heresies](#)) “means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal.’ According to Walker, neurodiversity “is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.” [\[source\]](#)

While the term “neurodivergent” (stemming from the concept of “neurodiversity”) was developed and first embraced by autistic people in the late 1990s / early 2000s [\[source\]](#), it has since been embraced by others with certain cognitive disabilities, particularly neurodevelopmental (ADD/ADHD, epilepsy, intellectual disability, learning disorders, and Tourette syndrome) and neuropsychiatric conditions (serious and persistent mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and schizoaffective disorder). [\[source\]](#)

There are multiple perspectives on what constitutes neurodivergence. Because neurodivergence is based within [the social model of disability](#) [\[source\]](#), experiences and viewpoints regarding neurodivergence will vary based on micro and macro social dynamics. Some of these perspectives are:

- Neurodivergence is a normal variance in human neurology despite being pathologized as disability or illness by a dominant neurotypical society. As such, many efforts to make systems more inclusive of neurodivergent folks are based around accommodating perceived medical needs rather than the needs set forth by neurodiverse individuals themselves.
- Neurodivergence is often seen as an identity and not a disability or illness. Medical support may often be required but this is due to problems within society and not the individual.
- Whether or not neurodivergence can be acquired is a hotly debated subject in neurodiverse groups.
- Individuals can be multiply neurodivergent such as autistic and dyslexic.
- Certain illnesses or injuries can cause symptoms that may cause someone to require the same societal support a neurodivergent person requires.
- Some illnesses or injuries, especially in the case of trauma, are normal reactions to abnormal or unacceptable conditions or treatment. Efforts to provide support and systemic change to prevent these situations often align with the goals of neurodivergent culture.

- A neurodivergent person may also have disability support needs for other factors. Someone can be a neurodivergent person with disabilities and/or a neurodivergent and disabled person.
- The individual experiencing injury, illness, trauma, and/or disability is the only person who gets to decide if they are neurodivergent. Everyone should be aware that neurodiverse communities composed of neurodivergent individuals may prioritize different goals and structures. Groups often form around collective internal experiences/perceptions (Such as differences in sensory perception) and/or around collective external experiences (such as discrimination or abuse) and not every neurodiverse group will be suitable for every neurodivergent person.
- Within the past decade some folks have begun to consider other psychiatric conditions to be forms of neurodivergence. These psychiatric conditions include personality disorders, eating disorders, disorders of trauma, and substance abuse disorders, as well as intermittent or less impairing instances of stress-related disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Which terms does Pleasurable recommend should be used?

There are many different terms that exist to describe different disabilities so close attention must be paid to be sure the term being used is inclusive of everyone who is meant to be included.

Because “cognitive disability” used to be the preferred term for Intellectual Disability, using “cognitive disability” can now be confusing unless it is specified which cognitive disabilities are meant to be included in the use of the term. Therefore, Pleasurable recommends following these language guidelines:

- When referring specifically to people with intellectual disabilities, it is appropriate to use the terms Intellectual Disability, Intellectual and Developmental Disability, or I/DD, depending on which group of people is being specified. If an individual who is intellectually disabled still uses the term cognitive disability to refer to themselves, it is appropriate to use “cognitive disability” when communicating with or about that individual.
- When referring to people with the symptoms of a neurocognitive disability, it is more appropriate to refer to the specific conditions rather than the symptom classifications that make up the DSM-5’s classification of neurocognitive disorders. If an individual who was diagnosed as having a neurocognitive

disorder uses the terms cognitive disability or neurocognitive disability to refer to themselves, it is appropriate to use “cognitive disability” or “neurocognitive disability” (depending on the individual’s preference) when communicating with or about that individual.

- It is appropriate to use neurodivergence in reference to an individual or group who self-identifies as such. When referring to specific people, it is always best to ask someone how they identify and which words they are comfortable with using to describe themselves. Pleasurable recommends following the guidance of each individual regarding how they identify.
- Neurodivergent integration and support will benefit anyone who suffers due to narrow ideas of disability. When advocating for the autonomy of someone with neurodivergent needs in a setting where their neurology is pathologized in a harmful way, it may be appropriate to offer the term “neurodivergence” and introduction to a neurodivergent community. Examples of this may be neurodivergent children or neurodivergent individuals whose access to community is limited.

However, please note that this is all based on current language use among disabled people in 2022. Please understand that definitions and resources among people with disabilities are always in flux; as such, we will do our best to keep this resource document updated.

As always, if you would like to make suggestions or other edits, please contact us via one of the methods on our website’s contact page.

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