

# Aboriginal perspectives on disability

## Introduction

For peer networks to be genuinely inclusive of Aboriginal people, it is important to have an understanding of an Aboriginal perspective on disability, as this can help the peer network think about how best to discuss things. This Quick Guide should be read together with the QuickGuides *How to make a peer group welcoming and safe for Aboriginal people* and *Tips for setting up Peer Networks in Communities*.

Remember that this is just a guide and not a glossary of hard and fast rules. As with all guides there will be some that have other opinions.

## Let's make it happen

There is no word for disability in Aboriginal languages, so disability is not a word that Aboriginal people are familiar with using the word disability. This may help us to understand the more inclusive nature of Aboriginal communities where people with disability are generally not excluded from or stigmatised in their communities.

Whilst some Aboriginal languages have words for specific impairments, the fact that there is no word for disability reflects the fact that people with impairments are not separated from the rest of the community for their difference. They are treated and cared for no differently from the other members of the group.

Some Aboriginal languages have attempted to adapt an existing word for an impairment. For example the word *nyumpu* (crippled) has been used to make sense of the concept of disability but many people object to its use, feeling they are being labelled or stigmatised, not about their personal limitations but about their perceived social standing. This reflects the fact that it is not the impairment that is the greatest problem facing people with disability, but rather societal and social responses to it.

Two frequently cited generalisations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (sometimes termed 'Indigenous') perceptions of disability may be relevant to the delivery of peer networks in some areas:

- some Indigenous people may not have a general concept of disability, which can result in under-reporting (as noted above) and, potentially, under-utilisation of the available supports from government or service providers
- some Indigenous communities view some types of disability (such as congenital disabilities) as a consequence of 'marrying wrong' (First Peoples Disability Network, sub. 542. p. 8), or attribute it to supernatural causes stemming from eating certain foods or doing certain activities while pregnant (Senior 2000). While this is a potential source of shame that may dissuade some Indigenous Australians from

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seeking support, Elliot (1994) and Senior (2000) suggest that stigmatisation within communities is limited

<http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/related-issues/disability/reviews/disability-within-the-indigenous-community>

Some general features of the Aboriginal perception of disability include:

- indigenous people with disability are generally not excluded from their communities
- some disabilities may be seen as 'payback' for a past wrong doing, or may be seen as something special
- independence may not be seen as a major issue in some indigenous communities
- disability may be viewed as a family or community problem rather than a personal one
- some people with severe disabilities may be seen as the responsibility of 'welfare'
- a person may be identified and named after their disability. For example, a person with an eye injury may be known as 'one eye'

So to make your peer network is welcoming and inclusive of Indigenous people, think about how to structure the conversations and the topics so that they include the ideas above.

### Where you can find more information

First People's Disability Network <http://fpdn.org.au>

**Phone:** +61 (2) 9267 4195

**Email:** enquiries@fpdn.org.au

**Address:** PO Box A2265 SYDNEY SOUTH NSW 1235

The Australian Indigenous Health Infonet website has further information about disability within the indigenous community:

<http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/related-issues/disability/reviews/disability-within-the-indigenous-community>

This article by Damian Griffiths talks about addressing disadvantage:

<http://www.abc.net.au/rampup/articles/2012/04/20/3481394.htm>

The Community Door website considers intellectual disability from an Aboriginal perspective

<https://communitydoor.org.au/service-delivery/disability/how-to-hear-me-a-resource-kit-for-working-with-people-with-intellectua-5>

Co-authored by First Peoples Disability Network Australia



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