

COVID19: What we can learn from persons with disabilities



Who would have thought if someone had asked us in 2015 where we see ourselves in 5 years' time, that it would be where we are now?

We are experiencing a situation that nobody could have imagined, much less expected, and we are learning every day how to cope with all the challenges that go along with living in isolation, learning to do things differently and generally navigating our way in an unknown world. Many of us are watching news broadcasts daily to find out as much as we can about the virus, life expectancy, prevalence, and survival rates - arming ourselves with information. Some are continuing their lives as before, regardless of the restrictions in place and seemingly oblivious to how their actions can endanger others. Others are perhaps hiding at home in fear of the virus and the havoc it could potentially wreak on their life. There are those who challenge those in authority - the lobbyists and advocacy specialists. Then here are those who are actively looking for solutions; finding ways in which to continue living a meaningful life despite the challenges we are facing.

All of this got me thinking... This is exactly what happens to an individual once they sustain a disability. We all have certain expectations of life; ways in which we see our lives panning out. We go to school, then university or college, start working, buy our first motor car, get married, perhaps go on a world trip or two, obtain the long-awaited promotion, have children, and so it goes on. There are certain societal expectations of what will happen in our lives.

Nowhere in that picture of "the ideal life" is any room for human diversity. There are those who were not accepted into university or any tertiary education, who cannot find employment despite searching

unrelentingly, who choose not to marry or to marry someone who society deems unacceptable, who choose not to have children. Also, on this list are those who have had to deal with the realities associated with an impairment.

Nothing can prepare one for an impairment and how he or she will be disabled by society. It often happens in a split-second. Sadly, it isn't necessarily something that is dealt with as part of life from when we are children, so that by the time we reach adulthood, it is simply seen as part of life. Imagine the shock then, when a sporting injury or motor vehicle accident leads to paralysis, a genetic condition leads to blindness, or the experience of giving birth to a child born with severe intellectual impairment or deafness or any of a number of other conditions.

The individual has absolutely no experience of this situation and has to suddenly find their way in an unknown world. They will find out as much as they can on their condition so that they can manage it, find local organisations and resources that can share their expertise and provide support, advocate for legislation to accommodate those with disabilities, and find ways in which to continue living, not existing, in their new normal.

What does one do if tertiary education facilities are inaccessible to you as a wheelchair user, employers reject your employment application because they think an employee with an impairment will be a drain on the company, who cannot drive due to their impairment but public transport is unreliable, or even if getting married and having children is frowned upon? In a previous article I spoke about the fact the persons with disabilities have been using technology and running virtual offices for years, yet the world has suddenly realised that working remotely is a more cost-effective way of doing business.

While society often rejects persons with impairments on the grounds of what they perceive the person able or not able to do, persons with impairments are finding innovative and creative ways to cope and continue with their lives. If you want problem-solvers, ask persons with impairments. If you want people who think out of the box, ask persons with impairments who have been disabled by society.

Persons with disabilities have tremendous skills that are invaluable in all aspects of life, and society would do well to tap into that knowledge. Everyone has a role to play. Let's learn from each other.

Do you have an opinion or story to share? Write to us on roz@ncpd.org.za