

Disability Awareness in Relation to Sailing

One in every ten people in Ireland has a disability. This means that the chances are high that you will have contact with at least one person with a disability every day. The disability may or may not be obvious to you. The disability can be of a physical, sensory, intellectual or a combination of one or more and caused by genetic, medical or an accident.

No two people have a disability that is exactly the same. At first glance or without knowing very much about disabilities, it is quite easy to assume that everybody with cerebral palsy is affected the same way or that all quadriplegics have to use electric wheelchairs. This is not the case. Everyone is affected in varying degrees, some more seriously than others. To further confuse you, everyone with a disability learns to cope with it in different ways; some better than others. Therefore, one person may be far more independent than the other person even though they both may have a very similar disability.

When we first meet able-bodied people, we tend to classify them as 'the boss', or 'the neighbour' or 'the red-head'. But when we recognise people as 'Mr. Murphy', 'John' or 'Mary', we realise that they are individuals with unique needs, wishes and aspirations.

Similarly, when we meet disabled people, we tend to classify them as 'the wheelchair guy' or 'the blind woman'. But when we know them by name, we identify with their human-ness.

As with other shared activities, sailing makes it easy to get to know people, their likes and dislikes, their abilities and limitations. Try to understand the individual. Addressing someone by his/her given name helps effective communication.

General Awareness

Ask disabled people how their disabilities may affect their sailing, and how you may help. Check with the participants - they may be too embarrassed to raise certain issues in a group discussion.

Avoid the assumption that all people who use wheelchairs are without movement or feeling below the waist, or that all people using white sticks are totally blind (but be aware that they may be!).

One common trap is for people with a disability to assume that the needs of other disabled people are much the same as their own.

Managing a disability is very much the responsibility of the individual concerned. However, able-bodied assistants should be aware that:

- Travelling to a sailing club in a remote location may pose a problem for someone who can not drive. Public transport may be possible for some but out of the question for others.

- Rigging and de-rigging the boat can be complex; help may be needed for just stepping the mast or for the entire procedure. Disabled sailors must learn to take responsibility for supervising all help with their own boats.
- Moving around the site is an important consideration. Mud, sand, soft or slippery surfaces are difficult for the less agile. Rough terrain is hazardous for people with visual impairment.
- Embarking and disembarking is not easy.
- Moving around the boat must be considered. Will individuals crawl or 'bum about'? Will it be necessary to provide a sliding seat?

Safety is a concern with disabled sailors as it is with others. A lack of balance, mobility or agility may require extra support, seats, harnesses and lifejackets. Impaired vision may lead to stumbling over an unseen obstruction. Impaired hearing could mean failure to hear a shouted warning.

Time afloat must be discussed with disabled sailors so that they know what is planned and how they are to 'manage' their needs. The toilet needs of a paralysed person or an inability to sit for long periods may influence the length of a voyage. It is important to check that everyone has adequate food, drink, protective clothing and drugs for the time afloat.

Weather conditions often dictate the comfort of someone who can not move around much in the boat or has poor temperature control. Similarly rough seas and strong winds can toss a boat around to such a degree that those with reduced lower limb function or trunk control spend most of their time hanging on.

Social activities must neither isolate nor focus on people with disabilities. Check that the venue is accessible and clear of unnecessary clutter. Check also that people with hearing or vision impairment are welcomed, orientated and involved.

Note

The following material is included with the aim of facilitating personal interaction between people. It is not a detailed analysis of particular disabilities and as with any material you may read on specific impairments, should only be regarded as guidelines - as there will always be individual variation in impairments, disabilities, preferences. Details of specific impairments are not relevant to social interactions (if the person with a disability wishes to talk to you about his/her disability he/she will).



Visual Impairment

Visual impairment (VI) does not necessarily mean that the person cannot see anything. No more than 5% of "blind" people are completely unable to see. Most can see some light. A legally blind person is someone who cannot see, with visual aides, at 6 metres, what person with normal vision can see at 60 metres, or if the width of a person's vision is 20 degrees or less.

Introducing yourself. Always try to:

- Address the person to whom you are talking. Don't talk through a third person.
- Speak distinctly and directly towards the person.
- Don't speak louder than you normally do.
- Introduce yourself when you arrive and say when you are leaving (it can be embarrassing to be left talking to an empty room).
- When speaking to a VI person, address them by name or touch so they knows you are talking to them.
- Speak naturally, don't worry about using words like "look" and "see".
- It is essential to allow extra time and support so that visually impaired sailors have a chance to orientate and familiarise themselves with layout and equipment.

Tips for Guiding. Remember to:

- Lead a partially sighted person; do not push or grab an arm. Offer your elbow and ask the person from which side they prefer to be guided.
- Be accurate in your verbal instructions.
- Mention when you are turning left or right.
- Warn when approaching kerbs other obstacles. Say whether steps lead up or down.
- Negotiate a flight of stairs with care; pause a moment to let the person find the first step.
- Guide a person into a chair by putting their hand on the back, or seat. Do not push a person into a chair. If it's a bench or a stool, say so.
- Mention hazards, particularly at head height, as you go along.
- Guide so as to avoid the bows of boats which overhang pontoons.

Meals. Check if a person needs help:

- Locating and identifying food (some people use a clock layout to describe this e.g. potatoes at 5 o'clock, sausages at 2 o'clock etc.)
- Cutting up food.
- Don't completely fill glasses or cups.
- Managing certain foods. Spaghetti, unboned fish etc. can be challenging.



Involvement. Generally, sailing is a shared activity and it is important to ensure that all can participate to the best of their abilities. Ensure that:

- No-one is isolated from an activity by VI.
- Clear instructions are given in plenty of time so that the visually impaired sailor has a valid role in the crew.

Safety. It is sensible that lifejackets and harnesses be worn at all times by new visually impaired crew. Once both sailor and skipper have confidence, decisions can be made with reference to sailing conditions rather than disability.

Instruction Techniques

- The instructor must be articulate and willing to give the fullest description of technique and correction of poor technique. Use key words to assist.
- Sometimes it may help if the person feels the instructor performing a particular movement or the instructor moves the person through the movement.
- Don't grab their arms unexpectedly. If you are going to touch the person tell them first where and what you are going to do.
- Constantly correct style manually - do NOT push or prod those being instructed.
- Demand an accepted technique irrespective of the disability - adaption to techniques must be carefully evaluated to fall within an accepted limit - poor compromises inevitably lead to low standards of performance and injury.
- Familiarise the person with obstacles in the area (describe obstacles in their direct path of travel, let them feel the area and give them time to 'explore' the area).
- Use other participants to assist with guidance and direction.
- A 'buddy' system may be helpful.
- Give VI people constant feedback on the progress of an activity which may be naturally observed by people with vision.
- Acoustic signalling may be required in some activities to aid in direction and/or distance. Instructors should also develop cue/key words, e.g. communicating direction by referring to the hands of a clock.
- Develop a good level of spatial awareness.
- Work in a well lit area. Shadows and dark areas may be dangerous and will reduce visibility.

Implications for Sailing

- A VI sailor should be aware of the location of the water, direction and location of facilities and have assistance until he becomes familiar with the area.
- Audible aids will assist the VI sailor with direction and distance of buoys and other craft and countdown for race starts.



Hearing Impairment

A hearing loss can be one of the most isolating of all disabilities, excluding people from environmental cues, instructions and jokes. Even a slight hearing impairment can be made more disabling by wind, waves and flapping sails.

Points to Note

Hearing aids only amplify sounds they don't clarify them much. Background sounds also get amplified and this makes it difficult for the person to isolate sounds. So background noises should be kept to a minimum.

Lip reading - Try to be on the same level as the person you are speaking to as it is difficult to look up or down at a person and read their lips. Poor lighting also makes lip reading hard. The hearing impaired person's back should be towards the sun. Lengthy conversations should be kept to a minimum to avoid confusion. People who talk quickly, move their head or smile when they speak may be difficult to lip read. Beards and moustaches can make lip reading difficult. Lip reading is tiring so the person may not be as good at understanding late at night.

If you have difficulty being understood either through lip reading or a hearing aid repeat what you have said in a different way - change the phrases you used. If there is still a problem, write it down. There is a danger of social isolation because of difficulty in participating in conversations so efforts must be made to include a hearing impaired person. A profoundly deaf person may be hesitant when speaking as he is unable to hear his own voice to know if it is loud or soft.

Instruction Techniques

When sailing with a hearing impaired person, the following points are important for effective communication:

- Be sure you have the person's attention so they can ascertain the whole message.
- See and be seen. Position yourself where you can be seen face on, at close range and in good light. The person needs to be able to lip read and see your facial expression.
- Hand gestures and facial expressions help make the meaning clear.
- Avoid background noise.
- Speak naturally and clearly.
- Keep instructions short and simple - don't use unnecessary words or long sentences.
- Check that you have been understood.
- Rephrase the message if it is not understood.
- Encourage other members of the team to learn to communicate.



- Instructors should be precise and uncomplicated with signals. Aim to give all the necessary instructions before the activity has begun, using visual aids and demonstrations where possible.
- Use demonstration as the most important cue.
- Consider environmental conditions i.e. wind and sun.
- During the activity, signs such as the wave of a nag, flick of lights, or a tap on the shoulder may be required if the person is unable to hear a whistle.
- Use standard movements/body language which hearing impaired people understand.
- Be patient.

Implications for Sailing

- It may be easier for a hearing impaired person to understand instructions and explanations if visual cues are used eg. maps, charts, labels on equipment, etc.
- It is essential that visual signals between instructor and hearing impaired person are clearly understood.



Intellectual Disability

The term 'Intellectual disability' is used to cover a range of disabilities once collectively labelled 'mentally handicapped', 'mentally retarded' etc. The term refers to people whose needs vary from little to total care. In the context of sailing, participation by people with learning difficulties varies from simply experiencing the wind and water to making a significant contribution to crew activity.

Intellectual disability is present from birth or early childhood, or occurs during the developmental period (conception to 18 years). Special education, training and adequate support and medical treatment can help lessen its effects, but it is not curable. However, most people with intellectual disabilities are capable, with assistance, of learning about new situations and adapting to them. People with intellectual disabilities experience things which make us all human, but they learn and develop intellectually at a slower rate than average.

Instruction Techniques

An instructor needs to be aware of some common denominators amongst the population of people with an intellectual disability. Any one individual may not display all of the following characteristics, but rather, some of these to varying degrees:

- Inability to think in abstract terms.
- Lack of decision making ability.
- Poor short term memory.
- Learning difficulties and generally few literacy/numeracy skills.
- Poor co-ordination and mobility skills.
- Inconsistent concentration spans.

An instructor should recognise that:

- People with intellectual disabilities may range from borderline to profound in their impairment.
- A number of physical disabilities are often aligned with intellectual disabilities.
- Often where there is no accompanying physical disability, this is some delay in physical development. The sailor may take longer to master physical skills.
- Patience and understanding are needed.
- People with an intellectual disability like other people, express frustration and anger. Because they so often find it difficult to do this verbally, it often takes the physical form eg. clenched fists, foot stamping, tears, sitting down and refusing to get up. Their frustration need not be feared, rather, they should be recognised, accepted and channeled into appropriate actions.



Those involved with instructing sailors with an intellectual disability should consider the following points:

- Make all sessions fun and enjoyable.
- The level of expectation is crucial. Generally not enough is expected of people with intellectual disabilities both physically and socially.
- The greatest area of difficulty and frustration for both instructor and sailors is communication. Keep verbal instructions basic and brief. Be clear, precise, deliberate and sequential, then reinforce your message.
- When demonstrating an activity be clear and participate so the person has visual examples to model the performance on.
- Don't presume a nod or shake of the head means the person has understood your instruction.
- People with an intellectual disability learn more by doing than looking and listening. When teaching new skills move the sailors through the motion.
- Be specific in praise and encouragement.
- Break down skills into small teaching components, ensuring each part is learned fully before progressing. Review and repeat skills, and drill in many different ways and situation. Then reinforce. Remember also that reinforcement should be spontaneous and immediate.
- Be prepared to teach basic skills. Many new sailors will not have had the opportunity to learn or understand these skills.
- Keep practice time on specific activities short to avoid loss of concentration and boredom. Be sure to vary your activities and drills.
- Don't assume that these sailors will automatically know the inherent etiquette of sailing. Etiquette should be taught and practised regularly.
- Observe and talk with the person to become familiar with his/her individual physical and intellectual abilities.
- As with any instruction session, introduce new activities early in practice sessions before the individual becomes tired and vary the tempo of training to reduce the fatigue factor. Also, motivate with appropriate devices, positive feedback, points, individual recognition.
- Encourage the sailor to compete, above all, against personal performances.

Implications for Sailing

- Many sailors with intellectual disabilities will be fully mobile. It is important to ascertain level of water safety skill they have and if necessary the sailor may need to wear a life jacket whilst at the sailing venue.
- While sailing, a person with an intellectual disability may become fearful and react in an unexpected manner. These sailors should be monitored closely until their level of confidence is ascertained.
- On the other hand, a sailor with an intellectual disability may show no concern for their own personal safety or the safety of others. Again initial close monitoring should be instigated.



Physical Disability

The causes of physical disability are too numerous to list, but they can be grouped broadly into the following categories:

- Disability from birth such as spina bifida or cerebral palsy.
- Result of trauma/accident such as spinal injury or limb amputation.
- Medical cause such as polio, meningitis or stroke.
- Medical condition such as epilepsy, diabetes or haemophilia.
- Neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease or muscular dystrophy.

Many disabled people are further disabled by osteo-arthritis due to excessive stress on functioning limbs.

Managing the disability

On a day-to-day basis, most people manage their own disabilities (this is not to say that they do not need help with activities of daily living etc.). Similarly, most sailors manage their disabilities on the water. For some however, difficulties do arise from reduced or absent:

- Mobility - hinders easy movement into and around the boat, particularly during manoeuvres.
- Stability/balance - made worse by the movement of the boat. Extra hand-holds or back support may be required.
- Sensation - may mean that injury is not perceived e.g. A spinally injured sailor could break a leg or damage the skin on the backside without knowing it. The latter has the potential to give rise to a decubitus ulcer (pressure sore) and must be avoided at all cost. Some disabled sailors should sit on cushions at all times.
- Strength/stamina - results in sheets pulled on slowly or incompletely. Efficient rigging helps.
- Co-ordination - causes difficulty selecting or grasping particular items. This problem can be decreased by widely spacing cleats etc. and altering sheet ends.

Temperature control

Spinal cord damage can lead to temperature control dysfunction. This may be due to diminished sweating below the neurological level of the lesion, poor blood circulation in lower limbs or paralysis. It's important therefore to consider how the sailor will deal with extremes of temperature.

Incontinence

Some disabilities cause loss of bladder control. This is very much a matter of personal management. While sailing, consideration should be given to how incontinence may affect the duration of an activity. Privacy and the needs of female sailors must be considered also. If the toilets are inaccessible, alternatives need to be arranged. Much can be managed with forward planning.



Hands

Sailors with lower limb disabilities need to use their hands for many tasks - moving about the boat, steering or simply holding on. Sailing can be made easier with tiller brakes, back supports, hand-holds etc.

Implications for Sailing

- Depending on the level of disability, most people with quadriplegia and paraplegia will need assistance with lifting.
- Quadriplegics unused to physical exercise will tire easily.
- These sailors may be more prone to hypothermia and heat exhaustion.
- The paralysed areas of the body are usually insensitive to heat, cold or pain and will have reduced circulation. These areas need to be protected from hard surfaces by cushioning and other protective clothing. It is important for quadriplegics and paraplegics to have their feet protected at all times.
- The sailor may experience difficulty with balance whilst sitting in a boat, depending on level of disability.
- General the person's lower limbs are fragile and therefore more likely to fracture or suffer soft tissue damage. These areas need to be protected from hard surfaces by cushioning and other protective clothing. It is important for these sailors to have their feet protected at all times.
- If a urinary bag is worn, it should be emptied every 3-4 hours and before any physical activity.

