

Luca Sápi

# A BRIEF GUIDE TO MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT



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# THE BASICS OF GOOD SUPPORT

Mobility impairment in itself does not determine how actively a person can live their life. It is much more a question of how accessible the surrounding environment is for them. People are often put in difficult situations not because of the mobility-impairing condition itself, but because the built environment (for example, stairs, narrow doors, or the absence of an elevator) does not allow them to move independently or participate in everyday life. That is why it is important that society also has to adapt and help create an environment in which everyone can live their life freely and with equal opportunities.

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# DESIGNATION

Mobility impairment is a collective term that refers to a physiological disability. Different diseases, accidents, or developmental disorders affect the musculoskeletal system in various ways, making it difficult to treat as a single category. The ability to move is also greatly influenced by the extent and severity of the conditions – some can move without any aids, others use a cane or walker, and there are also individuals who use a wheelchair.

## TYPES

There are several types of mobility impairment, which affect the lives of those affected in different ways. Paralysis may be complete or partial, and can affect one side of the body, or the lower or upper limbs. Orthopaedic deformities, such as scoliosis or hip dislocation, may also make movement permanently more difficult. In some cases, mobility impairment is caused by post-brain-injury disorders, for example, oxygen deprivation at birth or as a result of an accident. Types of mobility impairments also include the loss of one or more limbs due to amputation, as well as congenital limb deficiency disorders.

# TERMINOLOGY

When talking about people with mobility impairments – as with other types of disabilities – it is very important to use appropriate language. Generally accepted expressions include „person with mobility impairment,” „person with a physical disability,” or, if someone actually uses a wheelchair, then they are a „wheelchair user.” However, the most important thing is to see and refer to the person, not just the disability: don’t call someone simply „the mobility-impaired,” or „the disabled” but specify, for example „, mobility-impaired man,” „woman with mobility impairment,” or „child with a physical disability.” This helps ensure that the disability is not treated as the sole defining characteristic, but as one attribute among many.

It’s also important to recognise that personal preferences vary. Some people find these terms natural, and they identify themselves as a wheelchair user, a person with a mobility impairment, or a person with a disability. However, some people do not use these labels at all.

On the other hand, some words should never be used. The terms „cripple,” „invalid,” and „handicapped” are now pejorative. They were once official or colloquial designations for the condition, so you may encounter them in older books, newspapers, or even medical documents. They did not necessarily carry negative connotations at the time, but over time, they became stigmatising and offensive. Therefore, today these terms should be avoided, and respectful, person-centred terms should be used instead.

# PROVIDING SUPPORT

For people with mobility impairments, as for everyone else, independence is especially important. Thus, the first rule you should keep in mind when you provide support is: to always start by addressing the person with the disability, then ask them, and act only after these steps. An unexpected movement—for example, if you suddenly grab someone or start pushing their wheelchair—can be frightening and uncomfortable. It is much better to first speak to the person and then ask: „Can I help you?“ If the answer is no, that should be respected. If the answer is yes, it is worthwhile to clarify: „What can I help you with?“ because it matters whether you need to open a door, help someone board a bus, or assist the person to find a seat, a railing or a bar to safely hold on to.

Many people think that support is important only for people who use wheelchairs, but not everyone who has a mobility impairment uses a wheelchair. Some people move with a cane, a walker, or a rollator, but many people do not use any visible assistive device, which might indicate their mobility impairment. However, in such cases, it may still be difficult for the person to stand for a long time; thus, they might need a seat, a railing, or to lean on something. These invisible difficulties are called „non-visible/non-apparent disabilities.“ For example, someone may have hip problems, or wear a prosthesis, or live with an orthopaedic device, or simply have difficulties keeping their balance. This is especially important in public transportation: the impairment may not be apparent, but for the given person, it is essential to be able to sit down or to hold on to something

safely. Therefore, if you suspect that someone has difficulty standing, you should always politely offer your seat—the worst thing that may happen is that they decline your offer.

Thus, helping does not mean taking control; it means offering support where it is needed. Opening a door, showing a free seat, or a small act of consideration can be a much greater help than one might think.

## **SUPPORT IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS**

### **Getting Around in the City**

Public transport often presents challenges for people with disabilities. The form of necessary support depends on what assistive devices the given person uses—or does not use. With a wheelchair, the best way to assist is to ensure accessible boarding and disembarking. It is not appropriate to push the wheelchair without asking first – that can be dangerous and humiliating. A much better approach is to address the person and then ask: „Can I help you get on the ramp?“ and act only after receiving consent.

When one uses a walker, rollator, crutch, or cane, it may happen that these devices only help the given person in boarding or disembarking the vehicle, or conversely, that they are more useful for holding on to and maintaining balance aboard the vehicle. The core principle remains the same in every case: be

patient, ask first, and do not remove the device from the person's hand without their permission. Additionally, it is important to leave enough space for the person with a disability and for their device. If you push a person with a mobility impairment, step on their foot, or kick the device away from them, accidents can easily occur. A good question in these situations might be: „Would you like me to hold the walker while you board?“ or „Shall I hold your arm to make it easier to get on?“

People who do not use a device but have mobility impairments may still move more slowly, have more difficulty boarding the vehicle, or need more time to find a seat and secure themselves. Since this is often not apparent from the outside, it is especially helpful to be patient, not rush them, and politely offer your assistance.

One more very important point: accept if someone declines help. They may move slowly or seem uncertain, or from an outside observer's point of view, their movement may appear even risky, but if they say they can manage on their own, believe them. Everyone is the best judge of their own mobility, and in most cases, they have already developed their own effective methods. Intervening in these can cause harm or even lead to an accident.

## **Doors and Buildings**

The entrance doors of buildings are often difficult to open, especially if they are narrow or heavy. The best support you can provide in such cases is to open the door and wait until the person with a disability passes through at their own pace. It

is not appropriate to grab someone without asking or to start pulling their wheelchair through the door, as this can cause discomfort and embarrassment. A more respectful way is to give them space and indicate—either verbally or with a gesture—that you have opened the door for them and, if needed, you hold it open. If the building has a ramp or elevator, pointing it out can be very helpful, as the accessible route is not always obvious.

## Stairs and Ramps

Stairs often pose significant obstacles for people with mobility impairment. You can politely offer to help the disabled person reach a handrail or, if they deem it necessary, you may offer to hold their arm. However, it is crucial to only do this if the person requests assistance and gives guidance on the mode of support beforehand. For wheelchair users, lifting or assisting without permission can be dangerous, leading not only to uncertainty but potentially to accidents. Good support means helping according to the given person's instructions or simply ensuring that others do not block their path. When it comes to ramps, it is often enough to wait patiently until they reach the top and ensure a clear path.

## Shops and Offices

In everyday tasks like shopping or running errands, even small gestures can make a big difference. For example, offering a chair for someone who is waiting for a longer time, showing them where the elevator is, or offering to take down products from a high shelf. It is important to always speak directly to the person

with the disability, not to their companion if they have one, as this shows respect and fosters more genuine communication. It results in an uncomfortable situation when someone feels they are being „ignored” in a conversation, so always address the disabled person directly.

## Social Situations

In social settings, attention and equal treatment are the most important. Avoid talking about the person with the disability in third person singular while they are present—if you want to ask something related to them, do so directly. If they are part of a group, make sure to include them in conversations and decision-making so they do not feel excluded. Some individuals with mobility impairments may also have speech difficulties, so they might use alternative communication tools such as pictures, voice-assisted devices, or smart devices that combine both. Patience is especially vital in these communication situations: wait until they express their thoughts and do not interrupt them. This not only makes communication smoother but also shows that you regard them as an equal partner.

# LEISURE, CULTURAL LIFE, AND SPORTS

For people with disabilities, leisure activities, cultural events, and sports are just as important as for anyone else, as they provide opportunities for relaxation, community engagement, and recharging. However, often the lack of accessibility or environmental inattentiveness makes it difficult for everyone to enjoy concerts, plays, films, or sports events equally.

The greatest help is to think ahead. For example, when organizing a program with a disabled person, it's worthwhile to check whether there is an accessible entrance, elevator, or restroom at the venue, and whether reserved seating is available. As mentioned earlier, not all people with mobility impairments use a wheelchair. Some move with assistive devices or without them, and for these individuals, having a secure seat, a handrail, an accessible restroom, or enough space is just as important as ramps or elevators for others.

When visiting a theatre or cinema, it can be very helpful to assist with navigating stairs or finding the way between rows, but always ask the individual with the disability where they would like to sit—do not decide over their head what is good for them. At concerts and festivals, especially given the large crowds, attentiveness is particularly important. It's advisable to stay close to the person with a disability, ensure they are not bumped or pushed, and, if necessary, help them avoid accidents protectively. In parks or public areas, a resting place, bench, or smooth pathway can be very helpful. In museums or

exhibitions, knowing the accessible route and asking the staff for directions can make a big difference.

In sports and physical leisure activities, it is especially important that the disabled individual can participate independently. They can truly enjoy the joy of movement if allowed to try, practice, and engage in activities in their own way. Constantly surrounding and overly protecting them is not helpful, as it can take away the experience. At the same time, situations may arise where a sudden crowd or pushing can cause accidents. In such cases, both the person with a disability and their companion should be prepared to intervene promptly to prevent mishaps.

The most important thing is that everyone knows best what they need. It is crucial to pay attention to each other not only on an individual level, but also on a community level. Give each other space, and only assist when someone asks for it. This way, leisure, culture, and sports can truly bring joy, foster community, and provide relaxation for everyone.

# EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

## School Life

School is a place for learning, development, and friendships for every child. For children with mobility impairments, participating in lessons, group activities, and school programs is just as important as for others. However, this requires the school to

be accessible: easy-to-open doors, ramps, elevators, well-designed restrooms, and safe outdoor areas ensure free movement.

The attention of classmates and teachers also plays a significant role. It is important for children to learn that their disabled peers love to play, learn, and make friends just as much as they do—they simply achieve these in different ways. For example, a wheelchair user child may not be able to play football on the field but might enjoy taking on the goalkeeper role or participating in other games. A student using a cane benefits from classmates not rushing ahead on stairs, but waiting for them until they reach the top or bottom, thus not leaving them behind.

Small acts of attention from the teachers during lessons can also make a huge difference. For instance, giving more time to complete tasks for students who write slowly, or allowing them to do tasks at their desk if going up to the board is difficult. More and more digital tools like tablets and computers assist students with disabilities in accessing the same knowledge as their peers. The key is to provide every child with the opportunity to develop their abilities and not let obstacles define their daily lives.

## **The World of Work**

As adults, work is the area where people with disabilities can show their skills, experiences, and values. A properly accessible workplace is essential for full participation in work. This can involve installing ramps and elevators, as well as ensuring an ergonomic environment—such as adjustable desks and specialised chairs.

Even small gestures from colleagues can be a great help. For example, having enough space for movement in the office, keeping documents within easy reach, or providing comfortable access during meetings—all contribute to enabling employees with mobility impairments to work independently.

In recent years, digital work and flexible hours have become increasingly important, especially for those for whom commuting is tiring or difficult. Online meetings, remote work, or part-time options are solutions that allow people with mobility impairments to work in ways best suited to their abilities and needs.

Most importantly, we must see the disabled person as a full-fledged colleague. The question should not be what they cannot do, but rather what they are good at and how they can best utilise their skills. Approaching work this way allows people with disabilities to be active, valued members of the community, just like anyone else.

## PRIVATE LIFE

The family and romantic life of people with mobility impairments can be as diverse and rich as that of any other people. They can be partners, parents, friends who love, support, and build a community around themselves just like anyone else. However, their environment mustn't view them solely through the lens of their disability. Mobility impairment is a trait in a person's life, but it does not fully determine who they are or what roles they can play in society.

Unfortunately, in everyday life, many people with disabilities face insensitive, hurtful, or even humiliating questions and statements. These often come from their surroundings—acquaintances, and even strangers—and frequently probe about what their body cannot do or what they are incapable of doing. This attitude can be especially damaging during adolescence, a time when self-image and gender identity are in formation. Mobility impairment, by itself, does not exclude sexuality, intimacy, or feeling whole as a woman or a man.

Openness and equal treatment are essential in both romantic relationships and friendships. A person with a disability desires intimacy, love, closeness, and companionship just as much as anyone else. The foundation of the relationship is not a caregiver-patient dynamic, but mutual respect, attention, and love. If the partner of the person with mobility impairment is constantly in a „caregiver” or „protector” role, it can easily disrupt the balance and mask that the relationship is truly between equals.

People with mobility impairments can be loving parents as well. In certain situations, they may make different choices, but they are nonetheless capable of giving love, raising children, and providing safety for their kids. The greatest help from the environment is not to question the parent’s role but to support the disabled parent in realising parenthood in their own way.

Ultimately, the most important in family life and romantic relationships is the same as in every other area: respect for human dignity, patience, and a partnership mindset. Love, closeness, and mutual trust are the values that strengthen every relationship—regardless of whether someone is disabled or not.

# SUMMARY

A mobility impairment does not by itself determine what life someone can lead. It depends much more on how open and accessible society and the environment are for them. With care, patience, and respect, people with disabilities can participate independently and fully in all areas of life: education, work, family, friendships, leisure, and culture.

The real barriers are often not in the body but in the environment and mindset. If we pay attention to these and strive for change and openness, it becomes natural that people with disabilities are as valuable and active members of the community as anyone else. Acceptance, attentiveness, and cooperation enrich all our lives. When everyone has the opportunity to develop their abilities, not only the individuals but society as a whole benefits. In an inclusive world, we can all grow as people.



