

World medical definition of learning disability

The World Health Organisation defines learning disabilities as:

“a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind”.

Learning disability is a diagnosis, but it is not a disease, nor is it a physical or mental illness. Unlike the latter, so far as we know it is not treatable.

Across the world there are 3 basic things that decide if someone has a learning disability.

These things are generally measured and decided by medical professionals.

All three things must be present. Either one on their own does not mean that someone has a learning disability.

The 3 things are:

1. The person finds it harder to cope independently with everyday life. This might be things like how they communicate or care for themselves.
2. The person has a lower than average score on IQ tests. Generally it has to be below 70 to be called a learning disability
3. The impairment must be there before the person is an adult.



The term learning disability is a label. It can be convenient in discussion and for planning services. But people who carry that label wear many others, such as friend, neighbour, relative, employee, colleague, fellow citizen. A label describes one aspect of a person, but does not capture the whole person.