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# How people with disabilities struggle during the COVID-19 pandemic

*While all South Africans have experienced challenges during COVID-19, most people with disabilities have experienced extra difficulties.*

People with disabilities may have a condition of their body or mind that makes it difficult for them to do certain activities and interact with the world around them. In South Africa, during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, many people with disabilities have struggled to get services that they needed, such as shopping for food, getting to work or school, buying medicine, or even getting to a healthcare facility like a hospital or day clinic.

One of the biggest challenges people with disabilities face, even before COVID-19, is transport. Most people with disabilities do not have their own vehicles. While many people without disabilities rely on public transport, such as taxis, buses and trains, to get to work, school, shops, and healthcare facilities, many people with disabilities, especially those with physical or visual impairments, face extra difficulties using public transport.

For the majority of wheelchair users, difficulties include getting on and off taxis and buses; train platforms not being level, which makes getting on and off trains difficult; and subways and railway bridges having steps and not ramps.

Some taxis charge wheelchair users extra money to travel with them as their wheelchair may take up a seat. In South Africa,

during 'hard lockdown' (Levels 4 and 5), when we were only allowed to leave our homes for a few hours a day to buy food or get medical help, many people with disabilities found using public transport very challenging.

It takes some people with disabilities extra time to get out of bed, to eat, to bathe or wash, and to get dressed. So, during the 'hard lockdown', by the time they had managed to get to the taxi or bus stop, taxis were often full. Particularly toward the end of the day, close to curfew when we needed to be back in our homes, drivers often chose not to stop for them as they might have taken extra time to get on and off.

Other people with physical disabilities who use assistive devices, such as crutches, can get on and off public transport by themselves, but have still experienced other challenges during lockdown. Some people may need to hold onto surfaces, such as doors, to balance. Some people with visual disabilities rely on their sense of touch and have to hold someone's arm to guide them, or feel the seat of a taxi to see where they must sit. The need to feel and touch places some people with disabilities at a higher risk of getting COVID-19 because of having to feel and hold onto things that are touched by many other people.

While many shops and medical facilities have hand sanitiser that is dispensed via a foot pump, some people with disabilities, including wheelchair users, are not able to step onto the plate to make the sanitiser spray.

Sanitiser is expensive for many people, especially when they have to also sanitise their assistive devices, such as crutches and wheelchairs, or white canes used by visually-impaired people. Many people with disabilities do not have jobs, so they find having to pay for products to sanitise their assistive devices too expensive.

Some people, and many children, with disabilities find wearing a mask very difficult, especially if they have breathing difficulties, or get anxious by having things on their faces or by not being able to see their family's or friend's facial expressions.

When it comes to understanding information about getting or preventing COVID-19, or how to access services to get help, some people with disabilities have extra challenges. People who are Deaf and who use sign language cannot understand what is being said on TV or radio because there are no sign language interpreters or sub-titles (the writing at the bottom of the screen that shows what the speaker is saying).

People with hearing impairments, who need to lip-read to understand what others are saying, find communication very difficult, as people need to wear masks, covering their mouths, to stop COVID-19 from spreading from one person to another.

Some people with disabilities need to visit healthcare facilities to collect medicine; get assistive devices, such as wheelchairs; or therapy, such as physiotherapy or speech therapy. Unfortunately, because of transport challenges, social distancing challenges, and many rehabilitation centres being closed during the pandemic, many people with disabilities cannot get what they need to help them.

People who are Deaf have challenges as most healthcare workers cannot communicate in sign language and friends and families are not allowed into hospitals to interpret what the health workers are saying to them. People who rely on lip-reading, again, face challenges, as healthcare workers have to use personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks at all times.





Many children with disabilities cannot go back to school, especially those who live in school hostels or travel by school buses. Reasons why are social distancing, not having enough people to help children get on and off transport, or not having enough PPE and sanitiser to keep safe. Some children with

visual disabilities read and write using Braille, and they need their fingers to do this. In the classroom, the teachers and children need to touch the Braille paper and Braille machines, which cannot be sanitised.

Other children use computers and assistive devices to type or communicate for them, and sanitiser will damage these products. For children who are Deaf and Blind, who have difficulty seeing and hearing, their teachers have to hold their hands when communicating and need to be close to the child.



Some children with disabilities find change very difficult, so seeing their classroom look different with desks being moved around for social distancing, and doing things differently like taking temperatures and sanitising, and not being able to hold their teachers' hands or see their friends' faces, can be very scary for them. The most important thing for all people is to be considerate and caring for people with disabilities, and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Nakuba abantu base ningizimu ne Africa babenezinqindamba ezeyamene ne COVID-19, kodwa abantu abaphila nokukhubazeka babe nezinqinamba ezengenziwe. Isibonelo salokhu ukuthi noma izindawo eziningi zine Sanitiser yogugeza izandla kodwa le sanitizer iphuma kokuthi ucindezele ngonyawo, abanye ke babantu abaphila nokukhubazeka, kubalwa kuba abahamba ngezihlalo, abakwazi ukucindezela ngonyawo ukuze kuphume I sanitizer. Kubalulekile kakhulu ukuba nozwelo nokucabangela abantu abaphila nokukhubazeka.

*Translated by Zamantimande Kunene, South African Medical Research Council*

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