



# The Case for a Common Functional Definition and Understanding of Cognitive Disability

It is estimated that over 5 million Canadians experience cognitive disabilities. They may be otherwise labeled as living with mild cognitive impairment, ADHD, dyslexia, dementia, intellectual disabilities, autism, or hundreds of other conditions.

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Nevertheless, in the absence of a consensual definition, **cognitive disability remains a catch-all categorical descriptor deprived of meaning**. The lack of a consensual functional definition manifests real-world consequences in the form of policy, education and community participation shortfalls, which further perpetuate systemic and environmental barriers to accommodation and inclusion.

## Inconsistency inhibits inclusion.

The lack of a clear, consistent and commonly accepted functional definition of cognitive disability inhibits research, education and policy development. Such inconsistency creates “blind spots” where many individuals who may be included within the definition are rendered invisible.

The result is that those who are unseen are inadvertently disadvantaged.

## Clarity creates common ground for a common purpose.

We propose the establishment of a common, consensus-based definition of cognitive disability. One that serves the needs of all stakeholders by more effectively communicating across all facets of their specific disciplines, support programs and policy initiatives.

## What the term “cognitive disability” means.

We are proposing the universal adoption of this common functional definition.

Cognitive disability is a situation of disadvantage experienced by individuals with cognitive abilities that differ from what is considered typical, in one or more of the following domains:

- Attention
- Executive functions
- Learning and memory
- Language
- Perceptual motor skills
- Social cognition

People with cognitive disabilities constitute a diverse group with a range of strengths and limitations that can be persistent, episodic, or temporary.

Disability is understood as a social construction of disadvantage; as an experience of unfair barriers to full participation and inclusion.

Cognitive abilities are identified with the functionality of the brain. They are the processes that enable thought, reasoning, learning, language, memory, comprehension, coordination of perceptions and movements, social cognition and attention.

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# The very definition of empowerment and progress.

A consensual functional definition of cognitive disability will help create equity, foster opportunity, enable collaborative engagement and build more accessible, inclusive and resilient communities.

Creating consensus for a definition establishes a common foundation of understanding across academic and research disciplines. Equally important, this same definition empowers legislators and community leaders with a more functional and actionable framework for policy development, inclusive programming and practical, real-world accommodations.

## One definition. One huge step forward.

Consensus on a common functional definition is an essential step toward a world in which persons with cognitive disabilities are recognized for their abilities, their strengths and their capacity to contribute – and thrive.

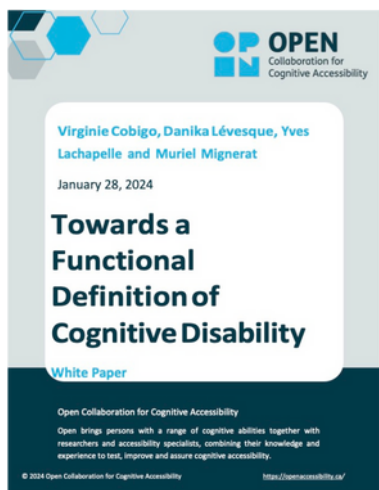
## Empowerment propels progress.

The common functional definition of cognitive disability will support, focus and guide:

- The next generation of research and education.
- Policies and programs that recognize the diverse experiences of persons with cognitive disabilities.
- Engagement and inclusion of persons with cognitive disabilities in decision making that informs program design, implementation and ongoing evaluation.

# Go deeper. Learn more in our white paper.

Access our comprehensive white paper, **Towards a Functional Definition of Cognitive Disability**



It is available to [read online here](#) (HTML, English).

It is also available in [PDF format here](#) (English).

And it is available as an [accessible text PDF here](#) (English).

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