

# NON-VISIBLE DISABILITIES

## Thriving with Non-Visible Disabilities: Support for Health and Social Care Professionals in Fife

Fife's Health and Social Care professionals are at the core of their communities, providing essential care and services. For those living with non-visible disabilities—such as chronic pain, mental health challenges, or neurological conditions—their roles can be particularly demanding. To truly foster compassionate care for patients and service-users, it is essential to extend that same compassion to ourselves and our colleagues. By creating understanding and inclusive workplaces, we can ensure that every professional in Fife is supported to thrive.

## Why it matters

Non-visible disabilities affect physical, mental, or neurological health but may not immediately appear to others. Globally, one in six people lives with some form of disability, and the majority—around 80%—have a disability that is non-visible. Research has showed that 88% of employees with non-visible disabilities choose not to disclose it at their work to avoid stigma and discrimination. Conditions like arthritis, fibromyalgia, depression, anxiety, or post-stroke cognitive impairments can bring symptoms such as chronic pain, fatigue, or concentration difficulties. These challenges may be hidden, but they can profoundly impact those experiencing them.

For Health and Social Care professionals in Fife, managing a non-visible disability alongside the demands of their roles can be particularly challenging. Physical tasks such as lifting patients or standing for extended periods may worsen chronic pain or other conditions, while fast-paced care environments can amplify cognitive difficulties, such as problems with focus or memory. Misunderstandings around non-visible disabilities are also common. Because these conditions are not immediately obvious, colleagues or managers may underestimate their impact, potentially leaving individuals feeling judged or unsupported.

This can lead to heightened stress and anxiety, making it even more difficult to balance work with personal health.



## Creating inclusive and compassionate workplaces

Creating inclusive and compassionate workplaces is essential to helping Health and Social Care professionals thrive. Flexibility in work arrangements, such as adaptable hours or additional breaks, can enable employees to manage their symptoms while maintaining productivity. Providing ergonomic tools, such as adjustable chairs and assistive technology, can reduce physical strain. Equally important is fostering open communication, where employees feel safe discussing their needs without fear of judgment. Raising awareness of non-visible disabilities within teams and encouraging understanding helps to build a workplace culture rooted in empathy. Additionally, ensuring access to mental health support, such as counselling services and stress management programmes, can help professionals maintain their emotional wellbeing.

Compassion among colleagues is also critical. Listening without judgment and acknowledging the experiences of others can make a significant difference. Flexibility and understanding— whether by offering help with tasks or supporting adjustments—create a stronger sense of teamwork. At the same time, respecting a colleague's privacy and focusing on their strengths fosters trust and mutual respect. When we extend the same compassion to our colleagues that we show to the people we support, we create an environment where everyone feels valued and supported.

Leadership in Fife's Health and Social Care sector has a key role in promoting inclusivity. Managers who lead with empathy set the tone for the entire team. Flexible policies, such as phased returns to work or tailored role adjustments, can make a significant difference in helping employees balance their health needs with their professional responsibilities. Providing access to resources like [Pain Talking](#) and ensuring that employees are aware of available support services fosters a culture of care. Actively listening to feedback and encouraging collaboration within teams helps create workplaces where every individual feels empowered to succeed.



Practical workplace adjustments can also help professionals overcome barriers and thrive in their roles. These might include flexible hours, remote work options, ergonomic equipment, or redistributing tasks to reduce strain. The Equality Act 2010 requires employers to make reasonable adjustments, and resources such as [Access to Work](#) , and [Citizens Advice and Rights Fife](#) can guide employees and employers through the process.



## The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Initiative

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower initiative is another tool that promotes inclusion and understanding. The globally recognised sunflower symbol allows individuals with non-visible disabilities to discreetly signal that they may need additional understanding or support. By wearing a sunflower lanyard, badge, or card, individuals can communicate their needs without repeatedly explaining their condition.

Non-visible disabilities are a reality for many Health and Social Care professionals in Fife. Yet, with the right support, individuals can continue to provide exceptional care to their communities. To achieve this, we must cultivate a workplace culture of flexibility, empathy, and understanding, where both patients and staff are treated with compassion. Resources like Pain Talking which provides tools for understanding and managing persistent pain, and the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower initiative empower individuals to manage their challenges and contribute fully to their teams. When we prioritise inclusivity and kindness within our workplaces, we not only strengthen our teams but also build healthier and more resilient communities across Fife.



### Get In Touch

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## Let's hear from some of our colleagues who live with non-visible disabilities



**Ann Marnock**  
Social Care Worker

I have had Fibromyalgia for many years and have been diagnosed for 10. I work in Health and Social Care and for the most part, my colleagues have been supportive, I find those who are most supportive are people who themselves have a disability or long-term health condition.

I am very cautious and careful of mentioning any symptoms or effects my condition has, also think like many others; I am an over-achiever simply so nobody can question my ability to carry out my job.

I have found ways over the years to explain my condition to others, in a way that has had a lasting effect on them. It is daunting being diagnosed with any long-term health condition; it almost feels like a bereavement to begin with. I found I missed doing things I could no longer do, I lost friends who drifted away when I turned down invitations once too often, or cancelled plans. I worried about what would happen to me if I had a flare-up of symptoms that lasted too long, how would I pay my mortgage? how would I live? For a very independent person, I was in my own personal nightmare. Thankfully, none of my fears have happened and I am as well as I can be.

I evaluated my life, and looked at how I could improve my work life balance going forward into my 3rd decade of my career, and how I could use the skills I have in another way that gives me the reward from helping others achieve their goals. I decided to go part-time at work, and became a Supported Lodgings carer, which is very rewarding, plus it is a new challenge. Supporting young care experienced people to become more confident in their skills and abilities to branch out on their own is satisfying.

I wonder if I didn't have a disability, would I ever take time to stop and smell the roses, or would I be battling on, never seeing a bigger picture? My condition has its limitations, but maybe also some positives, and from a different perspective, gives opportunities I may not have had otherwise.





**Laura Aldous**  
Operations and Wellbeing Manager

Living with a non-visible disability like arthritis and the after-effect of a stroke has a profound impact on my working life. On the surface, I might appear fine, but there are days when pain, fatigue, or cognitive challenges make even the simplest tasks feel overwhelming. Arthritis causes stiffness and discomfort, making repetitive movements or prolonged periods of sitting or standing very difficult, it also means I struggle to get to a lower level to do things like pick up from the floor or get underneath the desk to plug things in. The stroke has left me dealing with an inability to stand for long periods, or walk long distances, occasional cognitive fog, or difficulty concentrating for extended periods, it also means that when in situation like presenting or talking in big groups i can get a stutter or tounge tied, and therefore prefer to have a script as the process of thinking on the spot can be slower. This in turn affects my mental health as i feel like people are looking or thinking I don't know what i am doing.

Additionally, the invisible nature of my conditions means that colleagues might not fully understand or recognise the limitations I face. This can sometimes lead to feelings of having to explain myself more than I'd like. I often push myself harder to "prove" my capabilities, which can lead to burnout or exacerbation of my symptoms. I bring resilience, problem-solving skills, and a unique perspective to the workplace due to my experiences. Recognising and valuing these contributions helps me feel empowered and appreciated.

How to support colleagues with a non-visible disability:

1. Be patient and understanding: Just because you don't look unwell doesn't mean you are not struggling.
2. Offer flexibility: Having the ability to adjust your work environment, take breaks, or modify your schedules can make a world of difference. Flexibility helps manage flare-ups.
3. Encourage open communication: It's helpful when colleagues and managers create a safe space for people to share details of needs without fear of judgment or discrimination.
4. Be mindful of assumptions: Avoid making assumptions about what people can or cannot do. Instead, ask directly what support is needed to perform the task. Also, don't assume because you may know a condition that you know how it impacts that person.
5. Celebrate strengths, not just limitations.





## Denise Paterson HSC Compliance Officer

For a number of years, I was suffering with a lot of pain and was constantly back and forth to the doctors and referred to the hospital for test. I was given medication, endoscopies, colonoscopies, MRI, ultrasounds etc as well as medication. I was referred to physiotherapy, pain management but nothing was helping.

Things came to a head in June 2016 was I was admitted to hospital in severe pain and following more tests I underwent a surgery for gallbladder removal and in 2017 I was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia.

At first it was a relief that I finally had a diagnosis and that all the pain I had been in was not all 'in my head,' but then I had to think about how I was going to live with this condition. I worked full-time, had four teenage kids living at home and was not sure how this was going to affect me.

It is extremely hard to find a work/life balance with Fibromyalgia. No two days are the same, you can have a day where you feel fantastic but the next day it takes you to even have a shower without being in pain. I am still trying to find that work/life balance with Fibromyalgia even after all these years.

I want to pull my weight at work and at home so like a number of people who have Fibromyalgia I still push myself too far. When I have a good day, I want to do everything that I have not been able to do due to the pain. When I push myself, I end up being floored for days after.

I am lucky that my job allows for flexibility, and I have a very understanding and caring manager and colleague. When I am having a 'bad day' or have had a 'bad night' I can work a bit more flexibly by taking extra breaks and working later times.

Fibromyalgia is a horrible non-visible condition but if you have other medical conditions on top of the Fibromyalgia then you can totally struggle to get out of bed some days. But having a great support network can get you through your bad days. I am lucky enough that I have the support of my husband and kids (with three adult daughters still living at home this helps with my support). But my support network extends to my family who are always willing to help or even just go out for a coffee to 'get me out the house for a while.'

It is difficult for others to understand what you are going through and when you don't have a visible condition it is really easy for them to shrug off what you are going through with comments such as 'I know the feeling,' 'I know you are in pain but you can just push through this,' 'get a good night's sleep and you will feel better tomorrow,' 'you're always sick, aren't you?,' 'it can't hurt that much I barely touched you.' But the pain is real and I have heightened pain levels due to Fibromyalgia affecting the nervous system, but I am finding ways to live with this condition as well hold down a full-time job and have a life with my family.

The only advice I could give to someone newly diagnosed or awaiting a diagnosis is to make sure you have a support network in place, find a job you love that will give you the flexibility to manage your condition and listen to your body. I am not great at the last one and sometimes try to push through, but I am getting better at listening to my body and trying to relax more.



## Rebecca Creighton

### Senior Prescribing Support Technician

Hello! I'm Becca, and I am disabled. I have had Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, a hidden disability that causes fatigue, post-exertional malaise, pain, orthostatic intolerance dizziness and much more, for 26 years.

I haven't always referred to myself as disabled. It's something that I had to come to terms with over time, not because I thought that being disabled was shameful, but because I felt like a fraud for referring to myself in that way.

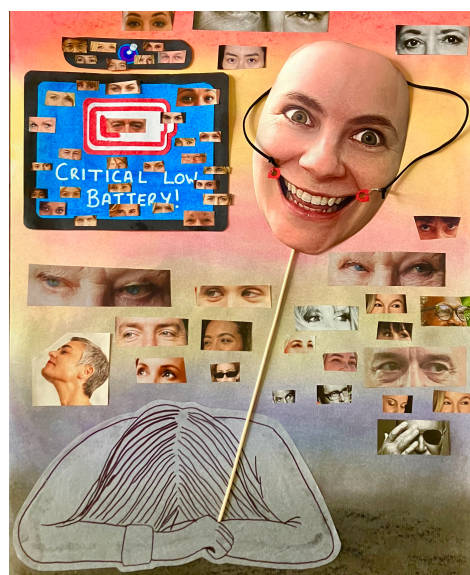
Having been diagnosed with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis at 9 years old, I learned at an early age that appearing as normal and healthy as possible was my safest option. ME was not well understood at the time. I learned to put on a mask and act like everything was fine and I have kept that mask with me my whole life, it was my safety net. But I now see how much it caused me to betray myself and my own needs. It also enabled others to minimise the effects of my disability or to dismiss my need for consideration. I should have sought help a lot sooner.

Thanks to the brilliant staff at Occupational Health I am able to accept my condition and my limitations a lot more, as well as access appropriate support and reasonable adjustments to make both my working life and downtime more manageable.

Identifying as disabled has given me a community who understands and a vocabulary to be able to describe my situation and have my needs met. I can't say this has always been popular with those around me. I can see the confusion in people's eyes when I tell them I'm unable to do something that I would have sacrificed part of myself to do before. It hurts when people don't understand, but being true to myself and becoming my own best advocate is more important.

If anyone reading this is struggling with a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect your ability to do normal daily activities, I would highly encourage you to get in touch with Occupational Health. My previous experience made me very wary about seeking outside support, but I cannot overstate the impact that their reasonable adjustments recommendations have had and how truly understanding they are.

I will leave you with one last thought, that helps me if I ever find that I'm wavering in advocating for myself. Disabled people do not have special needs. We have the same basic human needs as everyone else. We need to create a society that prioritises meeting them.



## Sandra Forbes

### HCSW Minor Injuries

I have both physical and mental disabilities but although my management staff are very good at dealing with the physical aspects (mostly) the others are much more challenging.

I suffer from severe depression and anxiety and complex PTSD and I try so hard to hide these from staff members as I feel embarrassed and ashamed at times.

Some days I struggle to even get out of bed as my anxiety is so overwhelming. Almost every time this happens I have to just pull myself together and get myself to work no matter how awful I feel. Often I get so anxious when others are watching me closely which is when I tend to make mistakes. Others see this as a form of weakness of course and then watch me closer which then leads onto making even more mistakes. Just because I take longer to do certain things it does not mean that I cannot do them at all.

Physically I am in moderate to severe pain at all times. I cannot stand still due to severe back pain. With my PTSD I still feel that there is a huge stigma attached to it. I get very anxious if I am put into confrontational situations which always return me to my stressed state which can become unbearable and hard to manage. People just do not know what to do but I tend to withdraw and find someplace where I can try to breath and cry. Because of shame on my part this is something that I never discuss with my work colleagues.

