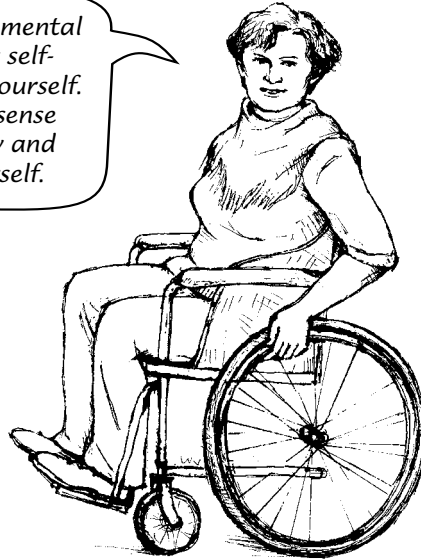


## CHAPTER 3

# Mental health

*When you have good mental health and healthy self-esteem, you respect yourself. You have a strong sense of your own dignity and confidence in yourself.*

*When you believe in yourself, you can find the strength to help yourself and others.*



Having a healthy mind and spirit is just as important as having a healthy body. When your mind and spirit are healthy, you have the emotional strength to take care of yourself and your family, to see problems and do your best to solve them, to plan for your future, and to form satisfying relationships with others. When you are mentally healthy, you can accept help from other people and still value yourself.

Many disabled women develop mental health problems that make it hard for them to face challenges, feel satisfied with their lives, or contribute to the community. Sometimes, these mental health problems are caused by a woman's disability. But usually, they are caused by the way a community treats women with disabilities.

This chapter describes the challenges to mental health that many women with disabilities face. It also describes common mental health problems and gives suggestions about how to work toward feeling better. It also shows how families and communities can promote mental health.

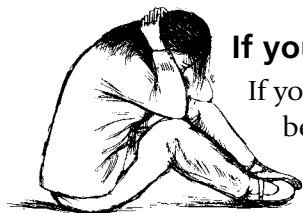
Remember **there are no quick solutions to mental health problems.** Beware of anyone who promises this.

## Challenges to mental health

Stress, discrimination, isolation, and traumatic events are some of the challenges to mental health that women with disabilities face. Of course, not everyone who has to cope with these problems will develop mental health problems. Stress, for example, is not a mental health problem, although when you can no longer cope with the challenges you face, too much stress has become a problem. Traumatic events in your life do not always cause mental health problems, but if you have no support in trying to understand them and work through them emotionally, they often do.

When thinking about mental health problems, remember:

- There is no clear line between normal responses to life's events and mental health problems.
- Most people have some of the signs described in this chapter at different times in their lives, because everyone faces problems at one time or another.
- Signs of mental health problems can vary from community to community. Behavior that looks strange to an outsider may be a normal part of a community's traditions or values.



### If you think someone has a mental health problem

If you suspect someone has a mental health problem, get to know her better. Listen to what other people are saying about her behavior and the ways she has changed. Since mental health problems often have roots in the family or community, think about how these may contribute to the problem. But not all mental health problems have causes that can be identified. Sometimes we just do not know why someone develops a mental health problem.

### STRESS

When you face a lot of stress every day and for a long time, you may begin to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. The problem may be made worse if you have been taught not to value yourself and to neglect your own needs.

### Physical changes and disease caused by stress

When you experience stress, your body gets ready to react quickly and fight off the stress. Some of the changes that occur are:

- The heart starts beating faster.
- The blood pressure goes up.
- A person breathes faster.
- Digestion slows down.



You may be made to feel you are weak or ill. But the real problem may be something that is not fair or not right in life.

If the stress is sudden and severe, you may feel these changes in your body. Then, once the stress is gone, your body returns to normal. But if the stress is less severe or happens slowly, you may not notice how the stress is affecting your body, even though the signs are still there.

Stress that goes on for a long time can lead to the physical signs common in anxiety and depression, such as headache, intestinal problems, and lack of energy. Over time, stress can also cause illness, such as high blood pressure.

### **Social barriers create stress**

Many of the same barriers that prevent women with disabilities from getting health care also cause stress in their daily lives. Since they face so many sources of stress, it is especially important for women with disabilities to find the support they need to feel strong and confident in their abilities, and maintain their self-esteem.

#### **Gender**

Gender is the way a community defines what it means to be a man or a woman. In communities that do not value girls as much as boys, girls experience more stress. Your brothers may be given more education or more food. You may be criticized a lot. Your hard work may go unnoticed. A girl with a disability is much more likely to be treated this way than a girl without

a disability or a boy with a disability. As you grow up, you may not believe you deserve to be treated well by your partner and family, to have health care when you are sick, or to develop your skills. When you feel this way, you may even think your lack of importance in the family and community is natural and right—when, in fact, it is unfair and unjust.

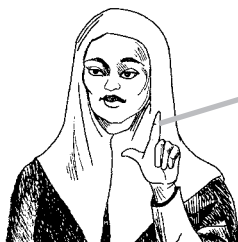
#### **Poverty**

When a family is poor, it is harder for a disabled girl or woman to get the skills she needs to work. She may not get the hearing aids or crutches she needs in order to go to school. If a disabled girl or woman does not have a chance to help support the family, they may treat her like a burden. If the family has only a little food, they may decide more food should go to the family members who go out to work and help support them.



### ***Attitudes about disability***

Communities may also have lower expectations for what girls and women with disabilities can accomplish in life. Having learned they have little to hope for, women with disabilities tend to value themselves less. They often lack the self-confidence to advocate for change in the community.



*When you grow up surrounded by people who love you but who do not believe you are capable of much, you start to believe that yourself. Low expectations from people you love and trust hurt your feelings about yourself.*

### ***Discrimination, stress, and self-esteem***

Our Association was formed in 1989 by women with disabilities to help promote the welfare of the woman with a disability. We have 21 members with various disabilities (sight, hearing, speech, and movement). We hold a meeting once a month to talk about our problems and to try to find solutions.

We all agree that women with disabilities are often discriminated against because:

- we are women.
- we have disabilities.
- we are mostly poor.



We are rejected as suitable marriage partners or regarded as the 'wrong' image in the workplace. Girls and women with disabilities are often not able to get an education, even when education is available. For example, even in special schools for children with disabilities, boys usually receive priority.

We are unlikely to receive training for any kind of work. We experience abuse—physically, emotionally, and sexually. Unlike all men and women without disabilities, we are seldom allowed to make decisions at home or in the community.

But for each of us in the Association, the biggest problem is lack of self-esteem. We are taught by society not to value ourselves. We are generally considered to be incapable of keeping a man and bearing children, and unable to do meaningful work. Therefore we are considered worthless. Even our extended families only want us if we prove valuable to them.

—Dormaa Ahenkro, Ghana

## Body image

The community may judge disabled women as less worthy than other women because they do not fit that community's image of a beautiful woman. But women with disabilities see a wide variety of bodies and behaviors around them and can appreciate these differences. They can come to see themselves as being beautiful, well-dressed, capable, and strong, even with their scars, deformities, amputations, hearing aids, unusual expressions and gestures, wheelchairs, crutches, sticks, canes, or the possibility of seizures ('fits') or bowel and bladder accidents in public.



*When I dress neatly with a matching sari and blouse, and wear matching bangles and bindi on my forehead, I feel good about myself and have more confidence.*



### **How I changed my image**

My name is Rose, and I come from Kenya. I am blind, and I have many family members and friends who help me with my daily care. I appreciate their help very much. But I was also frustrated because I did not have much control over how I was dressed or how things were done. I felt I was being treated like a child all the time because no one seemed to treat me with any respect.

I wanted to feel more independent. So I started asking questions. When someone helped me get dressed, I asked what the clothes looked like and how my hair was done. I also asked how other women my age were dressed and how they styled their hair.

I soon realized that when my helpers dressed me and did my hair, I ended up looking like a child. No wonder people didn't treat me with respect. But I am a grown woman of 25, and don't want to be treated as a child. So I asked my helpers if they would help me learn to fix my hair myself the way other women in the community did theirs. They were glad to. They had never thought about it before. Because they were used to fixing their own young daughters' hair, they helped me in the same way. Now, my friends help me to dress like other women in the community. And other people in the community treat me with respect.



**Isolation**

Disabled girls may grow up separate from other children and not have the chance to develop friendships. They may not learn the social skills they need to build strong relationships as adults. Being alone and isolated creates stress. Having friends and being part of a community is important for good self-esteem. A teenage girl who has a disability also needs support to develop confidence about her sexuality so she can form close personal and sexual relationships (see page 142).

**Job skills**

Women with disabilities are less likely to receive training for work so they can earn money. If they have not had a chance to gain job skills, it is harder for them to support their families and themselves.



## Common mental health problems

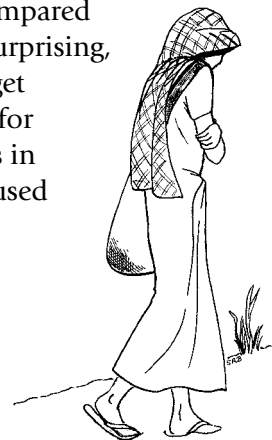
Although there are many kinds of mental health problems, the most common ones are anxiety, depression, reactions to trauma, and misuse of alcohol or drugs.

### **DEPRESSION (EXTREME SADNESS OR FEELING NOTHING AT ALL)**

Depression affects almost 5 in 10 women with disabilities, compared with around 2 in 10 people without disabilities. This is not surprising, because many girls with disabilities do not get the chance to get an education, develop confidence, or learn how to do things for themselves. As you grow older, the social barriers and changes in your health that make it more difficult to do as much as you used to, make you more likely to feel unhappy and depressed.

**Signs:**

- feeling sad most of the time
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- difficulty thinking clearly
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities, eating, or sex
- physical problems, such as headaches or intestinal problems, that are not caused by illness
- lack of energy for daily activities
- thinking about death or suicide



Although it is hard to believe when you are suffering from it, depression does not last forever. See pages 60 to 69 for ways to overcome depression.

## As you grow older

Your body will continue to change as you grow and age. Your daily tasks will take longer, some disabilities will get worse, and you may get 'secondary' disabilities from overuse of certain parts of your body. As you grow older, more things may go 'wrong' with your body and you will have to adapt the way you do things frequently. These constant changes can make you feel as though you will never be really independent and that you must constantly rely on others to help you. Feelings that your dependence is increasing can affect your self-esteem. See Chapter 13, Growing older.

If you are feeling sad a lot of the time, or you are unable to sleep, or if you see changes in your mood, talk to someone in your family you trust, or talk with a health worker.



## Suicide

Serious depression can lead to suicide (killing oneself). Many people have thoughts of suicide at least once in their life. But when these thoughts come more and more often or get very strong, you need help from a trained counselor or mental health worker right away.

- Are you feeling lonely and isolated from family or friends?
- Have you lost the desire to live?
- Do you regularly use alcohol or drugs?
- Do you have a serious health problem?
- Have you thought of killing yourself?
- Have you ever tried to kill yourself?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes,' you may feel better simply by talking about your problems with someone you trust. Some counselors or doctors also may use medicines to treat depression.

*If someone you know talks about killing herself, encourage someone to watch her closely and to be with her at all times. Ask them to remove dangerous objects from her surroundings. If there are mental health services in your community, find out if someone can talk with her regularly.*



## ANXIETY (FEELING NERVOUS OR WORRIED)

If feelings of nervousness or worry (other common names for anxiety are 'nerves,' 'nervous attacks,' and 'heart distress') continue for a long time or become more severe, then you may have a mental health problem.

### **Signs:**

- feeling tense and nervous without reason
- sweating
- feeling the heart pound (when there is no heart disease)
- frequent physical complaints that are not caused by physical illness and that increase when you are upset

**Panic attacks** are a severe kind of anxiety. They happen suddenly and can last from several minutes to several hours. In addition to the signs above, you may feel terror or dread, and fear you may lose consciousness (faint) or die. You may also have chest pain, difficulty breathing, and feel that something terrible is about to happen.



## TRAUMA

When something horrible has happened to a woman, she has suffered a trauma. Some of the most common kinds of trauma are violence in the home, rape, war, torture, and natural disasters. Trauma threatens a woman's physical and mental well-being. As a result, she feels unsafe, insecure, helpless, and unable to trust the world or the people around her. It can take a long time for a woman to recover from trauma, especially if it was caused by another person.

### **Disability caused by trauma**

When a woman becomes disabled later in life, because of war, an accident, or an illness, the sudden change can be very difficult for her. Some women who are newly disabled may feel they have lost all worth to themselves, their families, and communities. They may also be afraid or disturbed because of trauma.

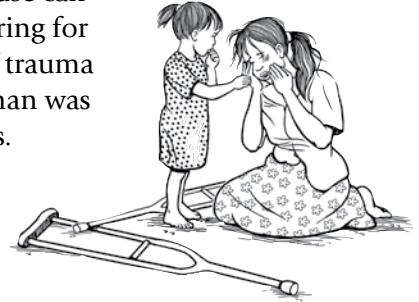
Often, a woman who becomes disabled later in life has grown up with confidence, good education, and many skills. She may have always had strong relationships with others and expects to be treated with respect. When she becomes disabled, it can take time to adjust to the changes in her body. It can be even harder to adapt to the changes in how other people see her, or how she sees herself.

Many women who become disabled later in life say they had to make a decision not to give up. Even though they felt sad and shocked, they realized they had choices about how to live their lives. (See Annie's story on page 63.)

## Abuse is one kind of trauma

Girls with disabilities are especially at risk for abuse or violence from someone in their family. Abuse happens if anyone touches a girl in a sexual way, or if a father, brother, cousin, or caretaker forces a girl to have sex. Abuse can also involve hitting or hurting a girl, humiliating her, caring for her cruelly, or refusing to care for her. Abuse is a kind of trauma that causes great harm to a girl's mental health. If a woman was abused or hurt as a child, it can affect her for many years.

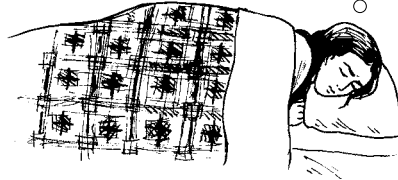
Many women with disabilities who continue being abused as adults don't complain because they believe they do not deserve to be treated well. For more information about abuse, see Chapter 14.



## REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

If you have experienced trauma, you may have many different reactions, such as:

- **going over the trauma again and again in your mind.** While you are awake, you may keep remembering the terrible things that happened. At night, you may dream about them or be unable to fall asleep because you are thinking about them.
- **feeling numb or feeling emotions less strongly than before.** You may avoid people or places that remind you of the trauma.
- **becoming very watchful.** If you are constantly looking out for danger, you may have difficulty relaxing and sleeping. You may overreact when startled.
- **feeling very angry or full of shame about what happened.** If you have survived a trauma where others died or were seriously injured, you may feel guilty that others suffered more than you did.
- **feeling separate and distant from other people.**
- **having outbursts of strange or violent behavior,** in which you are confused about where you are.



People suffering from reactions to trauma may also feel anxious or depressed, or misuse alcohol or drugs.

Many of these signs are normal responses to a difficult situation. For example, it is normal to feel angry that a trauma has happened, or to be watchful if the situation is still dangerous. But you need help if the signs are so severe that you cannot carry out daily activities, or if the signs start months after the trauma has happened.

## Helping overcome reactions to trauma

If you have suffered a trauma, you may need help to:

- **learn to trust others again.**
- **talk about your life before the trauma as well as your current experiences.** This way you can realize that although life has changed a lot, in many ways you are the same person as before.
- **express painful things that are too difficult to talk about or that are 'buried' where they cannot be remembered.** Drawing or painting, or a healing activity like massage, can help you express or relieve these painful feelings.
- **understand your reactions.** Once you understand your reactions, the feelings usually have less control over you.
- **make a plan for those reminders that you cannot avoid.** If reminders of the trauma make you react in fearful ways, it will help to make a plan for those reminders that cannot be avoided. For example, you might tell yourself: "His face is like the face of the man who attacked me, but he is a different person and does not wish to hurt me."
- **remember that you are not responsible for what you said or did if you were raped or hurt in any way.** All responsibility lies with those who hurt you. People who hurt you can make you feel as if you can never feel whole again. While bad experiences can change you, with support from those who care about you, even the most terrible experiences can be overcome.



Try to keep an object from your new life nearby as you sleep. This way if you dream of the trauma, when you wake the object will help you remember that you are safe now.

### If someone you know has experienced trauma

At first it may be best for friends, families, or caregivers of a woman who has experienced a trauma to do everyday activities together with her or to do some of them for her if that is what she wants. You can let her know you are willing to listen and wait till she feels ready to talk. Later, encourage her to take up some of the same activities she enjoyed before or that were part of her daily routine.

## Serious mental illness (psychosis)

Women with disabilities are at risk for mental illness if they have:

- had mental health problems in the past.
- lost family members or are separated from their families.
- witnessed violence or have violent partners.
- little social support.

A woman with a disability may be mentally ill if she has any of these signs:

- She hears voices or sees things that others do not hear or see (hallucinations).
- She has strange beliefs that interfere with daily life (delusions)—for example, she thinks her neighbors are trying to kill her.
- She no longer cares for herself—for example, she does not get dressed, clean herself, or eat.
- She behaves in a strange way, like saying things that make no sense.

Similar signs can be caused by some diseases, poisoning, medicines, drug abuse, or damage to the brain. People who are not mentally ill sometimes act in ways that make others question their mental health, particularly if these behaviors are related to beliefs or traditions that are not shared by the entire community. For example, if a woman says she received guidance in a “vision,” she may be drawing upon traditional sources of knowledge and guidance—not suffering from hallucinations or mental illness. These signs are more likely to be signs of mental illness if they come so often and are so strong that a person has difficulty carrying out daily activities.



### GETTING CARE FOR MENTAL ILLNESS

Although in most places family members care for those who are mentally ill, it is best if the person can also be treated by a trained mental health worker. In some situations medicines are necessary, but they should never be the only treatment.

Traditional healers often play an important role in treating mental illness. A healer who comes from the same community as the person with the problem may know her and her family, understand her, and have a clear idea of the stresses she has experienced. Some healers use treatments or rituals that can help a woman overcome her problem.

**No matter what treatment is given, a person with a mental illness should always be treated with kindness, respect, and dignity.**

Ask these questions before deciding on a treatment for mental illness:

- What is the purpose of each step in the treatment?
- What is expected to happen?
- If the person is not a danger to herself or others, can she get mental health care while living at home or living together with others in her community?
- Will the family be involved in the treatment?
- Is the person providing treatment respected in the community?
- Do any of the treatments cause side effects, physical harm or shame?



The most important part of any treatment is the support and care of family and friends.

If someone must be treated in a hospital, always ask for a tour of the facility before leaving her there. Make sure the hospital is clean, that patients are safe and can have visitors, and that they will get regular treatment with trained mental health workers. Patients should be free to move about, unless they are a danger to themselves or others. Also, make sure you find out what must be done to release the person from the hospital later.

Mental health facilities can have the same barriers as other buildings and services that make it difficult for people with disabilities to move around and communicate. See pages 36 to 40 for ideas about improving access to all health services.

## Working toward mental health

To build a better life, women with disabilities need health, education, and the ability to move around independently and earn a living. But the difficulty in achieving these goals can create challenges to your mental health. You usually do not need treatment from a trained mental health worker to overcome most feelings of depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem. There are ways you can help yourself and ways you can begin to feel better with the support of another person or a group.

## Things you can do with few resources

- Spend time with friends, gardening, cooking, or sharing other daily activities.
- Let your feelings out. Making up poems, songs, and stories can be helpful when you have trouble saying things to others. Or you can express your feelings without using words, through dancing, drawing, painting, or music. You do not have to be a trained artist to express yourself in these ways.
- Create pleasing surroundings. Try to arrange your living space in ways you like. Try to have as much light and fresh air as possible.
- Try to have some beauty around you. This could mean putting some flowers in the room, playing music, or going where there is a nice view.
- Practice traditions that build inner strength and help calm the body and mind.

### *Learn to relax*

- Close your eyes and imagine a safe, peaceful place where you would like to be. This might be anywhere: on a mountain, by a lake or ocean, or in a field.
- Keep thinking about this place as you breathe deeply in through your nose and then out through your mouth.
- If it helps, think of a positive thought, such as "I am at peace," or "I am safe."
- Keep breathing, focusing either on the safe place or the thought. Do this for about 20 minutes (as long as it takes to boil rice).
- If you start to feel uncomfortable or frightened at any time during this relaxation exercise, open your eyes and breathe deeply.

You can practice this exercise in your group or at home whenever you have difficulty sleeping or feel tense and afraid. Breathing deeply helps calm nervous feelings.

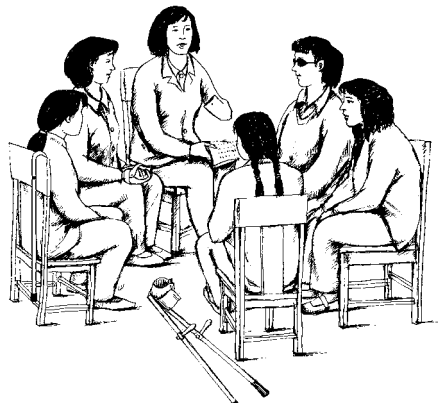


## Helping relationships

In a helping relationship, 2 or more people make a commitment to get to know, understand, and help each other.

Helping relationships can help you get support, recognize feelings, and control impulsive reactions. A helping relationship can be formed among friends, family members, a group of women with disabilities, a group of women who work together, or a group that already meets for another purpose.

Be careful when choosing helping relationships. Form relationships only with people who will respect your feelings and your privacy. For information about forming support groups, see pages 65 and 66.



## LEARN TO VALUE YOURSELF

When a woman grows up with the support of her family, school and community to live the best life she can, her feelings of self-worth will be very high, whether or not she has a disability. But if a woman grows up feeling she is worth less than others because she has a disability, she has to learn to value herself.



*When you think well of yourself, you can hold your head high and feel proud of yourself and what you can do. You have the courage to try new things and the power to believe in yourself. You respect yourself, even when you make mistakes. And when you respect yourself, other people usually respect you, too.*

*When you know you're important, you make good decisions about your life. You value your safety, your feelings, your health—your whole self! Good self-esteem helps you know that every part of you is worth caring for and protecting.*

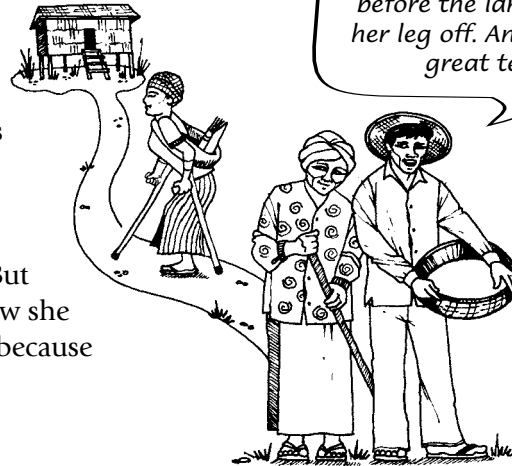
One of the most important parts of mental health is self-esteem. You have good self-esteem when you know you are worthy of being treated with respect. You know people listen to you and value your opinions. You feel capable of facing difficulties and challenges.

Girls and women who are treated with respect by their families, schools, and communities develop good self-esteem. The more support families and communities can give you to live the best life you can, the more self-worth you will feel. Other things that help you have good self-esteem are meaningful work, economic security, loving relationships, and safety from physical or sexual abuse.

*Women with disabilities around the world are redefining who we are and supporting each other. We are pretty and proud as we are. We are beautiful.*



With help and support from her friends and family, a woman who suddenly becomes disabled can learn to cope with her disability. She can learn to do things differently, in a way that works with her disability. But she does not have to change how she values and respects herself just because her body or mind has changed.



*Ung Yok Khoan is amazing. She was a great teacher before the land mine blew her leg off. And she's still a great teacher.*

### **Annie's story**

Dr. Annie is a medical doctor as well as a wife and mother. She became deaf due to an illness and suddenly found herself disabled because of her loss of hearing. As she entered the world of the disabled, she experienced the loneliness that many disabled women feel. Dr. Annie knew she could either give up her old way of life or make choices that would enable her to live as normal a life as possible. She learned to read lips and to communicate by writing when others could not understand her. Dr. Annie's dignity and courage in the face of much personal loss and suffering have been a positive example to many.



**Neelima's choice**

When Neelima was an adolescent, she tried to commit suicide by drinking acid. The acid completely burned out her gut and stomach. The skilled Indian doctors who saved her life told her she had a choice: after her operation she would either be able to speak or to swallow small portions of food, but she could not do both. Neelima chose to be able to swallow. Neelima remained mentally strong after her voice box was removed and she could no longer speak. In spite of this handicap, Neelima finished her school exams and took up a career in catering.

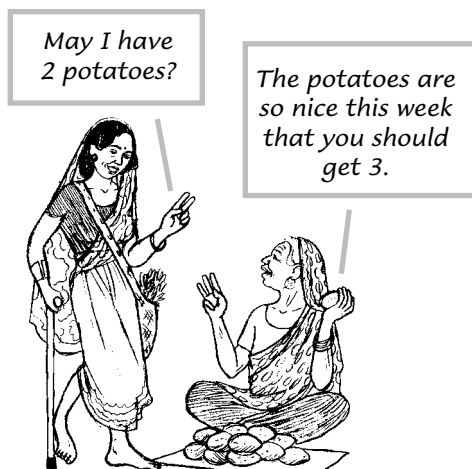
Always a good cook, Neelima made a name for herself by preparing food at home and selling it.



**Learning to value yourself is not always easy, but it can be done by taking small steps.**

**The first step is to meet other people.** If you are not used to going out, you might try sitting at the door of your home and greeting your neighbors. Then, if you are able, go to the market and talk with people there. As they get to know you, they will find out that women with and without disabilities are not really very different from each other. Each time you go out it will become easier to meet and talk with others.

Sometimes a woman's disability makes it hard for her to talk with others. Women who are deaf or women who cannot speak clearly can try using gestures or pictures to communicate. A deaf woman could also teach some sign language to her neighbors. Start by picking out 2 or 3 people you want to talk with. Try to find people who are patient and willing to work with you. Together, you can find ways to communicate about more and more things. Then, over time, you can work on reaching out to more people.



**The second step is to start or join a group for women with disabilities.** A group can provide a safe place for women to speak freely. Talking with other women can help you begin to:

- appreciate your own self-worth and assert your right to make decisions to improve your lives.
- learn about your strengths and weaknesses.
- share thoughts and experiences about the challenges that come from having a disability.
- talk about accepting and treating your bodies well.
- support each other during both happy and difficult times.
- learn how to become independent.
- feel good about yourselves, and not allow negative images about disability to change that feeling.



### ***It was hardest to convince myself***

Tina, a woman from Georgia who became disabled after she was the victim of a crime, shares her experience:

When I realized I was disabled and in a wheelchair, I was shocked. I thought I was to blame. But day after day, I told myself, “Your sons love you, and your husband needs you. You are a cosmetologist, and women are waiting for you to make their faces beautiful. You have to live.” I realized I was useful to the members of my family and to my society.

I decided to live—and work for them and with them. Now I can see that my life has changed for the best.

## **FORM SUPPORT GROUPS**

Meeting together with other disabled women can give a woman more strength and hope, which then helps her cope with daily challenges.

Just being able to talk about a problem can be helpful. After one woman tells her story, the leader can ask for similar experiences. After everyone has listened to these, the group can discuss what the stories have in common, whether the problems are partly caused by social conditions, and if so, what we might do to change these conditions.

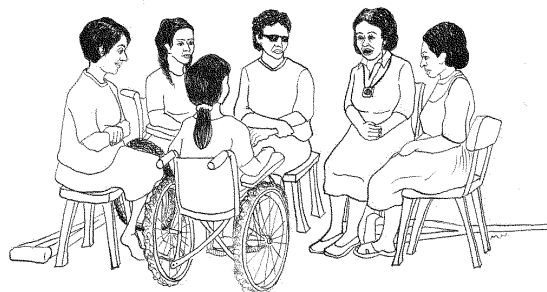
Then the women can decide whether to work to solve problems separately or together. Women acting together are more powerful than one woman acting alone.



*Sometimes we would arrive at the meeting feeling bad. We didn't want to speak. We had no energy. But then a hug or a laugh would be catching, and all of us would feel stronger. Just being together, and not alone, gives us strength.*

### **How to start a support group**

1. Find 2 or more women who want to start a group.
2. Plan when and where to meet. It helps to find a quiet place, such as a school, health post, cooperative, or place of worship.
3. Discuss what you hope to do. Choose the most important topics you want to talk about together. Usually, support groups work best when they are run by women with disabilities, for women with disabilities.
4. Give support instead of advice. Remember—every woman has to choose how to face her challenges for herself. No one should tell her what she has to do.
5. Ask everyone to keep the group discussion private.
6. Let everyone have a chance to talk but make sure the discussion stays focused on the main point. After the first few meetings, members may want to take turns leading the group. Having more than one leader can also help shy women lead.



*Some of us had been sexually abused in the past, but we had never been able to share it with others. It was only in the group that we could talk about these terrible things.*

**Recognize feelings.** Sometimes women hide their feelings (or do not even realize they have them), because they think they are bad, dangerous, or shameful.

**Create a story, drama, or painting.** You can make up a story about a situation similar to those experienced by members of the group. Hearing others talk about feelings can help a woman deal with her own feelings. The leader starts the story, and then another member continues to tell another part, and so on, until everyone has contributed something and the story is complete. The group can also act out the story as it is told or paint a picture of the story.

These questions may help the group talk about their feelings:

- What feelings or experiences are most important in this story?
- Why did these feelings occur? How is the woman coping with these feelings?
- What can the group do to help?

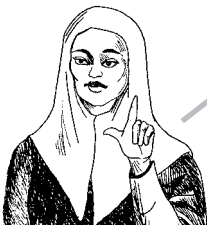
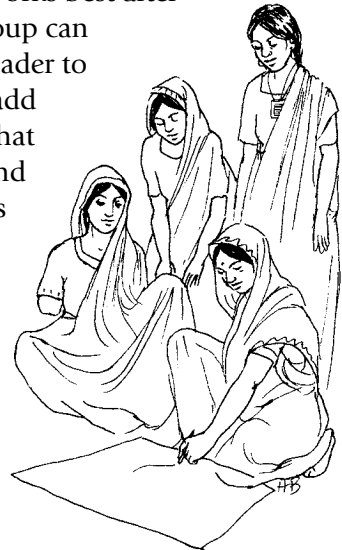
**Understand the causes of a problem.** By talking together, women with different kinds of disabilities begin to realize that many of them suffer from the same kinds of problems. This can help identify root causes of problems.



*I used to think badly of myself, as if I were to blame for my family's poverty. But it is not my fault I am disabled. Talking about this with others has helped me understand why disabled people suffer the way we do.*

**Create a picture of your community.** This exercise works best after the group has been meeting together for a while. Your group can draw a picture of your community. (It may help for the leader to draw a simple picture to get things started.) Then others add to the picture, drawing in those parts of the community that contribute to mental health of women with disabilities and those that cause mental health problems. These questions can help your group create a plan of action.

- How can we strengthen those parts of the community that now contribute to good mental health for women with disabilities?
- What new things need to be done?
- How can we help bring about these changes?



*We made a plan to go to the village council together to raise awareness about accessibility of the community water project and toilets. If one of us tried to do this alone, it would be much harder.*

*Make sure disabled girls and women participate in all family and community activities.*



## Families and communities can promote mental health

Families that encourage and build on the strengths of girls and women with disabilities promote their mental health. The way your family and community treats you shapes how you value yourself. When family and community expect you to do well at things and want you to do your best, you will likely grow up with a strong sense of self-esteem, be strong in your inner self, and learn that you are capable.

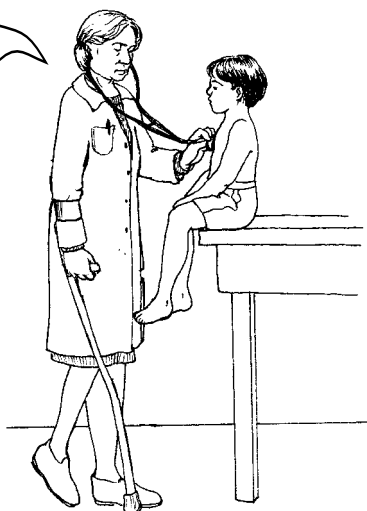
### Families and communities need to:

- recognize disabled women and girls as fully contributing members.
- show by example that they value and accept girls as much as boys, and disabled girls and women as equally as others.
- support girls with disabilities during the teenage years when they change from girls to women. They need the same knowledge and treatment as other girls in their community. It is important they be encouraged to dress according to their age and recognize their sexuality as young women.
- support girls and women with disabilities who have mental health problems.

Families, teachers, health workers and others can all help by **focusing on what you can do rather than what you cannot do**, such as:

- believe you can live a happy and fulfilling life, and contribute to your community.
- encourage you to try new things and do things for yourself, instead of over-protecting and doing everything for you.
- make sure you help at home and contribute to the family business.

*From the time I was a little girl, I wanted to be a doctor. My parents believed in me. They told me I could do anything I wanted and helped me to realize my dream.*



### **Educate girls with disabilities**

Girls with disabilities need to go to school and learn with other children. A disabled girl is more likely to have strong self-esteem if her family finds a way for her to go to school and the school makes a place for her. Work with other families to make schools accept children with all kinds of disabilities. Talk with teachers to help them understand your daughter's strengths and to raise their awareness about disabilities. Help the school understand how to include her in different activities.

Girls with disabilities need an education and need to learn skills that enable them to get jobs. They will then be able to support themselves and contribute to their families and communities.

