

Understanding Intersectionality: A Guide for MS Society Volunteers

Introduction

At the MS Society, we believe that everyone living with or affected by multiple sclerosis deserves to feel seen, heard, and supported. Our commitment to Equality, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI) means striving to create a welcoming and effective environment for all.

A key concept that helps us achieve this is intersectionality. This document aims to explain what intersectionality is and why it's vital for MS Society volunteers to understand and apply it in your work.

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality helps us understand that people's social identities (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, age, religion, etc.) don't exist in isolation. Instead, they intersect and overlap, creating unique experiences of both privilege and disadvantage.

Think of it like a crossroads: Each identity is a road, and where they meet (the intersection) is where a person's unique experiences are formed. Someone might face challenges due to their disability, but if they are also from a racial minority group, a woman, and facing economic hardship, their experience of living with MS and accessing support will be profoundly different from someone who is white, male, and financially secure, even if both have MS.

Key points about intersectionality:

- More than just "adding up" identities: It's not simply about having multiple identities, but about how these identities interact and compound to create specific experiences of discrimination or privilege.
- Recognises unique challenges: It highlights that people with intersecting identities can face distinct barriers and forms of discrimination that are not always captured when looking at each identity in isolation.
- Challenges "one-size-fits-all" approaches: It encourages us to move beyond broad categories and consider the nuances of individual experiences.

Why is Intersectionality Important for MS Society Volunteers?

As volunteers, you are at the heart of our community, connecting directly with people living with and affected by MS. Understanding intersectionality will enable you to:

1. Provide more effective and inclusive support:
Tailor your approach: Recognise that a "standard" approach might not work for everyone. For example, language barriers, cultural norms, or specific accessibility needs (beyond physical mobility) might impact how someone engages with our services.
Identify unmet needs: Be more attuned to the specific challenges faced by individuals whose intersecting identities might make it harder for them to access information, support, or feel included.

2. **Challenge unconscious bias and assumptions:**
 We all hold unconscious biases. Intersectionality encourages us to reflect on our own perspectives and challenge assumptions we might make about someone based on a single aspect of their identity.
 For example, assuming that all people living with MS have the same access to transport, or that all young people living with MS are comfortable with digital communication.

3. **Build a truly diverse and welcoming community:**
 When we understand intersectionality, we can actively work to create spaces where everyone feels comfortable being their authentic self.
 This means not just welcoming diversity but actively working to include and empower people from all backgrounds, particularly those who have historically been marginalised.

4. **Amplify diverse voices:**
 Help ensure that the experiences of all people living with and affected by MS, especially those with intersecting identities, are heard and represented in our advocacy and service development.
 This includes being mindful of who is present and who might be missing from conversations and activities.

5. **Strengthen the MS Society's impact:**
 By reaching and supporting a wider range of people living with and affected by MS, we strengthen our collective voice and accelerate our progress towards a world free from MS. Our vision is to be a fearless ally for everyone living with and affected by MS, regardless of their background.

Putting Intersectionality into Practice: What You Can Do

Here are some practical ways you can apply an intersectional lens in your volunteering role:

- **Listen Actively and Empathetically:**
 Be genuinely curious about individuals' experiences. Ask open-ended questions that allow them to share their whole story.
 Avoid making assumptions about someone's life, challenges, or preferences based on what you see or hear initially.
- **Be Mindful of Language:**
 Use inclusive language that respects diverse identities. Avoid jargon or slang that might exclude certain groups.
 Be open to correcting yourself if you make a mistake and learn from it.
- **Consider Accessibility in its Broadest Sense:**
 Beyond physical accessibility, think about communication styles, cultural relevance, and digital access.
 For example, are our resources available in different languages or formats? Are our online events accessible to those with varying digital literacy or access?
- **Challenge Stereotypes:**
 If you hear or see something that perpetuates a stereotype, consider how you can respectfully challenge it or offer a different perspective.
- **Advocate for Inclusive Practices:**
 If you notice barriers or opportunities for greater inclusion within MS Society activities or resources, share your feedback with your volunteer manager or relevant staff.

- **Educate Yourself:**
Continue to learn about different communities and their experiences. There are many resources available online and through the MS Society to deepen your understanding of diversity and inclusion.
Reflect on your own positionality and privileges, and how they might influence your interactions.

Conclusion

Intersectionality is not just a theoretical concept; it's a vital tool for ensuring that our work at the MS Society is truly impactful and equitable. By embracing an intersectional approach, we can better understand and respond to the diverse needs of people living with and affected by MS, building a stronger, more inclusive community for all.

Thank you for your commitment to the MS Society and for taking the time to understand this important concept. Your dedication makes a real difference in the lives of people living with and affected by MS.

Don't hesitate to speak to your volunteer manager if you have any questions or want to discuss intersectionality further.