WINTER 2026 VOLUME No.17

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

NEWSLETTER

LET'S TALK ABOUT:

WINTER CELEBRATIONS AROUND THE WORLD
MAKING HOLIDAYS WELCOMING
INVISIBLE DISABILITIES
AND MORE!



PHSS | You at home



FROM THE COMMITTEE

Welcome to the Winter 2026 edition of the PHSS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion newsletter! Winter is a season filled with traditions, celebrations, and opportunities to come together. As we recognize the many holidays and cultural traditions celebrated around the world, we are reminded that everyone experiences this time of year differently. It is an opportunity to learn from one another, celebrate our differences, and find meaningful ways to ensure everyone feels welcomed and included.

In this edition, we explore winter celebrations from around the world, share ways to make holiday gatherings more inclusive, and discuss the importance of understanding both visible and invisible disabilities. We also introduce DEI Voices, a new recurring feature where members of the PHSS community share their personal experiences and perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Thank You!

PHSS DEI TEAM

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WINTER CALENDAR

December

Universal Human Rights Month	
World AIDS Day	1
International Day of Persons with Disabilities	3
Hannukkah	4-12
International Volunteer Day	5
Bodhi Day (Rōhatsu)	8
International Human Rights Day	10
St. Lucia's Day	13
International Migrants Day	18
Winter Solstice/Yule	21
Christmas Day	25
Boxing Day	26
Kwanzaa	26-Jan 1
New Year's Eve	31

January 2027

Tamil Heritage Month	
New Year's Day / Mahayana New Year	1
World Braille Day	4
National Ribbon Skirt Day	4
Epiphany	6
Orthodox Christmas	7
Lohri	13
Makar Sankrati / Pongal	14
World Religion Day	17
International Day of Education	24
International Holocaust Remembrance Day	27
Let's Talk Day	28
National Day of Action Against Islamophobia	29

February 2027

Black History Month	
Lunar New Year	6
Ramadan	8-March 8
Shrove Tuesday	9
Ash Wednesday	10
Valentine's Day	14
Random Acts of Kindness Week	14-20
Family Day	15
Lantern Festival	20
Magha Puja	21
Pink Shirt Day	24
Lailat al-Qadr	26

Introducing

DEI Voices

A new feature where we will be hearing from our PHSS community on what DEI means to them.

From Exclusion to Belonging:
My Journey That Shaped the Vision for PHSS

By Brian Dunne OOnt, PHSS President & CEO

I left Ireland as a young boy and came to London, Ontario, with little understanding of how deeply people can be measured and judged by where they come from. Yet, I remember seeing signs that read, "No Irish Need Apply." Those words left a lasting impression on me. They were a reminder that people can be excluded, judged, and devalued simply because they are perceived as different.

That experience has stayed with me throughout my life and leadership journey. It has shaped my understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities who have too often been disregarded, underestimated, and devalued by society.

When I became CEO of PHSS in 1988, I believed that people with complex medical, physical, and developmental needs deserved much more than simply having their basic needs met. They deserved the opportunity to live in their own homes, build relationships, make choices, contribute to their communities, and experience the same opportunities and sense of belonging as everyone else.

That belief helped shape the mission and vision of PHSS. Over the years, we have challenged traditional approaches that separated people from their communities and have worked to create innovative, person-centred approaches of community-based care and support. Through partnerships, advocacy, research, and initiatives such as long-term ventilation supports, PHSS has helped demonstrate that people with the most complex needs can live meaningful lives in their communities when the right supports are in place.

For me, diversity, equity, and inclusion are not simply organizational commitments or words in a strategic plan. They are about recognizing the value and dignity of every person, respecting individuality, removing barriers, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to belong.





BRIAN DUNNE: Head of Participation House once thought about being a teacher

Irish immigrant has found a home

HANK DANISZEWSKI
The London Free Press

Brian Dunne leads an organ-tzadon that employs 350 people at 47 sitee across London.

But few Londoners heve likely heard of him or Participation House even though it has provided London's most vulnerable citizens with independence and dignity for almnst 25 years.

person
A Free Press profile

ticipadon House provides housing for adults with ical disabilhies such

MIKE HENSEN The London Free Press

Brian Dunne has headed Participation House since the organization becan in 1988, providing homes for physically disablod adults.

Some go to day programs, some work as valunteers, one even works at a Walmart.

Independent living hrings out remarkable changes in some of the clients, Dunne said.

"If you're still living at home, it's hard to be your own person. Dnce they move out, there are huge changes."

Independent living also removes a burden from familles who no longer heve to provide daily care, Dunne said.

Mast of the Participation House staff are developmental service workers, many of them graduares of Panahawe College. Dunne said the residence model is a cost-effective way to meet the medical needs of residents wh don't require an expensive i

My journey from Ireland to London, Ontario, taught me what exclusion can feel like. My work with PHSS has been driven by a commitment to helping ensure that others do not experience a lifetime of exclusion, low expectations, or devaluation because of their differences.

> "I believe that belonging is not something we give to people. It is something we recognize as their fundamental right."

The vision of PHSS has always been grounded in that belief: that every person deserves the opportunity to live, participate, contribute, and belong.





International Day of Persons with Disabilities

December 3 marks the United Nations' International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

This day celebrates the contributions, experiences, and rights of people with disabilities around the world. It also raises awareness about the barriers people with disabilities continue to face in their communities, workplaces, and everyday lives. It is an opportunity to recognize the importance of inclusion, accessibility, and equal opportunities for everyone, while encouraging us to build communities where all people feel valued, respected, and included.





Beyond Awareness: Taking Action

December 3 is an opportunity to turn awareness into meaningful action. Start a conversation about accessibility and inclusion, take time to listen and learn from the experiences of people with disabilities, or think about small changes you can make to help remove barriers in everyday life. Even the smallest actions can make a difference in creating more inclusive and accessible communities. Let's carry that commitment beyond December 3 and make inclusion a priority every day.

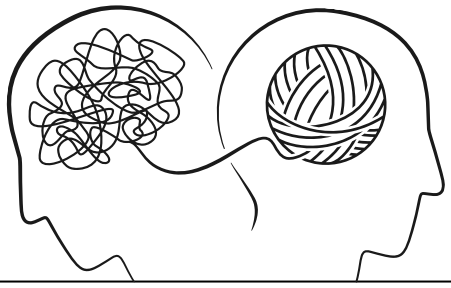


How to Take Care of Your Mental Health during the Winter Months

The winter months and holiday season can bring extra stress, changes in routine, and feelings of loneliness or sadness. It is especially important to take care of our mental health during this time of year. Here are a few simple ways to support your well-being:

- Stay connected with friends, family, and loved ones, a quick text or phone call counts.
- Make time for activities and hobbies you enjoy. You deserve it!
- Keep a regular sleep schedule and daily routine.
- Give yourself permission to rest and take breaks. It’s okay to slow down. You don’t have to do it all.
- Reach out to someone you trust if you need support. Everyone needs a little help sometimes, and that's perfectly okay.





Winter Celebrations Around the World



Hanukkah (Judaism)

Also known as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish celebration. Families light candles on a menorah, enjoy traditional foods, and play dreidel. Hanukkah foods include latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly-filled doughnuts).

Kwanzaa (African American communities)

Celebrated from December 26 to January 1, Kwanzaa honours African heritage, culture, and community. Each day focuses on one of seven principles, including unity, creativity, and purpose. A candle is lit each day on a special candleholder called a kinara.



St. Lucia's Day (Sweden and Scandinavia)

Celebrated on December 13, St. Lucia's Day is a festival of light during the darker winter months. Celebrations often include candlelit processions, singing, and saffron buns called lussekatter.





Bodhi Day (Buddhism)

Celebrated on December 8 by some Buddhist communities, Bodhi Day commemorates the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as the Buddha. It is a time for reflection, meditation, and practicing kindness and compassion. Traditions may include visiting temples, decorating with lights, and sharing meals. The word "Bodhi" means "awakening" or "enlightenment" in Sanskrit.

Christmas (Christian)

Celebrated on December 25, Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. Traditions vary around the world but often include attending church services, decorating homes and trees, exchanging gifts, sharing special meals, and spending time with family and friends. Christmas is also celebrated by many non-religious people as well.

Yule / Winter Solstice (Various traditions)

The winter solstice marks the shortest day and longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Many cultures recognize this seasonal change through gatherings, storytelling, and traditions celebrating the return of longer days.

Lunar New Year (East and Southeast Asian communities)

Celebrated in January or February, Lunar New Year marks the beginning of a new year on the lunar calendar. Traditions vary across cultures and may include family gatherings, special foods, decorations, and gifts of red envelopes.

How to make

Katherine's BANANA BREAD



Ingredients:

- 3 medium sized bananas mashed to about 1 to 1.5 cups *(very ripe or brown spotted)*
- *½ cup softened or melted butter*
- *¾ cup brown (or white) sugar for sweetness and moisture*
- *2 large eggs at room temperature*
- *2 cups all purpose flour*
- *1 teaspoon baking soda (helps the bread rise)*
- *½ teaspoon salt*
- *1 teaspoon vanilla extract*

Mix-ins (optional): *1/2 to 3/4 cup of walnuts, pecans, or chocolate chips*

Instructions

1. **Prep the Oven and Pan:** Preheat your oven to 325°F (175°C) and grease a standard 9x5-inch loaf pan.
2. **Mash the Bananas:** Use a fork to mash your overripe bananas in a large bowl until they form a chunky paste.
3. **Mix Wet Ingredients:** Stir the melted or creamed butter and brown sugar into the mashed bananas. Add the eggs one at a time, followed by the vanilla extract.
4. **Combine Dry Ingredients:** In a separate bowl, whisk together the all-purpose flour, baking soda, salt, and cinnamon.
5. **Bring Together:** Gently fold the dry mixture into the wet banana mixture. Tip: Stir just until the flour disappears, overmixing makes the bread dense and tough. Stir in any nuts or chocolate chips.
6. **Bake:** Pour the batter into your prepared loaf pan. Bake for 50 to 65 minutes. A toothpick or skewer inserted into the center should come out clean with moist crumbs.
7. **Cool and Serve:** Let the bread cool in the pan for 10 minutes, then transfer it to a wire rack to cool completely before slicing.





Holiday Movies
Around the world

Watching holiday movies is a popular tradition for many people during the winter months. Families and friends gather with cozy blankets, warm drinks, and snacks to enjoy films that reflect the spirit of the season. Whether celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or other winter holidays, movies can be a fun way to learn about different traditions and create lasting memories.

Here are some winter holiday movies from around the world to discover and enjoy!

Philippines

- **Puso ng Pasko** (1998) - YouTube
- **Ang Tanging ina** (2003) - Amazon/JustWatch Canada

Jamaica and the Caribbean

- **Christmas in the Caribbean** (2022) - Amazon
- **Going back to the Caribbean and Finding True Love** (2024) – YouTube

Nigeria

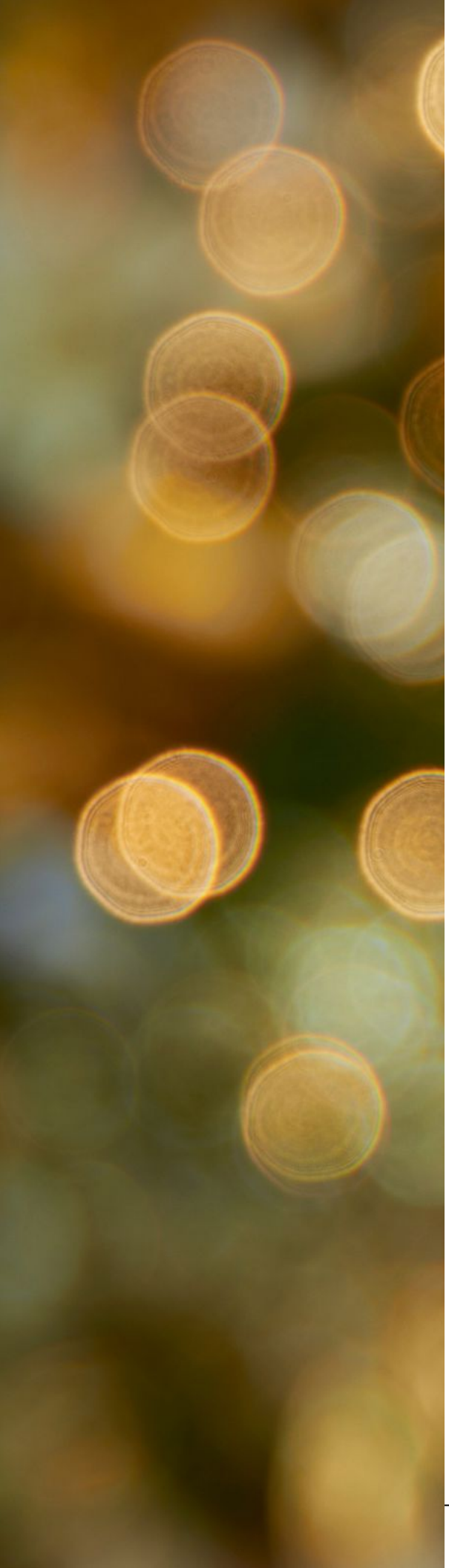
- **Christmas in Lagos** (2024) - Amazon
- **A Naija Christmas** (2021) - Netflix

India

- **My Santa** (2019) - Zee5
- **Christmas with the Singh's** (2024) - Stack tv
- **Christmas Karma** (2025) - Amazon

Christmas Classics

- **Home Alone** (1990) - YouTube, Disney
- **Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer** (1998) - Amazon
- **How the Grinch Stole Christmas** (2000) - Amazon, Crave and YouTube
- **Elf** (2003) - Amazon, YouTube
- **The Polar Express** (2004) - Apple TV, Amazon, YouTube
- **A Christmas Story** (1983) - Crave, Amazon, YouTube
- **It's a Wonderful Life** (1946) - Paramount, Amazon, YouTube
- **Klaus** (2009) - Netflix
- **Miracle on 34th Street** (1994) - YouTube, Disney



Making the Holidays Welcoming for *Everyone*

The holiday season brings colourful decorations, familiar music, delicious food, and opportunities to celebrate together. For many of us, these are the things that make the season special. For others, the idea of walking into a room filled with loud conversations, flashing lights, unfamiliar faces, and different smells, while being expected to socialize and join activities can be overwhelming.

The good news? **Making the holidays more inclusive does not require big changes. Sometimes, small, thoughtful gestures make the biggest difference.**

1 *Be mindful of sensory overload*

Holiday music, decorations, and busy gatherings can be enjoyable, but too much noise, light, or activity can become overwhelming. Keeping music at a comfortable volume and offering a quiet space to take a break can help someone enjoy the celebration at their own pace.

2 *Give a heads-up*

Think about how you feel when plans suddenly change. For someone who relies on a familiar routine, unexpected changes can be especially stressful. Sharing plans ahead of time, explaining who will be attending, and giving notice about changes can help people feel more prepared.

3 *Remember, food isn't one-size-fits-all*

Food is a big part of holiday celebrations, but everyone has different needs. Some people have allergies, sensory sensitivities, swallowing difficulties, specific dietary requirements, or prefer not to eat at all. Remember, food is not the only way to include others in a celebration.

4 *Offer choices, not expectations*

Not everyone enjoys singing, games, gift exchanges, or group activities. Some may prefer watching, participating briefly, or doing something quieter. Offering choices allows people to celebrate in ways that feel comfortable. Participation should always be an invitation, not an expectation.

5 *Ask before giving that holiday hug*

Hugs and handshakes may seem like friendly gestures, but physical contact is not comfortable for everyone. A smile, a wave, or a simple hello can be just as meaningful. Respecting personal space is another way of showing kindness.

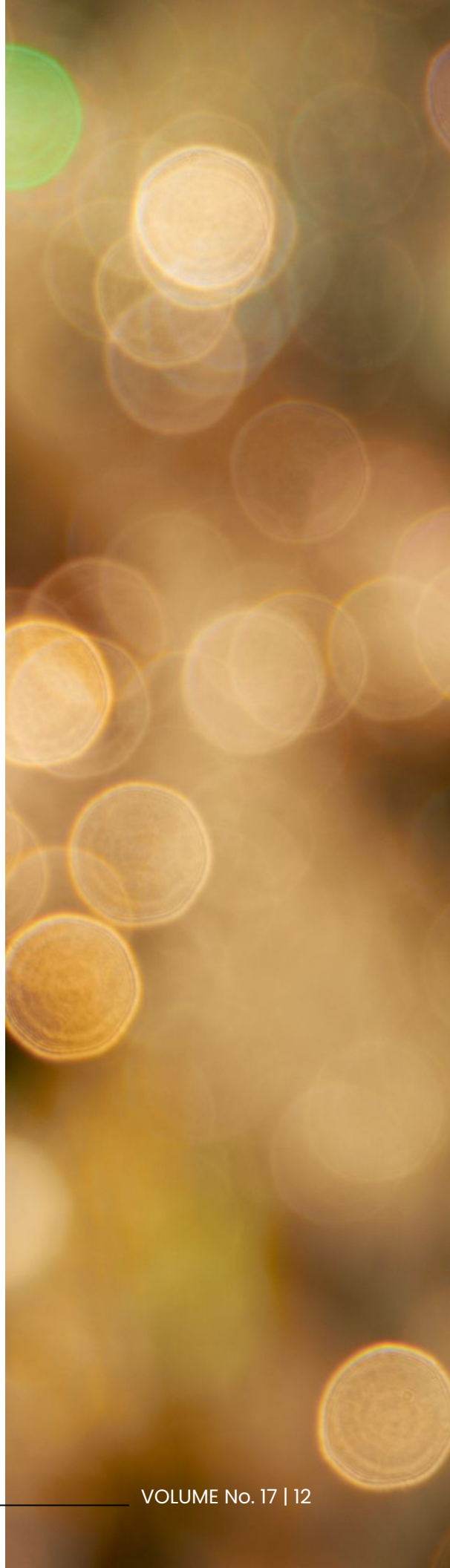
6 *It's okay to take a break or leave early*

Even the most enjoyable gatherings can become overwhelming. Having a quiet space or an exit plan can provide reassurance. If someone needs to step away or leave early, respect their decision without making them feel guilty.

7 *Respect different traditions and beliefs*

Not everyone celebrates the same holidays, and some people may choose not to celebrate at all. Respecting religious, cultural, and non-religious beliefs helps everyone feel welcome. Inclusion also means respecting someone's choice not to participate.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in planning the perfect celebration that we forget to ask a simple question: **Is everyone comfortable and enjoying themselves?** Being inclusive during the holidays is not about changing every tradition. It is about recognizing that everyone has different needs, preferences, and ways of celebrating. The best holiday memories are not necessarily about the decorations, food, or activities. They are about how we make people feel. This holiday season, let us focus on creating moments where everyone feels welcome, respected, and valued. **Because sometimes, the greatest gift we can give someone is simply understanding.**



Invisible Disabilities

Just Because You Can't See It Doesn't Mean It isn't There



Have you ever looked at someone and assumed they were doing perfectly fine, simply because they looked fine?

This is something many of us may have done without even realizing it. We often associate disability with something we can see, such as a wheelchair, a walking aid, or another visible physical difference. But the truth is, not every disability is visible.

What Are Invisible Disabilities?

Invisible disabilities, sometimes called non-visible disabilities, are conditions that may affect a person's daily life but are not immediately noticeable to others. These can include chronic pain, mental health conditions, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, neurological conditions, and chronic illnesses. Someone may look healthy on the outside while managing pain, fatigue, anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or difficulty concentrating. Others may have good days and difficult days, making their support needs less predictable. The important thing to remember is that **others cannot always tell what someone is experiencing just by looking at them.**

The Problem with Making Assumptions

Imagine someone asks to sit down during an activity because standing for long periods causes pain. Or a colleague needs a quieter workspace because noise makes it difficult to concentrate. Now imagine hearing comments like:

"But you don't look disabled."

"You were fine yesterday."

"Everyone gets tired sometimes."

"Are you sure you really need that?"

These comments may not always be intended to hurt, but they can leave someone feeling judged, misunderstood, or uncomfortable asking for support. Society sometimes expects people to prove that they need help before offering understanding. But should someone have to explain their medical condition just to have their needs respected?

Small Actions That Make a Big Difference

Creating an inclusive environment does not always require major changes. Often, it starts with how we treat one another.

1. ***Listen without questioning someone's experience***
If someone tells you they are struggling or need an accommodation, take them seriously. We don't need to fully understand their condition to respect their needs.

2. ***Avoid judging based on appearances***
Someone may be able to participate in an activity one day but find it difficult the next. That does not mean they are exaggerating. Abilities and support needs can change from day to day.

3. ***Be flexible when possible***
Offering breaks, adjusting activities, providing a quieter environment, or allowing extra time can help remove unnecessary barriers.

4. ***Respect privacy***
Not everyone feels comfortable sharing personal medical information, and they shouldn't have to explain their diagnosis to everyone. Focus on what support is needed rather than asking why.

5. ***Choose understanding over assumptions***
Before making a judgment, ask yourself: Do I really know what this person is experiencing? A little patience and an open mind can change how someone feels about asking for support.



Inclusion Begins with Understanding

One thing to remember is that disability doesn't always look a certain way. Sometimes, the biggest challenges someone faces are the ones nobody else can see. As a community, we have opportunities every day to create environments where people feel comfortable asking for what they need without fear of being judged. ***True inclusion isn't about treating everyone exactly the same. It's about recognizing that different people may need different kinds of support to have the same opportunities.*** The next time someone asks for a little extra time, a break, or a different way of doing something, remember that there may be more to their experience than we can see. ***Because understanding someone should not depend on being able to see what they are going through.***





PHSS | You at home

CCDI | EMPLOYER PARTNER

As an Employer Partner with the Canadian Centre for Diversity & Inclusion (CCDI), PHSS is able to provide a number of resources for staff to support us on our diversity and inclusion journey! If you haven't already; be sure to self-register today by scanning the QR code!

(Be sure to use your PHSS staff email address when signing up!)

CCDI Registration

www.phsscommunity.com