

THE ICF IN SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Produced by members of the ICF Network at the
European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR)

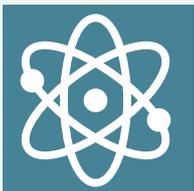
The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) is a practical framework developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to describe how people function in everyday life. It helps professionals and decision-makers understand not only a diagnosis or impairment but what matters for a person's daily life. EPR members use ICF in medical, vocational and social rehabilitation.

ICF is a supportive tool



ICF is designed to support people with disabilities, helping to ensure appropriate care, assistance, and support to which they have a right. It should be clearly communicated that using ICF does not mean people will lose benefits or support. When applied correctly, ICF works in favour of persons with disabilities.

ICF is based on the biopsychosocial model



A core message for newcomers is that ICF is not a purely medical model. It represents a shift from a biomedical focus to a biopsychosocial approach, integrating health conditions, body functions and structures, activities, participation, environmental and personal factors. This is especially important for management, governance and policy making.

ICF looks at people in their real-life context

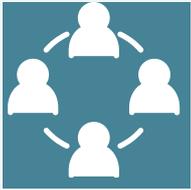


ICF does not isolate impairments from everyday life. It helps place health-related findings within a person's living conditions, social environment, and daily activities. The focus goes beyond diagnoses and on life consequences of health conditions and interventions.

ICF helps understanding individual life situations



It does not reduce people to a diagnosis or disability label. ICF facilitates an individualised understanding of what a person can do, what a person wants to do, what limits or enables participation, and what support makes a difference.



ICF is a framework and a common language

Mapping functioning with ICF is a means, not an end. It provides structure and definitions that improve communication across professions and services. It helps ensure that everyone is “talking about the same thing” when discussing functioning and support needs.



ICF supports better decision-making

By showing how different life areas connect, ICF helps to anticipate unintended consequences of interventions, avoid well-meant actions that negatively affect participation in daily life, and design support that aligns with what is meaningful to the person.

Repeated use over time can show changes and progress, creating a “moving picture” of functioning.



Clear communication with service users is essential

Some service users fear assessments, judgement, loss of benefits and reduced support. Service and support workers must explain ICF clearly and transparently, use accessible, non-threatening language, emphasise that ICF is about understanding and support.



Language matters

Terms like “functioning” can feel abstract or uncomfortable to patients, clients and service users. Explainers should translate technical concepts into plain, human-centred language focusing on possibilities, participation, daily life, and support needs.

ICF is a practical framework that helps understand how people function in real life, across health, environment, and participation, so that services and support can be better tailored to what truly matters for each individual.



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