

Disabling Characters

The game terms for disabling a character are the easy part. The attributes will change, the skills will change, and some of the other aspects, such as defense modifiers and saves will change. The difficulty for most players and GMs will be in the psychological aspects of the character after becoming disabled, and the day-to-day challenges that most of us take for granted. For the character who finds himself missing an arm, tying his shoes will be more of a challenge, at first, than facing a small army of zombies. The character who is suddenly wheelchair bound will find going into a restaurant more of a challenge, with tables that are too high or doors that are too narrow.

The rules and information presented here are a basis for introducing disabilities, and their affects on characters, to a campaign. This isn't meant to be the end-all, be-all. This is the start. As these rules are used in games, and we get feedback from gamers, they will be modified.

The game rule information will be presented first, then a very brief look at character effects. I hope that these rules will be used, argued, and modified. I welcome any response to what is presented here.

The rules will work best in a modern setting. The magical healing of the fantasy campaigns makes these rules more difficult to fully implement. (Otherwise, I'd have started decades ago.)

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Injury:

The most common way that a character will become disabled is through physical injury. This may come from combat, accident, or the machinations of the GM. The first section deals with the loss of limbs, or the loss of limb use (both are referred to as “loss of limb”; the rules for either are the same). Partial loss of limbs will be in the second section. Loss of a sense will be covered after that, with massive head trauma last.

In a modern campaign, there is no magic to return use of a limb, and no science that will fully replace the limb. Prosthetics will be touched on after each section. Prostheses for a limb will work slightly differently for a full limb than for a partial one.

Ability score loss is permanent, but the original scores should be noted somewhere. They may come into play at a later time; if role playing in dreams or with out of body experiences are used, these are the scores that will be used for those regions instead of the character’s current scores.

Any skills and abilities may be increased normally, but the penalty always applies. For example, a character who loses a leg may add points to the Climb skill at one point per rank (for class skills) or two points per rank (for cross-class skills), but the total modifier will always be –4. Characters may not gain ranks in restricted skills, unless the character uses prosthetics. In that case, the restricted skills are treated as cross-class skills. If the restricted skill was a class skill for the character, the character may take another, non-restricted, skill as a class skill to replace it.

Loss of an arm: The modifiers for the loss of an arm are different for main hand, off-hand, or both. If the character is ambidextrous, treat the loss of one arm as the off-hand arm.

Off-Hand: *Ability scores:* –1 Dexterity, –1 Strength. *Skills:* Climb –4, Disable Device –2, Swim –4, Tumble –2. *Attack Bonus:* –2.

Main Hand: *Ability scores:* –1 Dexterity, –1 Strength. *Skills:* Balance –2, Climb –6, Disable Device –4, Drive –2, Escape Artist –2, Forgery –8, Pilot –2, Sleight of Hand –4, Swim –4, Tumble –4. *Attack Bonus:* –6.

Loss of both arms: *Ability scores:* –3 Dexterity, –3 Strength. *Skills:* Balance –2, Escape Artist –2, Swim –8, Tumble –6. *Restricted Skills:* Climb, Drive, Forgery, Pilot, Sleight of Hand. *Attack Bonus:* –8.

Loss of a leg: The modifiers for the loss of a leg are different for main hand, off-hand, or both. A character who is ambidextrous must choose which is the dominant side to determine the main hand side.

Off-Hand: *Ability scores:* –4 Dexterity, –2 Strength. *Skills:* Balance –6, Climb –4, Drive –2, Move Silently –6, Pilot –4, Ride –4, Swim –4, Tumble –4. *Restricted Skill:* Jump. *Defense:* –2. *Reflex Save:* –2.

Main Hand: *Ability scores:* –6 Dexterity, –2 Strength. *Skills:* Balance –8, Climb –6, Drive –4, Move Silently –8, Pilot –6, Ride –6, Swim –6, Tumble –4. *Restricted Skill:* Jump. *Defense:* –4. *Reflex Save:* –4.

Loss of both legs: *Ability scores:* -8 Dexterity, -3 Strength. *Skills:* Balance -6, Escape Artist -2, Swim -8, Tumble -6. *Restricted Skills:* Climb, Jump, Ride. *Defense:* -6. *Reflex Save:* -6.

Loss of all (paraplegic/quadruplegic): This might require a redefinition of the character (especially one who relies on being physically active).

The character effectively loses Strength and Dexterity scores, any Defense bonuses due to class or ability score, and the Reflex Save becomes 0. The ability scores become non-abilities.

Restricted Skills: Balance, Climb, Drive, Escape Artist, Forgery, Jump, Move Silently, Pilot, Ride, Sleight of Hand, Swim, Tumble.

Prosthetics: For characters who lose one or more limbs, prosthetics may be used to compensate for the loss. Artificial limbs are made of lightweight metals (such as titanium or aircraft aluminum) or, less commonly in modern times, wood. Prosthetic limbs lower ability penalties by 1, skill penalties by 2, and the attack, defense, and save penalties by 2. These penalties cannot be reduced beyond -0; no points may be gained beyond the original score with prosthetics.

Restricted skills may be used at a -6 penalty.

Partial Loss of an arm: The modifiers for the loss of an arm are different for main hand, off-hand, or both. If the character is ambidextrous, treat the loss of one arm as the off-hand arm. These modifiers apply to any loss from the elbow to the hand.

Off-Hand: *Ability scores:* -1 Dexterity. *Skills:* Climb -2, Disable Device -2, Swim -2. *Attack Bonus:* -2.

Main Hand: *Ability scores:* -1 Dexterity. *Skills:* Climb -4, Disable Device -4, Drive -2, Escape Artist -2, Forgery -8, Pilot -2, Sleight of Hand -2, Swim -2, Tumble -2. *Attack Bonus:* -6.

Partial Loss of both arms: *Ability scores:* -3 Dexterity, -2 Strength. *Skills:* Drive -6, Escape Artist -2, Swim -4, Tumble -4. *Restricted Skills:* Climb, Disable Device, Forgery, Pilot, Sleight of Hand. *Attack Bonus:* -8.

Partial Loss of a leg: The modifiers for the loss of a leg are different for main hand, off-hand, or both. A character who is ambidextrous must choose which is the dominant side to determine the main hand side. These modifiers apply to any loss from the knee to the foot.

Off-Hand: *Ability scores:* -3 Dexterity, -2 Strength. *Skills:* Balance -4, Climb -4, Drive -2, Move Silently -6, Pilot -4, Ride -2, Swim -2, Tumble -2. *Restricted Skill:* Jump. *Defense:* -2. *Reflex Save:* -2.

Main Hand: *Ability scores:* -4 Dexterity, -2 Strength. *Skills:* Balance -6, Climb -4, Drive -3, Move Silently -6, Pilot -4, Ride -4, Swim -4, Tumble -2. *Restricted Skill:* Jump. *Defense:* -2. *Reflex Save:* -4.

Partial Loss of both legs: *Ability scores:* -6 Dexterity, -3 Strength. *Skills:* Balance -6, Climb: -6, Escape Artist -2, Ride -6, Swim -6, Tumble -4. *Restricted Skill:* Jump. *Defense:* -4. *Reflex Save:* -4.

Prosthetics for partial limbs: Prosthetic limbs lower ability penalties by 1, skill penalties by 2, and the attack, defense, and save penalties by 2. These penalties cannot be reduced beyond -0; no points may be gained beyond the original score with prosthetics.

Restricted skills may be used at a -4 penalty.

With the loss or partial loss of multiple limbs (such as an arm and a leg), use the highest penalty to ability scores. The skill penalties and the penalties to attacks, defense, and saves stack.

Loss of a sense: Losing one of the senses restricts the skills that a character may use. There are no ability penalties.

Taste: The character is no longer able to discern flavor. This does not affect skills, but it may make the character more susceptible to poisons, diseases, illnesses (such as food poisoning) or other taste-based problems.

Smell: The sense of smell will nullify the character's ability to distinguish odors, including harmful gasses (such as natural gas). It does not affect skills; however, since the sense of taste works in tandem with smell, the character's ability to discern flavor will be diminished, as well. The character is more susceptible to food poisoning and other maladies.

Touch: The loss of sensation in the skin (a general or localized numbness) will affect certain skills that rely on touch. The character will gain the following penalties: -1 Climb, -1 Demolitions, -1 Disable Device, -1 Drive, -2 Forgery, -1 Pilot, -1 Repair, -2 Search, -2 Sleight of Hand, -2 Treat Injury.

Hearing: The loss, or partial loss, of hearing affects some skills. The penalties acquired for severe hearing loss are: -4 Balance, -2 Climb, -2 Drive, -8 Listen, -4 Spellcraft. Complete hearing loss: -2 Balance, -2 Climb, -2 Drive, -8 Spellcraft. *Restricted Skills:* Listen.

Sight: The loss, or partial loss, of sight has the following effects. Severe sight loss: -4 Climb, Decipher Script -8, Drive -6, Investigate -6, Move Silently -2, Pilot -8, Read/Write Language -4, Search -6, Spellcraft -6, Spot -8, Treat Injury -4. Complete loss: -4 Climb, Investigate -6, Move Silently -4, Spellcraft -6, Treat Injury -4. *Restricted Skills:* Decipher Script, Drive, Pilot, Read/Write Language (except Braille), Search, Spot.

Prosthetic Senses: At this time, there are only devices available for recovering use of sight and hearing, if the loss is not complete. Hearing aids and enhancers, and glasses or other optical aids will decrease the penalties. Hearing aids will decrease the penalties by 6 (up to no penalty), and glasses will reduce the penalties by 4 (up to no penalty).

Other disabilities: This is simply a guideline to cover the most common types of disabilities in a modern campaign. There are other types of disabilities that would affect characters, such as head injury and brain damage, learning disabilities, and so on. They will not be covered in this overview, but might be examined at a later time.

Some effects of disabilities in the modern world

After a character loses a limb or one of the senses, there are limitations that most people do not think about. Getting a wheelchair through a narrow door, or up even a small series of steps can be impossible if they were not designed with wheelchairs in mind. In many public places that offer restrooms, the doorways are too narrow, or they are built into small hallways that make it difficult to maneuver through. This is a common problem, and limits the places that people with disabilities can go. Without assistance, going from street level onto a curb can prove extremely difficult.

Wheelchairs need about 30” of effective space. Most doorways are 24-28” wide. The space needed to turn a corner is about 36”. Turning around requires about 42-48” (depending on the size of the wheels, and any extensions in the front).

For those who lose an arm, carrying a bulky object and opening a door can become difficult. Without hearing, driving may be dangerous in some situations (the inability to hear emergency equipment, for example). Even communicating with others is challenging, like being in a place where everyone speaks a different language.

There are so many things that people without disabilities don’t think about in day-to-day life that become obstacles to those with disabilities. They all cannot be covered here, but there are resources for learning about them.

The individual with a disability, to some degree, must rely on others for help. It may be small things, like help with cooking, or it could be a reliance on others for such tasks as bathing or getting around. It takes time to adjust to the new lifestyle, but it is possible to keep a large degree of independence.

The psychological and emotional effects of disabilities

This section will explore the internal effects of becoming disabled. When a person becomes disabled, it affects their entire life—their friends, families, their relationships with other people, and their view of themselves. It often has a very dramatic and devastating effect. The process that an individual goes through is the grieving process. They have just lost a part of themselves, and must learn to live differently than before. This is a brief overview of the grieving process. There are many excellent resources for the real effects of injury and the grieving process.

Studies have shown that early and aggressive therapy after treatment for a life-changing injury speeds up the individual’s recovery and ability to return to a more “normal” life, the life that the individual

had prior to the injury. However, the psychological effects are long lasting, and it is difficult for the individual to return to his or her former life.

People around the individual, including family, friends, and acquaintances, will react differently. They may not know how to treat the individual, or they might try to take on a caretaking role in that person's life. The individual often loses friends after a life-changing injury, while some friendships become deeper. The injured individual is affected deeply by the loss, though he or she might not see the changes at first. The individual and those closest to them work through the grieving process, each in their own ways. First is denial, then anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

When there is a loss, there is grief over what was lost. The degree of grief varies, depending on how important or necessary the lost thing was to the individual. The loss of a job might not mean as much as the loss of a limb or a loved one, but it could trigger the same process within the individual to a lesser degree. The initial shock of the incident gives way to denial, that it couldn't happen to that person—"not me, such things don't happen to people like me." The individual is not ready to cope with what has happened, and refuses to believe that it is real.

Denial changes to anger when the denial can no longer be maintained. The anger is toward the incident, but it is often displaced. The individual may lash out at those closest to him or her, and the reasons won't always be rational. Part of this may be out of frustration and the inability to do what used to be taken for granted (such as tying one's own shoes shortly after the loss of an arm). This stage is the most difficult for the individual's family and friends, because the individual seems to be pushing them away. The injured person is going through changes, psychologically and emotionally, that he or she might not understand or even realize.

Bargaining begins within the anger stage. The individual will try to make a deal with anyone—or anything—that he or she believes has a chance of undoing the damage done. Doctors, charlatans, spiritual leaders, even deities become the potential targets of the person's attempts to put things back the way that they were.

Once the reality of the situation sets in, and the individual has exhausted the options to restore things the way that they were, the individual begins the process of accepting the change. The individual is likely to return to the other stages at times. The grieving process often lasts the injured person's lifetime.

In many cases of traumatic injury, individuals go through a period of depression. They may feel useless, since they can no longer do everything that they once were able to do. It takes time to re-define one's place after a life-changing injury, but it can be done.

When I began working on this, I talked about it with my regular game group a little. One of them said, "If your character can't walk anymore, you might as well roll up a new character." I disagree with that. I believe that in the game, something like that could challenge the player to try to look at things differently, and re-define that character. And hopefully look at the real world a little differently, as well.

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