

ACCESS: LARP

Guide to Mental Health Accessibility

Mental Health Accessibility for LARP

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Introduction and Overview

A few months ago I wrote a Guide to Accessibility in LARP. In the series I covered all aspects of a LARP game from booking to venue to rules giving a number of suggestions for ways we, as LARP organisers can better accommodate players with disabilities. There was a mixture of things that can be implemented as standard - for example basic items on a booking form - and other ideas which can be considered if applicable to your game or which may be necessary to help particular players. Mental health illnesses (including but not limited to Anxiety Disorders, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia and Borderline Personality Disorder) can have an impact on a person's experience of a game and may, at times limit them from playing a game. Whilst we are generally becoming better at identifying accessibility needs for physical disabilities, we don't do it so well for Mental Health Disability. In part this is because they are almost always invisible disabilities. They are also somewhat more nebulous in nature and it can be difficult for a person to describe the particular issue a person is facing with regard to access. Identifying accessibility issues is still possible and, with a little thought, we should be able to provide some accommodations.

This guide is supplementary to the original Accessibility in LARP guide and it is recommended that you read that before this Mental Health Accessibility guide. The original guide covered all aspects of a LARP game from booking to venue to rules giving a number of suggestions for ways we, as LARP organisers, can better accommodate players with disabilities. There are a mixture of things that can be implemented as standard - for example basic items on a booking form - and other ideas which can be considered if applicable to your game or which may be necessary to help particular players. This guide follows a similar format but focuses on disability and accessibility needs caused by mental health problems and neurodivergence.

To reiterate what is said in the Guide to Accessibility:

Not every game suits every player. There are so many different genres and play styles there are going to be some that don't suit you. As a game organiser it's ok to recognise this and not try and make a game of all things to suit all people. However, you should make sure that you aren't exclude people based on things they can't change such as disability, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Having a good equality policy in place is important and should go some way to making your event accessible to people due to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

This should extend to mental health issues that can have an impact on a person's game.

A player should take responsibility for their own health and well being however, as an event organiser, we also have a responsibility toward our players that we are not making things unduly difficult.

In General terms:

- Include disability in your equality statement. Let people know that ableist language and prejudice will not be tolerated.
- Extend disability to include mental health disability as well as physical disability.
- Recognise that the perfect set piece in your imagination may not be possible if it isn't accessible to your players.
- Remember that accessibility is about more than wheelchair ramps and can vary person to person.
- Keep things confidential or on a need to know basis. Your crew may need to know that a player is unstable on their feet but they don't need to know why. Limit private health information to key organisers, the first aiders and (where necessary) caterers.
- Ask your players questions and listen to their answers. They know best what will help them enjoy the event and what accommodations they need. Encourage them to contact you, ask them questions and work with players to make an event accessible.
- **Accommodations are not about making the game easier for disabled players. It's about making it no more difficult than for other players.**
- Some accommodations can be open to all players – scheduled meal times for example. However, giving a mobility impaired player a head start doesn't work if all players have the same head start.

Begin at the beginning

The first step in any LARP is telling your players about the game and getting them to book. It is important to consider accessibility at this stage, as people with access needs will want to know early on if this is a LARP they can play.

- Make the style and genre of your game as clear as possible: will it be a one day game or a weekend? Horror, action or mystery?
- Have a clear tolerance policy available early on.
 - Include a statement on how you will handle mental health in the game - both thematically and players needs.
 - Make it clear what your process is for dealing with infractions of the tolerance policy and/or complaints.
- Make sure information is provided clearly and with summaries where possible.
- Provide contact information so that potential players can contact you with queries.
- You may want to include a “content warning” stating that you may include or exclude certain sensitive issues.
 - This may overlap with your tolerance policy in areas like sexism and racism.
- State how triggers will be handled i.e. avoided completely; on a case by case basis; through clear signposts etc

Example

Becky has generalised anxiety disorder and can not play traumatic horror games without exacerbating it. She sees a game announced that may be fun but it isn't clear if it will have a lot of horror elements. She is able to email the organiser and get clarification, which they then add to the game description, that it is a horror event. Becky decides to pass on this game and is glad she didn't put herself in a bad situation.

Example

Charlie is concerned that mental health will be portrayed with bad stereotypes during the game and that they might be made fun of. They are relieved to see that this is addressed specifically in the tolerance policy and that mockery of mental health illness will not be permitted.

Signing Up

Once your player is interested, they have to send in a booking form to secure their place. Keep in mind advice from above to make the booking form clear and accessible. You can use your booking form to help determine further accommodations.

- It's not necessary to ask for a player's gender but if you do, make it optional and include non-binary options.
 - Consider having an optional space to put preferred pronouns.*
- When asking for relevant medical information, be clear that this can include any mental health issues or provide a separate question.
 - This must be kept confidential or on a "need to know" basis
- You may wish to ask people to state triggers or phobias.
 - If you do ask for triggers and phobias consider asking for further information i.e. "must avoid" or "I will need warning".
 - Think carefully about how you will handle triggers in game and give players the option to email/talk to you in advance.
- You may consider asking if there is a person or persons the player would particularly like to be grouped with or play alongside. Conversely you may want to ask if there is anybody they wish to limit contact with.
 - This may be most beneficial in games with pre-generated characters, or strong crew generated plot.
 - Asking if there are individuals that they want to avoid could be controversial. Have a good idea how you would deal with this. Even without the option on a booking form a player may contact you privately.

Example:

Jay has PTSD associated with burns. They list this as a trigger. The event organisers ask if they could provide clarification and Jay explains that people phy-repping burn scars is ok but they would have difficulty with it occurring in play. The organisers say that they won't be including any "fire damage" skills. Jay is satisfied with this.

Example:

Lucy needs help recovering from dissociative episodes and has a trusted friend who is playing. The organisers suggest several ways that Lucy and her friend can play together and will consider this when writing plot.

Food And Catering

Food and eating can cause stress for some people and you should bare in mind that some people may have or be recovering from eating disorders. This section mainly includes general good practice as opposed to specific ideas for accommodating mental illness.

* To clarify, this is not to suggest that a nonbinary gender is a mental health issue itself. However, some people experience anxiety or dysphoria surrounding misgendering, and correct pronouns can help.

- Try and give approximate meal times in advance so that people can plan accordingly.
 - People taking medication may need to know when to schedule doses around eating.
- Do not joke about or shame people about what or how they eat. Make sure this is relayed to catering staff or whoever is serving so that people aren't pressured into extra portions.
- Some players may need a private OOC space to eat in, to avoid anxiety or triggers relating to eating in front of people.

Example:

Rowan needs to take his medication half an hour before eating and asks if there is a schedule and if he can be noted if there will be any delays. The organisers provide a basic itinerary of meal times and liaise with the caterers.

Example:

David has OCD relating to how food is arranged on a plate and is concerned that this will cause difficulty or that they will be mocked. The organisers are able to reassure him that crew and players will be required to be respectful, they also talk to the caterers and ask that David's needs are known and will be managed properly - a special plate will be put aside for him at each meal sitting.

The site/venue itself

The physical characteristics of a venue may not throw up as many barriers and difficulties for people with mental health disability as for those with physical disability, but there are still some things worth considering.

- If possible is there are room available as an OOC quiet space.
 - Ideally this is separate from the crew room and bedrooms.
- Try and find out facilities as early as possible and give this information to players.
 - This can reassure players on things like toilets, layout, cooking areas.
- Having wifi or decent phone signal can help players who use online resources or apps to manage their conditions.
- Having a site map or clear explanation of where OC and IC areas are can be beneficial, especially in large or unusual venues.

Example:

Mark can have sudden changes in mood or emotion due to his BPD that can be difficult to deal with. He asks the organisers if there will be a "safe space" he can go to in those times so that he can manage his symptoms appropriately. They tell him they have designated a small room to be an OOC quiet room that he can access at any point.

Sleeping arrangements

If your event is overnight pay attention to sleeping arrangements. A good night's sleep can be the difference between functioning and not to some players. What makes a good night's sleep can vary dramatically.

- If you plan on having IC sleeping or camping, then designate an area to be OC as well for those who need the OC space.
- If possible let people see the room plans in advance so that they can mentally prepare.
- Assigned bunks can be beneficial - consider assigning groups to rooms or putting up a sign up sheet prior to the game.
- Be open to requests that certain people not share rooms.
- Some players may benefit from single gender rooms or a designated trans friendly room.

Example:

Aoibheann has social anxiety and can not sleep in rooms with people she doesn't know. She asks the organisers if she can reserve bunks for her player group. The organisers assign each group to a room in advance and post the info online before the event, as well as labelling each room at the event.

Example:

Liam has night terrors due to his bipolar disorder and is concerned about sharing a room because it can be frightening for other people. The organisers reserve a small room away from other players that he can sleep in. They also let ref taking the "night shift" know about it and Liam lets them know his preferred method of handling it.

The plot

Whilst a lot of accessibility comes down to Out of Character considerations, your plot can also have an impact. Considering your players' needs and integrating that into your plot makes everything far more seamless and means that those with additional needs can enjoy the game equally with their fellow players.

- Think about the pacing of your game - do you have calm periods between action and drama.
 - If you plan on you game being intense non stop drama and action is this reflected in your initial pitch [see part 1]?
 - Can you mix "positive" drama with "negative" drama to temper the mood?

- Refer to your booking forms and player communication about triggers, phobias and content concerns.
 - Make sure anything of this nature you include is respectful of player's concerns.
- Consider plot that can be solved by various means, or having a variety of plot i.e. some things which require a fight; some things that can be puzzled out.
- Avoid stereotypical portrayals of mental illness or using "madness" as a driver for "evil" NPCs

Example:

"Qui experiences psychosis, including 'hearing voices' and sensory overload. The game is advertised as being "altered reality" and Qui is concerned that representation of this in game might be disorienting or confusing. They talk to the organisers about it. The organisers say there may be some "hallucination like" special effects in game including sound recordings and that they will always be accompanied by a blue light. Qui is satisfied that this is a situation they can play in."

Example:

Hannah has claustrophobia and has stated this on the booking form. As the venue includes a number of small rooms/cupboards, the organisers decide not to put any plot directly relevant to Hannah's character in those spaces. Any items placed in there are capable of being retrieved and brought in to another play area.

Mechanics

Rules and mechanics are how stuff happens in your game world – it's how we make the unreal, real. They can affect and be affected by people's disabilities. Your rules and mechanics are about how people do things, so you should make sure that they let all people do things. I'm also including here suggestions related to how a game is run and general rules.

- Try and keep your rules as simple, precise and clear as possible.
- Consider lammies or cards which have effects or rules written on.
 - This can reduce anxiety over remembering small details.
- Be aware that rules or mechanics that have a time pressure on them can cause stress and anxiety.
- Consider a system call or method that allows a player to get out of an In Character situation if they become overwhelmed Out of Character.
 - Some games already have a "non-com" rule for players who can not engage in combat for physical reasons. You could extend or vary this to cover mental health related problems.

- Make it clear who is a point of contact for queries and have points of contact available in the main play areas.
- Have copies of rules available for players to check, in an easy to reach place or on a ref.
 - Printed rules summaries on toilet doors or near the main entrance is a great way of achieving this.
- Pay special attention to rules or mechanics that deal with “personality” skills i.e. leadership or charisma.
 - Ideally rules related to these skills have clear mechanical effects such as a boost to hit points.

Example:

Ruby has memory problems due to her depression and is concerned about being able to remember the rules for magical items. The organisers had originally intended to mark magical items with coloured ribbon but after talking to Ruby, decide to use printed lammies with the relevant information printed on. Ruby is reassured by this.

Example:

Darnell has borderline personality disorder and can struggle with strong emotions and reading other people. He asks the organisers if there is a way of disengaging from roleplay should he become overwhelmed. The Organisers create a “Pause” call that Darnell (and others) can use to briefly pause play in their area in order for them to step aside safely. Darnell is reassured

Downtime Systems:

Downtimes are used in LARP to manage what happens to characters between events. They should be designed carefully anyway, but there are things you can keep in mind for greater accessibility.

- Provide clear instructions on how the downtimes should be carried out.
- Provide examples and outline what players can reasonably expect to achieve with their downtime.
- Set a clear timeline of when downtime will open and close.
 - Provide as long as possible for downtime to be completed.
 - Try and be proactive in giving your players a reminder.
- It is preferable to avoid free text for downtimes: form fills, menus and limited options can be easier to navigate for players.
- You may want to include a clear statement of what happens to a character if downtime isn’t completed.
 - A default option such as “perform basic advances/mechanics for my character” can be

useful.

- Offer to talk/email with players to help to work out a suitable downtime

Example:

Leanne experiences anxiety related to filling out forms and is struggling to complete a downtime for her character. She is pleased to see that there is a tick box that says "basic character progression" and an explanation that will spend her XP on hit points and improving her primary skill. This is a relief for Leanne.

Rounding it all up

This guide tries to cover as many areas as possible and provide you with plenty of examples of how mental health may impact on a player's game. It's by no means comprehensive of every possible impact or every possible accommodation, but it should give you an idea of how to handle a variety of different needs and situations.

Additionally, this isn't a list of things that you absolutely must do every time. There are some things it can be handy to just do automatically that can help all players, but there are other things that are more tailored to an individual. Nobody would blame you for using loud bangs when none of your players have indicated an aversion to such things. However, you should be prepared and know how to provide those accommodations if necessary.

At the end of the day, making a game accessible opens your game up to more players and helps you players have a more enjoyable event. Having more players and players who are happy with our event is really what we, as event organisers, are aiming for and good accessibility can help us achieve that.

Glossary

IC – In Character – when you are roleplaying as your character or times when people are expected to be acting as their characters. This also covers things that are considered part of the game or story.

OC/OOC – Out Of Character – When you are not roleplaying as your character, you are yourself. Times or things which are not part of the game or story.

NPC – Non-Player Character – A game character that is not played by a player. May be a limited role used to deliver plot or story.

Crew – People involved in running the game. They may play NPCs, be referees or storytellers, or help with general tasks. Not players.

HP – Hit Points – A method of assigning and monitoring health or strength to a character.

XP – Experience Points – A method of assigning how much skill or experience a character has.

Downtime/DT – The time between games. Some games may have a mechanism for explaining what a character does during this period or it may be used for character advancement.

Time In – The point at which the game starts and things are considered IC unless otherwise stated.

Time Out – The point at which the game ends and things are considered to be OC.

Calls – Words or phrases that are used to convey a particular in game meaning. They can be IC or OC. e.g. “Man Down” is an OC call that alerts people to an injured player.

Phys-rep – Physical Representation – an OC item that represents something specific IC. This can include foam swords phys-repping real swords or an empty bottle phys-repping medicine.