

ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities face many barriers every day – from physical obstacles in buildings to systemic barriers in employment and civic programs. Yet, often, the most difficult barriers to overcome are the attitudes with which people with disabilities are regarded. The most pervasive negative attitude is focusing on a person's disability rather than on an individual's abilities. Even more damaging is the attitude – that society doesn't expect people with disabilities to accomplish such everyday things as going to work, socializing, participating in recreational activities; and when people with disabilities do, they are viewed as courageous.

This attitude impacts people's lives leading to under or unemployment and social isolation. Unlike physical and systematic barriers, attitudinal barriers that often lead to illegal discrimination cannot be overcome simply through laws. The best remedy is familiarity, getting people with and without disabilities to mingle as coworkers, associates and social acquaintances. In time, most of the attitudes will give way to comfort, respect and friendship.

Inferiority

Because people may have a visual, hearing, cognitive, mental or mobility impairment, others often believe that they cannot take care of themselves. However, most people with disabilities have skills and accommodations to proceed with their daily tasks with little to no problems and make the impairment moot in the workplace.

Pity

People who feel sorry for a person with a disability may not treat the person as an equal. People with disabilities generally don't want pity or charity, just equal opportunity to earn their own way and live independently.

Hero worship

Many consider it triumphant when a person with a disability does ordinary things like living alone, going to school or holding down a job when doing these things are the norm for most people. The person with a disability has just adapted as most people do when life's circumstances change. Heroism is no more common among people with disabilities than it is among people with no disabilities. Most people with disabilities do not want accolades for getting up and going about their days.

Fear

Many people are afraid that they will "do or say the wrong thing" around someone with a disability. They avert their own discomfort by avoiding the individual with a disability. As with meeting a person from a different culture, frequent encounters can raise the comfort level.

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The Spread Effect

People assume that an individual's disability negatively affects other senses, abilities or personality traits, or that the total person is impaired. For example, many people shout at people who are blind or don't expect people using wheelchairs to have the intelligence to speak for themselves. Focusing on the person's abilities rather than his or her disability counters this type of prejudice.

Generalizations

The other side of the spread effect is the positive and negative stereotypes people form about disabilities. Some common generalizations are that all people who are blind are great musicians or have a keener sense of smell and hearing, that all people who use wheelchairs are either docile or compete in the Paralympics, that all people with developmental disabilities are innocent and sweet-natured, that all people with disabilities are sad and bitter. Aside from diminishing the individual and his or her abilities, such prejudice can set expectations too high or low for individuals who are merely human.

Otherness

People often think of disability as something one is born with, treating people with disabilities as a separate group. In fact, most people acquire disabilities as adults and aren't defined by the disability. The fact that the person had a profession, family and other personal characteristics isn't undone when they become a "person with a disability." One could say there are people with disabilities and the "temporarily able bodied."

Backlash

Many people believe individuals with disabilities are given unfair advantages, especially when it comes to work-place accommodations and legal protections. In fact, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require special privileges for people with disabilities, just equal access. Employers may need to provide accommodations but must not lower performance standards to get a job done. Public facilities must be accessible although tax incentives can deflect any costs.

Ignorance

People with disabilities are often dismissed as incapable of accomplishing a task without the opportunity to display their skills. Some are surprised to learn what people with disabilities still can do, for example, when they see someone with quadriplegia driving a car or a person who is blind using a computer.

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Definition

Many disabilities are "hidden," such as learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, epilepsy, cancer, arthritis and heart conditions. People tend to believe these are not bona fide. However, conditions impacting one or more major life activities are generally covered by the law and accommodations can be highly beneficial for people with non-visible disabilities in their lives and work.

Success

Negative attitudes towards people with disabilities can be changed through education and by showing examples of success.

Information for this fact sheet came from the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) with the assistance of freelance writer Eric Minton.