

Section: Exceptionalities
Topic: Attitudes Toward Disabilities

It is important to recognize that people with disabilities have the same equal rights and opportunities as anyone without a disability. Public attitudes can create obstacles in working toward this outcome. This section will outline myths that create attitudinal barriers toward persons with disabilities.

After completion of the reading and the homework assignment, the student will know what an attitudinal barrier is and recognize the difference between common myths and facts about people with disabilities.

THE INVISIBLE BATTLE

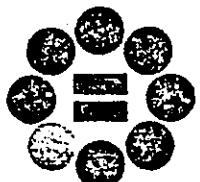
Attitudes Toward Disability

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, a lot of attention has been addressed to the rights of disabled people. Through legislation and the efforts of many consumer groups, persons with disabilities have finally been recognized as valuable and equal members of society. Ramps are going up, doorways are being widened, and affirmative action is being taken. The physical barriers are coming down—slowly, but surely.

But what of the invisible barriers that still stand in the way of disabled citizens: the negative attitudes still held by many individuals? These attitudes underly the resistance which is voiced by those who reject the importance of independent, dignified life-styles for disabled citizens. The attitudes may arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. In spite of good intentions and adequate information, negative stereotyping still occurs (e.g., telethons, public service announcements on television). Often, attitudinal barriers go unrecognized.

This booklet is an introduction to the subject of attitudinal barriers: what they are, how to recognize them; and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the invisible barriers encountered by disabled citizens.



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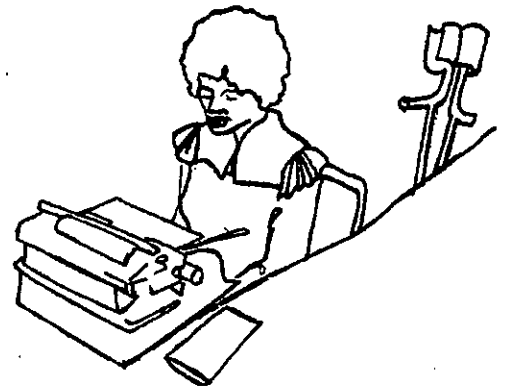
MYTH:

Disability is a constantly frustrating tragedy. Disabled people are courageous, brave and inspirational by being able to overcome their handicaps.

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FACT:

Disability is an inconvenience. Most disabled people do not sit around and ponder their disability all the time. They simply carry on their lives as normally as they can. Individuals with disabilities cannot be stereotyped any more than can other minority groups. Each person is an individual personality and, as such, each disabled person will deal with his or her disability differently.

**MYTH:**

All disabled people are handicapped and/or crippled.

FACT:

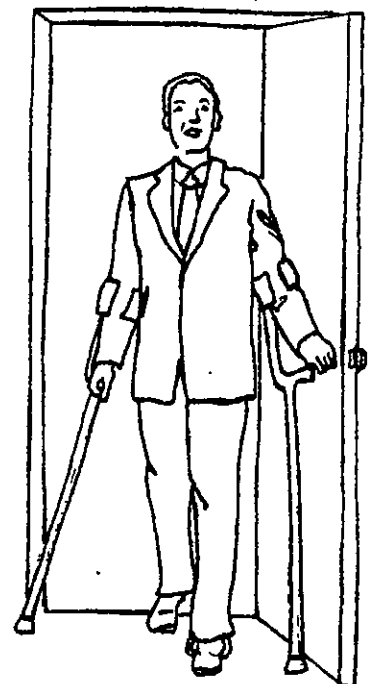
The terms "disabled," "handicapped," and "crippled" are often used interchangeably. In fact, the latter two terms carry negative connotations, indicating that a disability prevents someone from being a fully-functioning member of society. A disability does not always present a handicap; rather it often only means that a disabled person may do something a little differently from a nondisabled person, but with the same result and with equal participation.

**MYTH:**

Able-bodied people have an obligation to take care of disabled people.

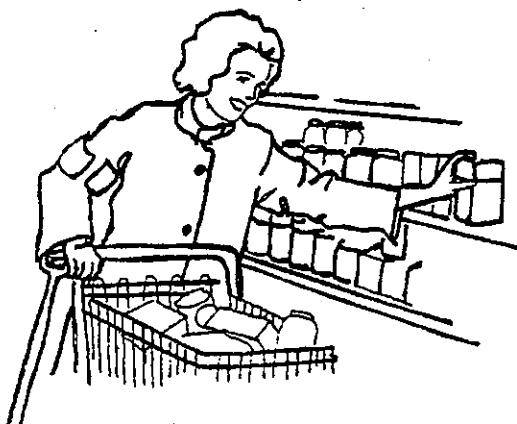
FACT:

Some disabilities may require a level of dependency upon other persons. In such cases, the disabled person will usually ask for help—as we all do now and again. But common courtesy and good sense dictate when and where help is needed. Nondisabled people have no intrinsic paternalistic duty to give pity, charity or extraordinary assistance to persons with disabilities.



MYTH:

Disabled people lead totally different lives than others do.

**FACT:**

Approximately 40 million US citizens have physical or mental disabilities. Most disabled people living at home occupy their time just like you. They go to work, go shopping, go out to dinner, raise families, and pay taxes. Chances are good that when you meet a disabled person you will discover several similar interests.

WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

WHEN YOU MEET A DISABLED PERSON...

1. Offer help but wait until it is accepted before giving it. Offering assistance to someone is only polite behavior. Giving help before it is accepted is rude. It can sometimes be unsafe, as when you grab the arm of someone using a crutch and the person loses his balance.

Accept the fact that a disability exists. Not acknowledging a disability is similar to ignoring someone's sex or height. But to ask *personal* questions regarding the disability would be inappropriate until a closer relationship develops in which personal questions are more naturally asked.

3. Talk directly to a disabled person, not to someone accompanying them. To ignore a person's existence in a group is very insensitive and it is always rude for two people to discuss a third person who is also present.
4. Don't park your car in a parking place which is specially designated for use by disabled people. These places are reserved out of necessity, not convenience. Some disabled people cannot walk distances, others need extra space in order to get

wheelchairs in and out of the car. If you park in a handicapped space it may be convenient for you but totally prohibiting for disabled people.

Treat a disabled person as a healthy person. Because an individual has a functional limitation does not mean the individual is sick. Some disabilities have no accompanying health problems.

6. Don't assume that a lack of response indicates rudeness. In some cases a disabled person may seem to react to situations in an unconventional manner or may appear to be ignoring you. Consider that the individual may have a hearing impairment or other disability which may affect social or motor skills.
7. Keep in mind that disabled people have the same activities of daily living as you do. Many persons with disabilities find it almost impossible to get a cab to stop for them or to have a clerk wait on them in stores. Remember that disabled individuals are customers and patrons, and deserve equal attention when shopping, dining, or traveling.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Contact your community facilities (churches, lodges, restaurants, clubs) regarding making the facility more accessible to disabled people (e.g., building ramps, installing raised numbers in elevators, having a sign language interpreter).
2. Include disabled employees on planning committees for office picnics, parties, and other events so that social functions will be for all.
3. Include disabled citizens on task forces dealing with community planning (transportation, building, zoning) so that the community will meet the needs of all citizens.
4. Encourage community groups (Kiwanis, Lions, Jaycees) to have programs about disabled people. Make sure that disabled people are included in the planning and presentation of the programs.
5. When you see a television show portraying disabled people "like everyone else," write a complimentary comment to the producer and to the station carrying it.

6. When you read or view a presentation portraying disabled people in a negative or condescending way (sick, hostile, maladjusted, nonproductive), write a letter stating your opinion to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.
7. Answer children's questions about disabled people. Questions are very normal. Remember that children get their information and attitudes from you.
8. If a disabled person asks for help and you want to help but do not know how, ask the disabled person the best way of giving assistance.
9. If a disabled person feels he can do something but you cannot understand how (e.g., job requirements, whitewater rafting), ask the person to explain.
10. Establish communication with disabled people. Often this can be as simple as using a pencil and paper along with speech, if a person is deaf.
11. Include employees with disabilities in planning and policy making within your business or professional organizations.

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Assignment # _____
 Due Date _____
 Name _____

Below are scenes that persons with disabilities typically experience. Read each situation and on a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions:

1. Which myths and attitudinal barriers do you recognize?
2. If you were the person with a disability, how would you handle the situation?
3. Briefly recreate the scene using facts instead of myths.

1.



Mark, who uses a wheelchair, is seated in a restaurant with his wife, Ann. The waitress comes to take their order and asks Ann, "What would he like to order?"

2.



Cindy, at 13 years old, is very curious about boys. She is talking with her mother about a cute boy in class. Her mother responds by saying that someday a very special man will come along and like Cindy, even if she does have cerebral palsy. Who knows? He might even marry her. Then Cindy's mother goes on to say that boys aren't important. Developing the mind will be more helpful than worrying about boys.

3. David has been an occasional patron of The Coconut, a bar and discotheque, where he goes to socialize and meet potential dates. David, who uses a wheelchair, asks the Coconut's owner to build a ramp so that he can get in and out unassisted. The owner refuses, telling David that he should come to the bar with a friend, or if that's impossible, that any of The Coconut's management staff would be willing to help David inside.

