

Models of disability

There are two ways of looking at disability – **the medical model** and **the social model**.

The medical model says that **the person is the problem**

In this model, disability is understood as an **individual problem**. If somebody has an impairment – a visual, mobility, or hearing impairment, for example – their inability to see, walk, or hear is understood as **their disability**.

The social model says that **society is the problem**

In this model disability is understood as a **social problem** – the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by the way society takes little or no account of people who have impairments and **prevents them gaining equal access** to education, employment, information, housing, public transport, leisure opportunities and so on.



The medical model of disability

The medical model is best summarised using the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps developed by the World Health Organisation in 1980. This classification makes the following distinctions:

Impairment: 'any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function'

Disability: 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being'

Examples

- I may be a wheelchair user. My disability is regarded as being related to the facts, for instance, that I cannot climb the stairs in my house or walk to the shops.
- I may be partially-sighted. My disability is regarded as being related to the fact, for instance, that I cannot read information in 'standard' size print.
- I may be brain injured. My disability is regarded as being related to the fact, for instance, that I cannot speak as quickly as other people.

From a medical model viewpoint, the societies we live in are just fine so long as the majority of people who don't have significant impairments (identified as 'normal') are able to go about their daily business. It is people who have impairments (identified as 'abnormal') who are identified as being the problem.

This is also why disabled people often experience pressures to undergo treatment or therapy in order to be made 'more normal'. Normality is highly valued and abnormality is thought of as being undesirable.

The medical model can be summed up as:

Impairment – my problem

Disability – my problem

The social model of disability

During the 1960s and 1970s disabled people started to challenge the way that they were treated and regarded in society. They considered having to live in residential institutions, being unable to find paid work or being unable to go on public transport as social injustice.

They looked at the way society was organised and they recognised the ways structures of education, employment, the provision of housing, information, leisure activities, and public transport systems were planned and delivered without taking the needs of people with impairments into account.

The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) developed their own definitions of impairment and disability which formed the basis of what is known as **the social model**.

The social model was later extended to include people with impairments other than physical impairments. In 1981 the Disabled People's International (DPI) made the following distinctions:

Impairment is the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long-term or permanent basis

Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers

We are disabled by society because of the inaccessible environments we live in, and by the judgments and assumptions that other people make about us.

When people identify disability as 'our problem' they will respond to us as victims in need of 'special' treatment and requiring 'special' services.

When people identify disability as a problem with the way society is organised, they will work to remove barriers that prevent us from taking part in society.

The social model can be summed up as:

Impairment – part of me

Disability – society's problem

Using the social model all disabled people have a right to be part of society.

Preferred Language

The language used here is the language used by the Disabled People's movement. Disabled people use language which reflects the **Social Model of Disability** which recognises the 'disabling' barriers of society whilst acknowledging individual impairment.

Avoid

Preferred

Wheelchair bound

Wheelchair user

The disabled

Disabled People

People with disabilities

Disabled Person

Cripple/crippled by

Person with

Victim of

Person with

Suffering from

Has or experiences

Invalid

Has long term condition

Handicap/handicapped

Impairment

Spastic

Person has cerebral palsy

The Blind

Blind or visually impaired people

The deaf

Deaf people/BSL users

Deaf and dumb

Deaf

Retarded

Has learning difficulties

Mentally handicapped

Has learning difficulties

Mentally Ill

Person who experiences mental health problems

Special Needs

Needs or requirements

Moving & handling

Moving & assistance

Able-bodied

Non-disabled