

Myths and Realities

Myths are roadblocks usually caused by misunderstandings and a lack of experience interacting with people with disabilities. Too often, these misunderstandings interfere with the ability of people with disabilities to find acceptance among their peers because they evoke fears and discomfort.

Misunderstandings about a disability can evoke the following fears:

- That we might “catch” it.
- That we will do or say the wrong thing.

Misunderstandings can also create discomfort or embarrassment if we are afraid of the following:

- That people with disabilities are so different from us that we cannot understand them and they cannot understand us.
- That we cannot communicate with persons with disabilities.
- That the needs and wants of persons with disabilities are not the same as ours.
- That we may feel our own vulnerability and shortcomings in their presence, and have to face up to the fact that we are likely to experience a disability at some point in our lives.

Misunderstandings can lead to pity if we believe the following:

- That persons with disabilities want others to feel sorry for them.
- That persons with disabilities only need our help, rather than our support and friendship.
- That persons with disabilities are less fortunate, and want “special” attention (e.g., special education, special friends).

Myths & Realities

Myth: People with disabilities are brave and courageous.

Reality: Adjusting to a disability requires adapting to a lifestyle, not bravery and courage. Going to college, having a family, participating in sporting events and working in a job are normal not heroic activities for people with disabilities just as they are for people without disabilities.

Myth: People with disabilities are sick.

Reality: Of course, individuals with disabilities are sometimes sick, just as people without disabilities are sometimes sick. A disability, though, is a condition, not an illness. Assuming they are the same thing can foster negative stereotypes, including fear of ‘catching’ the disability, or that people with disabilities need to be ‘cured’.

Myth: If you cannot see a disability it does not exist.

Reality: One out of every five Americans has a disability, and not all disabilities are visible or immediately apparent. Conditions such as chronic back pain and arthritis, as well as learning disabilities and psychological disabilities, can create significant limitations or difficulties for those experiencing them.

Myth: People with physical disabilities have lower IQs or are 'uneducable'.

Reality: People with physical disabilities have a full range of IQs and academic abilities. The degree of the physical disability has no bearing on a person's mental capacity.

Myth: A wheelchair is confining; people who use wheelchairs are 'wheelchair bound'.

Reality: A wheelchair, like a bicycle or a car, is a personal assistive device that enables someone to get around. Rather than 'confining', most people who use wheelchairs consider them liberating!

Myth: People who use wheelchairs can't walk.

Reality: Some people using wheelchairs cannot walk, others can. Many people use wheelchairs because they tire easily or because their strength is limited and using a wheelchair makes it possible for them to travel longer distances, or to be 'out and about' for longer periods of time.

Myth: People who are blind acquire a 'sixth sense'.

Reality: Although many people who are blind may refine their remaining senses and use them more fully, they do not develop a 'sixth sense'.

Myth: All people who are blind or visually impaired read Braille.

Reality: Only about 10% read Braille. Many use other methods of gaining access to printed materials, including computers with screen readers and books on tape.

Myth: People with disabilities are more comfortable with 'their own kind'.

Reality: People with disabilities are most comfortable with people they like and enjoy spending time with. This misconception probably came about because, in the past, many people with disabilities often went to separate schools or lived in institutions.

Myth: People with disabilities always need help.

Reality: Many people with disabilities are independent and capable of giving help. And while anyone may offer assistance, most people with disabilities prefer to be responsible for themselves.

Myth: People with disabilities should be protected from the harsher aspects of life.

Reality: People with disabilities want to participate in the full range of human experiences the good and the bad.

Myth: Curious children should never ask people about their disabilities.

Reality: Many children have a natural, uninhibited curiosity and may ask questions that some adults consider embarrassing. But 'shushing' curious children may make them think having a disability is 'wrong' or 'bad'. Most people with disabilities won't mind answering a child's questions.

Myth: The lives of people with disabilities are totally different than the lives of people without disabilities.

Reality: People with disabilities go to school, get married, work, have families, laugh, cry, pay taxes, get angry, have prejudices, vote, plan, dream and set goals like everyone else. People with disabilities are human beings who can be just as annoying, nice, rude or amusing as anyone else you might know.

Myth: People who are deaf or hard of hearing can read lips.

Reality: Lip-reading skills vary among people who use them and may not be entirely reliable. People who are deaf or hard of hearing use a number of methods to communicate, including sign language and interpreters.

Myth: People with disabilities cannot participate in sports and recreational activities.

Reality: People with disabilities take part in a wide variety of sports. In recent years, technological advances in adaptive sports equipment have opened doors to even more recreational opportunities.

Myth: Once architectural barriers are removed, full integration into society will be possible for people with disabilities.

Reality: A world without architectural barriers will be a wonderful help to people with disabilities. But until attitudinal barriers also fall, people with disabilities may continue to have trouble being recognized as valuable members of society.

Myth: There is nothing one person can do to help eliminate the barriers confronting people with disabilities.

Reality: Everyone can contribute to change. You can help remove barriers by:

Understanding the need for accessible parking and leaving it for those who need it.

Encouraging participation of people with disabilities in community activities by using accessible meeting and event sites.

Understanding children's curiosity about disabilities and people who have them.

Advocating barrier-free environments.

Speaking up when negative words or phrases are used about disabilities or about people with disabilities.

Writing producers and editors a note of support when they portray someone with a disability as a 'regular' person in the media.

Accepting people with disabilities as individuals capable of the same needs and feelings as yourself.

And now, a couple of myths about people without disabilities:

Myth: People who don't have disabilities don't want to be around those that do.

Reality: Not true. However, lack of experience in meeting people with disabilities sometimes makes those without uncomfortable. They're often afraid of saying the wrong thing, and nervous about doing something offensive. People with disabilities and those without must get past this initial hesitation and discover ways to make interaction more comfortable for everyone involved.

Myth: People who offer to lend a hand to people with disabilities know how to provide

the needed help.

Reality: The desire to help and the knowledge of how to do so do not necessarily go hand in hand. If a person with a disability accepts an offer for assistance, it's helpful for him or her to give specific instructions on exactly what type of assistance is needed and the best way to carry it out.