

**Why Do We Think  
What We Think  
About Adults & Children with Disabilities  
*Moving Towards Equality***

***Southwest ADA Center***

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*The information herein is intended solely as informal guidance and is neither a determination of your legal rights or responsibilities under the Act, nor binding on any agency with enforcement responsibility under the ADA.*

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*The Disability Law Resource!*

- The **Leading Resource** On
  - ADA & ADAAA
  - Other disability related laws such as 504 of the Rehab Act
- Serves a wide range of audiences including employers, businesses, government agencies, workforce systems, schools and people with disabilities
- Expert staff are available to provide training, publications and respond to your inquiries.
- **Hot Line: 1-800-949-4232**
- [www.southwestADA.org](http://www.southwestADA.org)

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## Inclusiveness - Training Goals

- The concepts of this training may or may not be new to you.
- The learning goals of this training can be multi-purposed for you depending on where you are in your own personal belief system concerning disability and those who have disabilities.

## This training will do one or more of the following for you:

- 1. Introduce you to a whole new way of thinking about **WHAT you believe and WHY** you maintain those beliefs concerning people with disabilities and how **these belief are passed down** through generations (which could include how you feel about yourself as a person with a disability).
- 2. Give you reasoning tools to use to challenge yourself and others, **including children**, who have taken for granted societal defined ideas concerning people with disabilities. It will also aid people with disabilities to pinpoint and understand why they can feel stereotyped & oppressed and how to overcome that oppression.
- 3. Help you examine your own possible stereotypical and negative beliefs about others with the same or different disability as yours.

## Take Away Message



Sensitivity is always based on the belief that people with disabilities should be **FULLY included** in all aspects of American life, which will ensure the basic guarantees of independence, freedom of choice, control of their lives, and the opportunity to blend fully and equally into the American mainstream.

*Signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990*



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5

## A Short Attitude Measurement



- Do you ever feel awkward in the presence of a person with severe disabilities?
- Are you aware of the problems many people with disabilities have in accessing many public buildings, businesses, and even places of employment?
- Do you ever catch yourself treating someone with a disability differently than you treat those who are not disabled?
- Do you feel like you should pay extra special attention to a person because they are disabled?
- Do you assume that, unfortunately, “kids will be kids” when they tease their peers with disabilities?
- If you honestly answered “yes” to a few or most of the above questions, think about WHY you did.
- But don't feel terribly guilty. Given our backgrounds and long time, outdated disability beliefs still held by much of our society, it is almost predictable that most of us are unsure of what to think about and how to positively interact with people with various disabilities.

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6

## *Learning Environment*

- ✓ We all can learn something
- ✓ Paramount that everyone to feels safe in asking questions and processing attitudes / knowledge



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7

## **Reality - Social Construct of Disability**

- “Having a disability means different things to different people. Some take the daily challenges that accompany disease and illness **in stride**. Others **struggle greatly**. It has been debated that being born with a disability is easier than adapting to one that occurs later in life. Among us are the pessimists, the optimists and all those who fall somewhere in between. Despite our individuality, we've been given one broad label. Under this large umbrella also come our life partners, children, parents, siblings and friends.”

*Ez Disability Project*



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***At least half of my exercise I get every day comes from jumping to conclusions*** (Bruce Dexter, Journalist)



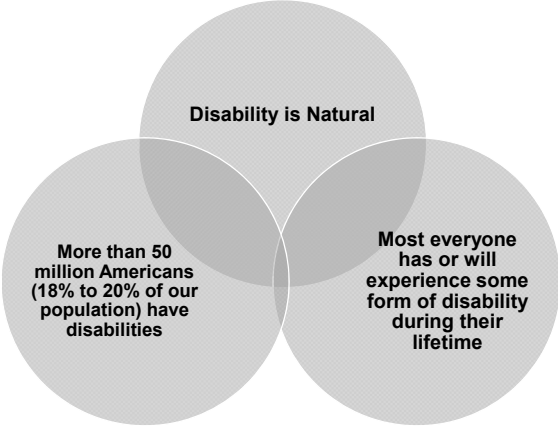
Becoming aware of our own personal filters regarding how you feel about disability and medical conditions is essential to working towards NOT automatically jumping to conclusions (positive or negative), about someone based on his/her disability.



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It is estimated that by the year 2020, half of the U.S. population will have at least one chronic condition and one-quarter will be living with multiple chronic conditions.  
(Center on an Aging Society, Georgetown University)



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## Today's prevailing way of thinking about disability

People with disabilities have chosen to define themselves rather than to accept societal dictates regarding who they are according to their disability



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11

## Sociological Overview


- Categorization/labeling of some people as “disabled” and others as “non-disabled” is subjective
- Depends upon society’s relative ideas:
  - what activities people should be able to do and
  - how they should be able to do it



*Just imagine.....what if.....*


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12


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## Sociological Overview

- The term ABNORMAL emerges based on relative ideas:
  - Assignment of who is abnormal is subjective
  - Comes from a perspective influenced by cultural “norms”
    - (based on common beliefs and values)
- Cultural norms are often based on deeply rooted beliefs that people have taken for granted as truths/reality.



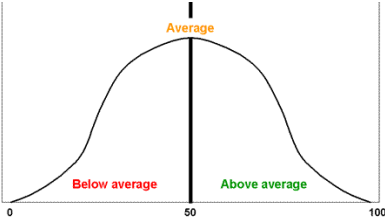
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## Sociological Overview

Therefore:  
Making a black and white categorization of disability is Impossible. Reality is that all human abilities fall on a Continuum.

- **Normal Curve**
  - Negative and positive judgments are assumed about a person depending where they “fall” on the curve.



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## Sociological Overview

So the prevailing view by mainstream society as viewing and defining each human being as “normal” vs. “abnormal” affirms:

- the underlying basic belief of defining and assuring oneself as normal (OK) & therefore **being acceptable to others**
- the prevailing assumption that those who are “abnormal” are somewhat lesser functioning human beings

## Sociological Overview

“Normal” vs. “Abnormal” Way of Thinking or **“Ableism”**

The Common Societal Belief:

- Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human
- The “disabled person’s” primary goal and need in life is a CURE that will allow them to join the ranks of the “normal people”
  - Expects “the disabled” to go to painful and damaging lengths to RESEMBLE normal people
  - Ableism is discrimination in favor of able-bodied people.



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**Meet Liberty Bell**  
Does she know she's "different / disabled?"  
OR  
Does she go about her doggy duties care free?



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**Roots of Discrimination**  
**FEAR of people with disabilities**

- stems from ancient religious beliefs disability as an evil product of sin
- reinforces modern cultural images equating disability with social deviance (children really pick up on this and can be express through teasing / bullying)
- stems from the recognition that it is always possible to "suffer a misfortune" and join the ranks of disabled"
- reminder that no one has total control over their body
- Confirms that human suffering, if present, is an inescapable part of the human experience.




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## Roots of Discrimination

### Belief in Perfection

- society defines what is attractive and beautiful
- non-disabled people generally envision a perfect world in which there is no suffering or pain – therefore all disability is unacceptable and must be cured
  - common cultural values that life is worth living only with a perfectly intact body coupled with the fear of being a burden on friends and family
  - Set the “norm” for children of what they and their peers should look like, feel, think, etc.



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## Roots of Discrimination

### Exaggerated Heroism Attributes

“That’s Amazing!”

- difficulty in understanding how people with disabilities can live full satisfying lives
- “overcoming of the odds” perpetuates beliefs that most people with disabilities cannot achieve such success.
- “success” stories focus on the disability NOT on architectural and attitudinal barriers as the source of the “hero’s” dilemmas
- emphasis on individual strength, NOT on societal change, as the key to overcoming disadvantages



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## Roots of Discrimination

“I am not your inspiration, thank you very much”  
(Stella Young, Comedian and Journalist)



## Inspirational Porn

(term coined by advocate youth with disabilities who have grown up with ADA rights)

- Assumes that people with disabilities generally can't lead happy lives. It fills in qualities that may or may not be true in order to inspire oneself.
- People with disabilities are called “*inspirational*” or “*brave*” for
  - doing all the things that “regular” people do
  - using people with disabilities to make nondisabled people feel good about themselves, or to shame one into feeling gratitude or to be motivated to do something to better one's life

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## Inspirational Porn

- Why is it called Inspiration Porn?**
  - It objectifies people with disabilities - treating a person as an object or a thing for self gratification.
- Why is it Damaging?**
  - Works directly against the fight for a more accessible society simultaneously convincing us the disability is always tragic and that a little compassion is all we need to make everything better.
- Better Solution**
  - Don't pity and treat people with disabilities as “special”. Instead, be aware and work to **remove attitudinal, physical, educational, communicational, and economical (employment) & health care barriers.**

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## Acknowledging Genuine Experience

- **If invited to do so**, it can be powerful for both you and the person with a disability to acknowledge real life experience, including difficulty and hardship. Individual strength can certainly be recognized while being aware that:
  - the difficulty many times comes from, or is compounded by, having to face and function in a generally inaccessible society and
  - a great part of the solution should be emphasis on societal change, as the key to overcoming hardship.

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23

## Roots of Discrimination

*Pity is Not Progress*

### Oppressive Charitable Attitudes

- being disabled is a miserable and sad way to live
- “the disabled” must be seen as society’s disadvantaged
- “the disabled” must be “cared” for on society’s terms of pity



### Empowering Charity

- True Charity Begins with Respect and Ends with Action that Builds Strength and Dignity

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24

## Paradoxical Ideas

- Disability is artificially constructed by a society to enforce the “normalcy” of the majority of its members

Vs.

- Disability is a valid, unifying identity that reflects the real experiences and culture of a large group of people in this same society

## Paradoxical Ideas

“Subjective Construction of Disability”

Vs.

“Disability Culture”?

Is there a contradiction?

**NO! WHY?**

## Disability Culture



- has opportunity to develop because:
  - Centuries of society ignoring their designated people as disabled by constructing a world tailored to the needs of people accepted as normal
    - based on how the majority of how people physically function, think and feel
  - **Society sets apart groups of people who are less able to function in society due to attitudinal, physical, educational, communicational, and economical (employment) & health care barriers.**

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27

## Disability Culture



Creates opportunity to develop a  
disability subculture within the  
larger culture

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28

## Disability Rights Movement

- Disability Culture in turn **produces leaders and activists**
- Challenges the roots of societal discrimination & demands **full participation** in society
- **Disability rights** movement has recognized that this desire to transition to normalcy is not a valid goal
- Because normalcy like disability is a **relative** concept



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29

## Disability Rights Movement

- *The right to participant fully in society is paramount therefore:*
  - Disability is an unstable term that is subjectively constructed by culture
  - The appearance of “normalcy” is not important -- recognition of people with disabilities as fully human and equal
  - Believe that living in a world that continues to & stereotype its people with disabilities is NOT inevitable



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30

## Disability Rights Movement



- Identify the unconscious or conscious failure by society to take into account the **spectrum** of human needs and abilities as discriminatory
- **Shift the disability paradigm** from a quest for cures / normalcy / to be acceptable to others to a crusade for civil and social rights



**Elimination of attitudinal, physical, educational, communicational, and economical (employment) & health care barriers.**

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31

## Disability Power!



- \* Americans with Disabilities Act
- \* Telecommunications Act
- \* Fair Housing Act
- \* Air Carrier Access Act
- \* National Voter Registration Act
- \* Voting Accessibility for Elderly & Handicapped Act
- \* Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act
- \* Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- \* Rehabilitation Act (including Section 504)
- \* Architectural Barriers Act


**Learn about these laws at [www.ada.gov/cguide.htm](http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm)**



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32



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## General Helpful Tips

- It is NOT a them and us situation. All of us are individuals. No SAMENESS Factor. Having a disability means different things to different people.
- Ask Before You Help - Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean he/she needs help.
  - If the setting is accessible to his/her particular disability, usually assistance is not needed.
  - Just like anyone else, adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people and children must be loved and treated respectfully.
  - If it appears that help may be needed, always ask before you act. "May I be of assistance?"
    - Once the offer for assistance has been accepted, ask for instructions and clarify what kind of assistance the person wants.

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## Tips

- Use the **latest civil rights** oriented people first language
  - "A person with a disability" rather than "disabled person" or "the disabled".
  - **Avoid outdated terms** like "handicapped", "crippled" or "victim" which carry stereotypic implications of pity and paternalistic attitudes.
  - FYI – "Handicapped" is an old archaic term that means cup in hand or beggar.
- Always **speak directly to the** person not to his/her companion, aide or sign language interpreter. Converse with him/her you would anyone without a disability.




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## Tips

- ✓ Persons who are blind or have low vision.
- ✓ Let him or her take a hold of the back of YOUR arm when guiding them to a location (not the other way around).




- ✓ Service Animals are working animals, they are not pets.
- ✓ Do no touch or talk to the animal.
- ✓ If needed, make sure the animal has a place to sit or lay down by its owner.

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## Tips

- **Same body space** as anyone else and respect all assistive devices
  - avoid touching a person's wheelchair, scooter, walker, or cane.
- May **depend on their arms** or devices for balance;
  - grabbing them to help could knock them off balance.
- **Best judge** of what they can & cannot do
  - Don't make decisions for them about participating in an activity.



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## *Just Remember*



- Remember that people with disabilities, **like all people**, are experts on themselves. They know what they like, what they do not like and what they can and cannot do.
- Sensitivity and proper etiquette toward people with disabilities is always based on the belief of
- ***FULL inclusion in all aspects of American life, will ensure that people with disabilities are given the basic independence, control of their lives, and the opportunity to blend fully and equally into the American mainstream***

