



Day 3: From Awareness to Acceptance – Models of Disability

The medical model, the social model, and the holistic model are three different ways of framing disability.

Most people outside of the disability community think of disability within the framework of the medical model – where someone with a disability is thought to have an “impairment” that should be “fixed” so they can be as “normal” as possible. This casts disability in a very negative light and leaves little room for people with disabilities to feel pride in their identity as a person with a disability.

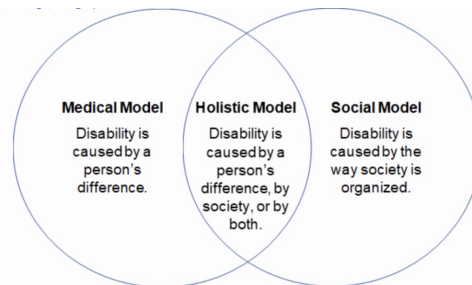
The social model of disability proposes that disability is caused not by a person’s body or diagnosis, but by the way society is designed and organized. This places no judgement on the person with a disability, and instead recognizes that societal barriers are the problem to be fixed. If a person who is paraplegic can’t access a restaurant, it is not their paraplegia or their wheelchair that is the barrier – the lack of a ramp is the barrier. This shift in attitude creates an environment where people with disabilities are accepted as equal and valued members of society.

However, the social model was originally designed to describe the experiences of people with mobility and sensory disabilities and is not fully inclusive of other types of disability, such as chronic illnesses. The holistic model of disability is intended to capture the full complexity of the disability experience. The holistic model of disability proposes that disability may be caused only by a person’s difference, only by their interaction with society, or by both their difference and society in combination. Under the holistic model, people with disabilities can freely choose therapies and medical treatments that support their needs and goals.

The social model is deeply connected to a concept known as the Independent Living philosophy. Like the social model, this philosophy is a shared belief that people with disabilities have the same rights and privileges as people without disabilities. The philosophy makes the argument that someone with a disability should be able to participate in and contribute to their communities. It asserts that the person with a disability is in charge of their own life and, therefore, should make their own decisions on how and where they want to live, work, and spend their time, NOT what society or a medical professional selects for them.

The shift from a perspective of mere awareness of disability to full acceptance of people with disabilities requires society to take responsibility for creating accessible and inclusive communities.

Models of Disability



[Image description: Models of Disability Venn diagram with two overlapping circles. One circle is labeled "Medical Model: Disability is caused by a person's difference." The second circle is labeled "Social Model: Disability is caused by the way society is organized." The area where the two circles overlap is labeled "Holistic Model: Disability is caused by a person's difference, by society, or by both."]

Learn More

Read:

- ASAN: Acceptance vs. Awareness
<https://autisticadvocacy.org/2012/04/acceptance-vs-awareness/>
- Introducing the Holistic Model of Disability
<https://autistic.com/2020/02/14/the-holistic-model-of-disability/>
- Disability Network Frequently Asked Questions
<https://www.dnlakeshore.org/frequently-asked-disability-questions/>

Watch:

- What is the Social Model of Disability (3:07, *includes captions*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0e24rftZ2CQ>

Listen:

- NPR: The Social Side of Stuttering (16:20)
<https://www.npr.org/2021/01/19/958423970/the-social-side-of-stuttering> (*transcript here:*
<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/958423970>)

Discussion:

- Are the social and holistic models of disability new concepts for you? What do you think about them?
- When you encounter people with disabilities, do you find yourself feeling that they are “broken”? How could you shift your thinking to include social causes of disability?
- What barriers have you seen in your community that prevent the inclusion of people with disabilities?

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