

WHAT IS A DISABILITY?

There are many ways to understand what a disability is. We call these models of disability. A model of disability can include things like:

- What is a disability?
- What causes disabilities and why?
- What do we do when someone has a disability?
- How do we treat people with disabilities?

Most people don't consciously or intentionally decide how they will think about disabilities. We all learn our models from society, family, media, and more. The model that someone uses shows in what assumptions they make about disabilities and people with disabilities, how they treat people with disabilities, and how they speak about disability.

It is also common for people to think with different models in different situations. For example someone might use the social model of disability in their day to day life by asking for accommodations, but move to the medical model when they get medications from a psychiatrist.

The two most common models of disability in the United States right now are the Medical Model of Disability and the Social Model of Disability. These are not the only two: there are other models that have been more common historically or are more common in other places. For example there is the Charity Model, which believes we should support disabled people through charitable giving, or Religious Models, which see a higher power as the cause of a disability.

In general, disabled people tend to favor the Social Model, which was pioneered by disability advocates based on their lived experiences.

THE MEDICAL MODEL

The medical model of disability says that a disability is a physical condition (impairment) in someone's body or mind. A person can't do or access things because of the impairment.

In response, we should try to cure or fix the condition because that would remove the disability. We can do that through studying and understanding the condition, using medication/surgery/other interventions to change it, or by controlling the symptoms.

Benefits and Problems with This Model

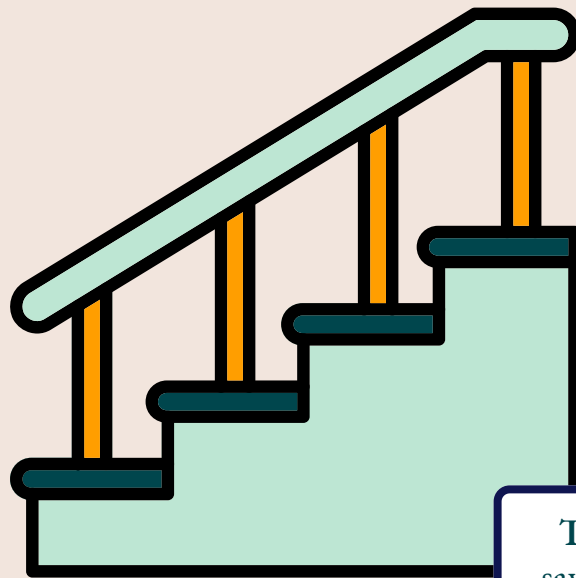
- **Problem:** Can cause stigma for disabled people or make them feel like their disability is their fault
- **Problem:** Puts the responsibility to fix the problem on the disabled person
- **Benefit:** Can provide helpful interventions like glasses or prosthetics
- **Benefit:** Can provide relief from pain, fatigue, or other physical symptoms

THE SOCIAL MODEL

The social model of disability says that disability comes from barriers in society. A person may have an impairment or a difference, but their abilities are removed when society does not give them access or support. This could be physical (like not providing ramps) attitudes, (like assuming everyone needs to make eye contacts), or discrimination. To fix this problem, the social model says that we should provide accommodations, modifications, and understanding that make the world accessible to everyone.

Benefits and Problems with This Model

- **Problem:** Doesn't give us a way to understand or address pain and other physical symptoms
- **Problem:** Asks for larger societal changes, which can feel overwhelming
- **Benefit:** Can help disabled people feel more accepted
- **Benefit:** Asks everyone to take responsibility for making an accessible society



The medical model says the physical condition is the problem. The solution is a cure or prosthetic.

The social model says the stairs are the problem. The solution is to build a ramp.