

Models of disability

Understanding the different models of disability is important not just for people directly involved with a child or adult with a disability but also for everyone in society in order to build positive attitudes and a better understanding. The medical and the social models of disability are two frameworks (amongst others) that provide contrasting ways of thinking about disability.

The medical model (or 'individual model' as it is sometimes referred to) focuses on the individual's medical condition and locates disability within the person. This model assumes that with medical treatment or intervention the individual can be helped to overcome their limitations. People with disabilities have generally rejected this model. They say it has led to their low self-esteem, undeveloped life skills, poor education and consequent high unemployment levels. Above all, they have recognised that the Medical Model requires the breaking of natural relationships with their families, communities and society as a whole.

The social model of disability starts from a different perspective. It ignores how "bad" a person's impairment is. Instead, it establishes that everyone is equal and demonstrates that it is society which erects barriers that prevent disabled people participating and restricts their opportunities.

The social model shifts the emphasis from personal inadequacy or abnormality to physical and societal (legal, cultural, and attitudinal) barriers experienced by a person with impairment. These barriers are viewed as disabling the person and are external to the individual. This viewpoint shifts the focus onto the rights of disabled people and the requirement for society to change.

Disabled people developed the social model of disability because the traditional medical model did not explain their personal experience of disability or help to develop more inclusive ways of living.

In a Social Model of Disability the key definitions are:

Impairment: An injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a long term effect on physical appearance and / or limitation of function within the individual that differs from the commonplace.

Disability: The loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers. Disability is shown as being caused by 'barriers' or elements of social organisation which take no or little account of people who have impairments.

More recently, a new model of disability has begun to gain favour drawing upon the spirit of the disability arts movement and the whole notion of disability pride. This is called **an Affirmation Model** and was proposed as an idea to enable impairments to be perceived as a core part of a person's being and of their experience. The idea behind this model is to challenge the underlying assumption that impairment is a personal tragedy and for disabled people to be regarded and treated as victims of misfortune.

Why are models important?

Although many organisations state that they support and follow the social model it is not always easy to change people's attitudes or work practices. It is often easier and more rewarding for a member of staff to help an individual (a medical model approach) rather than spend time changing the system (a social model approach).

David Crabtree

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Bibliography

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