

HOW SOCIETY HAS VIEWED PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Over the ages, people with disabilities have been dehumanized in many different ways. Some of the stereotypes which have been used to label people with disabilities persist in the mind of the public even today. Viewing a person with disabilities or group of people with disabilities according to a stereotype limits what we expect of them and how we respond to them. This should become clearer as we discuss some of the “historical” stereotypes.

1. **The person with disabilities is a “menace”.** Between 1870 and 1925, all persons with disabilities were linked with poverty, crime and promiscuity and were seen as contributing to the decline of civilization. Individuals who were mentally retarded, in particular, were viewed as “threats” to society. This view led to segregation, imprisonment, persecution and even destruction of thousands of people with disabilities. Placement in large custodial settings or “asylums,” as they were called was common. Sterilization was widely used to prevent the “spread” of social problems through heredity.
2. **The person with disabilities as an “object of dread.”** This view stems from the time when leprosy was a common dreaded disease. The first institutions were built in Europe to house lepers. These prison-like buildings were placed well outside the cities, often on hilltops for the clean air. When leprosy declined, the “leprosariums” were quickly filled with society’s misfits, disordered and people with disabilities. The image of dread that society held for lepers was transferred to people with disabilities.
3. **The person with disabilities as “sub-human.”** This view is still encountered today, particularly where people with very severe disabilities are concerned. Such persons are often compared with “animals” and “vegetables.” Simple amenities such as heat and regulation of water temperature may be ignored because the person with disabilities is thought to be insensitive to heat or cold.
4. **The person with disabilities as an “object of ridicule.”** Those who remember the movie *Charlie* or the book *Flowers for Algernon* will recall how the main character, who had mental retardation, was the butt of frequent and humiliating jokes from co-workers. The appearance of people with disabilities in “freak shows” and circuses also illustrated this point. Historical novels show that people with disabilities were used as fools, court jesters or clowns.
5. **The person with disabilities as an object of “pity” or “charity.”** Until recent years, services (from education to clothing) were given to people with disabilities out of pity or a sense of charity. People with disabilities were even

placed in the position of having to beg for survival. The pity and charity approach is still used in public fundraising campaigns.

6. **The person with disabilities as a “holy innocent.”** This view characterizes the person with disabilities as a “holy innocent,” a “Child of God,” a “special messenger,” a divine reminder to man of his sins, but someone who is himself incapable of sin and therefore not responsible for his own actions.
7. **The person with disabilities as an “eternal child.”** The most common current misconception of persons with mental retardation is that, mentally, they are children forever. The tendency, then, is to expect them to behave like children. For example, an eighteen year old man may be expected to play with the same toys as a six year old, when, in fact, he could be playing sports and learning vocational skills. Clothes, books and possessions that are really appropriate for children are often given to adults with disabilities, thus reinforcing the juvenile stereotype.
8. **The person with disabilities as “sick.”** A final stereotype, and one which is also common today, is the view of the person with disabilities as sick—often mentally sick. Some disabilities, such as epilepsy, can be treated and controlled by drugs, but it is unrealistic to expect most disabilities to be totally overcome or “cured.” Even so, all persons with disabilities can be helped through better services and opportunities to achieve a measure of independence. Great emphasis should be, and is being put, on education and rehabilitation, schools, vocational centers, and residential services. These non-medical services are more appropriate and will, in the long run, produce more direct benefits to the individual with disabilities and to society.

The person with disabilities as a citizen and developing individual.

Fortunately, the old, degrading stereotypes are being replaced by a positive view of people with disabilities. The person with disabilities is increasingly seen as a citizen, entitled to full protection, rights and privileges under the law. He/She is also entitled to the same services, opportunities and benefits as other people.