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When we talk about disability we tend to generalise. Disability can mean many things from someone in a wheelchair, to someone who is blind, to someone who just needs to take tablets to control a condition. But whenever we make general statements it is clear that our statements cannot apply to everyone equally. Disability is a word which we must define very carefully. This is because the needs of disabled people vary according to their condition. Whilst access to buildings is very important to someone in a wheelchair, it is not as important to a person who can walk. One of the main responsibilities of equal opportunities is to recognise that there are many types of people with many types of requirements.

So how can we define disability? What we must not do is not fall into the same trap as many people do by being general. Each time we consider disability we should look at the many implications that might affect different people. By lumping together all people with disabilities we would not be treating them fairly. Governments and agencies who are responsible for providing services for disabled people often have difficulties deciding how to spend the money because there are many people with many different needs and many agencies are responsible for providing services including hospitals doctors social workers activity centres and so on.

One way to define disability is to let disabled people define it for themselves, or let individuals assess their own abilities. Often people who seem obviously disabled do not see themselves as disabled whilst some people who look perfectly ordinary and normal would define themselves as disabled.

Some people define disability according to the level of help someone needs to go about their everyday business. Other ways to define disability is to work it out according to the amount of state benefits a person receives. Some definitions are **subjective**. This means that it depends on how people feel about themselves rather than how other people may want to define it. A definition based on benefits is seen to be more **objective**. This means basing a definition on actual factors which apply to all people.

## Exercise

1. Define disability in your own words.
2. Why is it sometimes difficult to define disability?
3. Is it better to let disabled people define their disability or should outside organisations determine what it is?

A stereotype is a general opinion about a person or group of people which assumes that the person or group can be typically identified and described in a particular way. The problem with stereotypes is that they are generally untrue but are sometimes popularly believed. We all tend to stereotype because it is an easy way to categorise people or groups.

The stereotype of disabled people is that:

- z They have a physical disability and are usually in a wheelchair,
- z If they can walk they are unstable and unsteady on their feet,
- z They are always ill
- z They don't really appreciate what's going on,
- z They are living a poor quality of life and people should feel sorry for them.

Stereotypes do not allow people to be seen as individuals with separate identities, qualities, and potential.

When we study any group of people we should be very careful not to assume what they are like but instead learn from the evidence. For example, the stereotype about disabled people usually being in a wheelchair is untrue. Most disabled people do not use wheelchairs because their disability is not related to their inability to walk.

## Exercise

1. What do you understand by the word stereotype?
2. Why do people stereotype others?
3. Write a paragraph each to:
  - z support the use of stereotypes,
  - z outline the reasons why stereotyping is not accurate.

Prejudice comes from two words: **pre** and **judge**. Prejudice means making up your mind before you know all the facts or having an opinion which is not based on a full understanding of the matter.

One of the biggest problems that disabled people have is the prejudice which is expressed by people who have no disability themselves. Most people have a concept of normality and do not like anything or anyone who does not match up to that concept. For most people normality means the average. This is average in terms of appearance, beliefs, and behaviour. Although most able bodied people do not directly insult disabled people, indirectly their ignorance and behaviour means that sometimes they do hurt disabled people.

Many disabled people have a visible appearance which is noticeable, usually associated with movement. But that does not mean that a disabled person is mentally weak. Some so called 'normal' people automatically think that someone who has a physical disability must also be lacking in their mental powers. Often they speak not directly to the disabled person but to any other person who may be accompanying them. This makes the disabled person feel invisible and insulted. At other times people say things like 'I think it is wonderful how you cope', and 'isn't it a pity...'

Disabled people often feel inferior and sometimes avoid situations in which they feel people will expect them to explain their disability. All they really want is for people to let them get on with their lives. They do not want to be constantly reminded of their disability; they are perfectly aware of it already. Some 'normal' people seem to have a morbid fascination rather than a genuine caring attitude.



## Exercise

1. What is 'normal' in terms of ability and disability?
2. Is anyone normal?
3. Why do people sometimes prejudge situations?
4. Is it inevitable that people who have no disability themselves cannot understand the real needs of disabled people?

One of the main areas of concern for disabled people and carers is accommodation. People with physical disabilities which are not too severe can continue to live in ordinary houses and for some others specially adapted housing is sometimes available. But one of the main needs of disabled people is that there should be more accommodation available which has easy access and which meets other needs like adapted bathrooms and kitchens.

But for people with learning difficulties, (sometimes called mental illness), the type of accommodation varies. In the past many people with learning difficulties were simply locked up in institutions. There are some terrible stories of how people were neglected and ill treated in British institutions in the past. Today, the policy towards people with learning difficulties is to integrate them into ordinary society. But often there is little support from professionals and where there is no support, people with learning difficulties are discriminated against both in terms of education employment and opportunities.

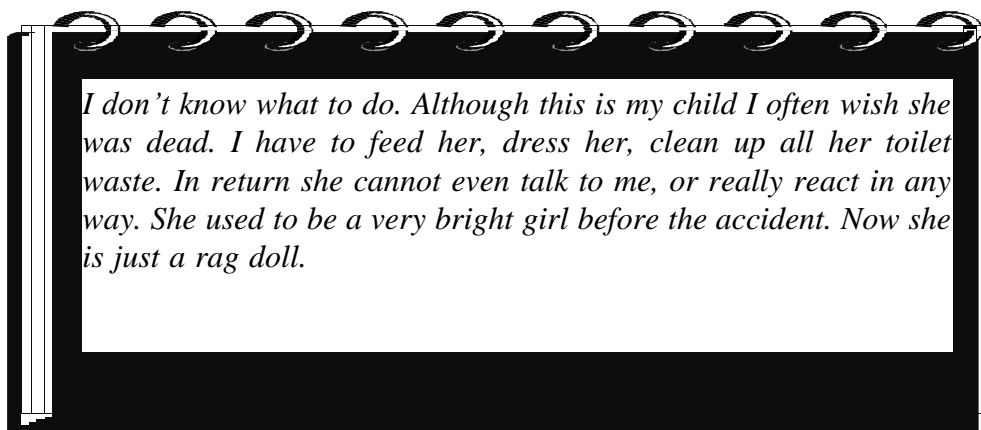
Most disabled people want to live independent lives. Independence gives people a greater sense of worth. Disability often brings dependence not only in the sense that the disabled person needs care but also financial dependence because the disabled person is less likely to work or earn money. Employers often do not want to employ people who have a disability. This is more often because they do not understand that the disability will not affect the person's ability to work. They think that any disability means that the person is incapable of doing anything.

## Exercise

1. Why is independence important for **all** people?
2. How would an ordinary house, (2 storey), need to be adapted for someone who was:
  - z In a wheelchair,
  - z Blind?

One of the most emotional issues in disability is the right to life. Sometimes pregnant women are told that the baby they are carrying is damaged in some way. Often the medical advice is for the woman to have an abortion. The woman is put in a very difficult situation because most people do not like to have to 'play God'. It is difficult to know in advance whether the baby would be able to grow up and lead a life of any quality. It also brings into question the right of anyone to decide who should live and who should not be allowed to live.

Some people become disabled during their life. They may end up very ill indeed and often have such a low quality of life that they feel, and their relatives feel, that they would be better off if they were dead. It is illegal in the UK to assist anyone to die, but many people think that living a life without real consciousness is not really living life at all.



The question of the right to choose when to die is not only an issue for disabled people, but it affects them more. Most people agree that everyone has the right to a chance to live, but some people feel they could not cope with a seriously disabled person in their lives.

### Exercise

1. Should pregnant women who are carrying a baby which is potentially disabled always have an abortion?
2. Who has the right to decide who should live and who should not live?
3. Should people with a severe disability have the right to choose whether to live or not?

Some disabled people think that they are treated as if they were invisible. The invisibility of disabled people sometimes starts at school. Because disabled people are often ill more than other people they sometimes miss school, or may spend time in hospital or being taught at home. Some disabled people are taught in special schools which are separate from mainstream education. It is sometimes very difficult for people who have been to special schools to adapt to going to college where they meet able bodied people sometimes for the first time in such a setting.

Housing can be another big problem. If a person is housebound then they hardly ever go out. Often there is a lack of suitable transport or places to go. Some sheltered housing is placed a long way from town centres and disabled people might find it difficult to go out. Whilst disabled people may have homes which are adapted to take account of their disability it is a different matter when they go somewhere else.

Able bodied people often do not speak directly to the disabled people and instead talk to their carers. It is as if the disabled person was not there. People who use wheelchairs are especially aware of this. They are physically lower down when they are sat in their chair whilst the able bodied people around them are standing. Sometimes the person in the wheelchair is completely ignored by everyone even though they may be talking about the person in the wheelchair. Remember disability does not mean stupidity. Disabled people are quite capable of speaking for themselves and telling you how they feel. Many disabled people look forward to the opportunity of mixing with larger groups because they might not have that opportunity very often. But able bodied people are often ignorant of this need.

People also sometimes get confused between disability and illness. It is possible for a disabled person to be ill; but the disabled person is not ill all the time. Sometimes the disabled person might have an illness like anyone else. They can have flu, and other minor ailments. Often able bodied people think that disabled people are always ill. Disabled people can come to terms with their disability and then lead a fairly normal life. No one likes being treated as if they are going to collapse at any moment or be treated as if they are very fragile. Able bodied people often do not listen to disabled people and make their own assumptions about their condition.

## Exercise

1. What effect can 'invisibility' have on a person's self confidence?
2. Why is it important for disabled people to speak for themselves?
3. Is it more important for disabled people to be assertive than other people?

Self image can be defined as being a picture of oneself. It is all about how individuals see themselves. It has a lot to do with physical attributes, how we think we look to other people. Obviously for people with severe physical disabilities their self image is often very negative. Self image also involves our concept of what we are capable of doing, our aspirations and ambitions. It is very important for disabled people to have a positive self image because they need to work harder to achieve. When disabled people are in the company of other disabled people or in sheltered housing or education they usually find it easier to be more positive. When they are in ordinary situations with able bodied people it is easier to be negative.



Able bodied people also need to have a positive self image. Some people promote their own self image by finding faults in other people. People with disabilities are very aware of how able bodied people sometimes undermine them in order to feel better themselves. Sometimes able bodied people by being too sympathetic also inadvertently undermine disabled people.

Disabled people are as interested in fashion, beauty and style as able bodied people. Often this is not understood. But the media never portrays fashion or beauty in a way which is designed to attract people with disabilities. The media always shows the ideal body which even most able bodied people do not match.

## Exercise

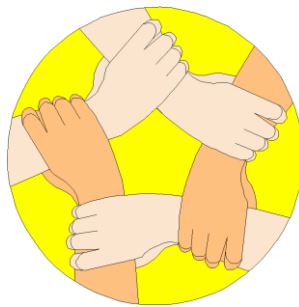
1. What is self-image?
2. What is your self-image? Outline the main features of your make-up?
3. How do people often improve their self-image by undermining the self-image of other people?



Disabled people are discriminated against in many ways but are usually less effective at fighting against discrimination than other groups because traditionally they have not been united. Black people and women's groups have always been able to organise themselves better. Today there are some pressure groups which represent disabled people which are quite active. Disabled people can be black or white, male or female, old or young, rich or poor. Because disability cuts across social classes, colour, and sex it has been sometimes difficult to present a united front in political terms.

The public is very supportive of disabled people, and this has been shown in surveys which have been conducted on many occasions. But it seems that the expression of support in surveys is not matched by the experience of real everyday life. Disabled people are often abused and insulted. Able bodied people stand and stare when they would not stare at other able bodied people. They become angry if someone in a wheelchair blocks the aisle in a supermarket. Disabled people have equal rights with able bodied people but often able bodied people do not see it that way.

Civil rights is all about rights which all people have and not just some people. Disabled people have the right to equal access to shops, cinemas, town centres and leisure facilities. The fight for equality has had some effect. You may see disabled parking spaces in town centre car parks and supermarket car parks and more buildings which are accessible. But civil rights is also about good housing, education and employment opportunities.



## Exercise

1. What are civil rights?
2. Should all people have the same rights? Why?
3. How are disabled people sometimes deprived of their civil rights?

*As a wheelchair user the most important thing for me is good access to the amenities which I use regularly. People who do not have any problems with mobility do not understand the problems that uneven pavements can present. When you are in a wheelchair it is a question of confidence as much as anything else. If you are continuously bumping into things or are unable to enter buildings then eventually you feel like giving up.*

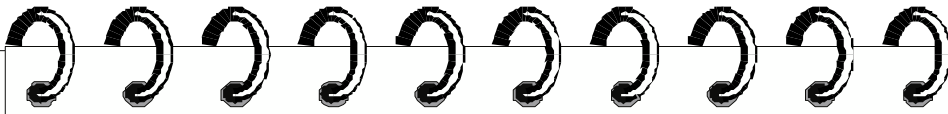
*Wheelchair users need to use the same facilities as other people do. Shops, restaurants, offices, and other buildings should be accessible. Many of us work and have disposable incomes, we like to enjoy ourselves as well. It is very unfair that we cannot enjoy the same privileges as other people.*

*In addition to the ordinary things which people enjoy we also want to enjoy the luxuries as well. We want to enjoy holidays, to visit places of interest, and be involved in the workings of our community. People in power should be aware of our needs and they should be serious about providing effectively for us.*

*I know that there are people who have other kinds of disabilities and they have pressing needs as well. It is up to the government to make sure that people with disabilities are properly catered for. I do not accept that the cost is too high or that only some people can be helped. We pay taxes and contribute to the wealth of the nation and should be able to expect fair and equal treatment.*

**Exercise**

1. Is your school or college fully accessible for someone who uses a wheelchair?
2. Make a list of public buildings in your area which are not wheelchair accessible.



*I am very determined to make sure that I can live a full and complete life. Just because I am disabled does not mean that I should feel sorry for myself. And not only that, I do not want other people to feel sorry for me either. If anybody treats me like a child or treats me any less than I am then I will make sure that they don't do it a second time. I am fed up with people who think that disability means stupidity!*

*Some people think they are doing good when they offer to do voluntary work in the day centre where I go sometimes. And some of them do good work. But I for one will not sit there and smile if I am being patronised by these do-gooders. Yes, disabled people do need help sometimes but that does not mean that we can be treated any differently to how so called normal people are treated.*

*I am attending a retraining course and hope to find a job at the end of it. I have applied for a local authority grant to help me adapt my kitchen and bathroom. I have also booked a 3 day horse trekking holiday in the Lake District. I say to all disabled people, get up and go for it. Do not wait to be told and do not look for others to guide you. This is your life and you must make the most of it because no one else will do it for you.*

Exercise

1. What do you think of the attitude of this person? Why?
2. What do you think this person would achieve if he or she were:
  - z more aggressive,
  - z less aggressive?
3. Should disabled people be more assertive and fight for their rights more? What would other people think of disabled people if they were more assertive?
4. What is the difference between **aggressive** and **assertive**?

