

MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS FROM WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

**Water and Sanitation for all:  
practical ways to improve accessibility for disabled people**

**4. Disability and attitudes in developing countries**

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**Introduction**

“EVERYBODY’S fighting some kind of stereotype, and people with disabilities are no exception. The difference is that barriers people with disabilities face begin with people’s attitudes — attitudes often rooted in misinformation and misunderstandings about what it’s like to live with a disability. *(Anonymous)*

Physical barriers are easy to see, such as steps into a building or an inaccessible toilet, and as such it is more straight forward to find a solution to overcome such a barrier. Barriers of attitude however, cannot be seen and vary considerably between individuals, countries and cultures. Overcoming these kind of barriers requires a change in mindset which takes time and education. However, if we all take a responsibility as individuals to learn and understand and change our own mindsets from within, then we are in a better position to change the mindsets of others.

**Top 10 Myths**

- **Myth 1:** People with disabilities are brave and courageous.  
Fact: Adjusting to a disability requires adapting to a lifestyle, not bravery and courage. Don’t over-generalise.
- **Myth 2:** All persons who use wheelchairs are chronically ill or sickly.  
Fact: The association between wheelchair use and illness may have evolved through hospitals using wheelchairs to transport sick people. A person may use a wheelchair for a variety of reasons, none of which may have anything to do with lingering illness.
- **Myth 3:** Wheelchair use is confining; people who use wheelchairs are “wheelchair-bound.”  
Fact: A wheelchair, like a bicycle or an automobile, is a personal assistive device that enables someone to get around.
- **Myth 4:** People with disabilities are more comfortable with “their own kind.”  
Fact: In some countries, grouping people with disabilities in separate schools and institutions reinforces this misconception. Integration is so important to eradicate misconceptions, whether these are around issues of non-

disabled/ disabled, black/white, male/ female. It is up to us to eradicate segregation and encourage a society that caters for all.

- **Myth 5:** People with disabilities always need help.  
Fact: Many people with disabilities are independent and capable of giving help. If you would like to help someone with a disability, ask if he or she needs it before you act.
- **Myth 6:** Non-disabled people are obligated to “take care of” people with disabilities.  
Fact: Anyone may offer assistance, but most people with disabilities prefer to be responsible for themselves. Using the terminology ‘take care of’ adds insult to injury.
- **Myth 7:** Curious children should never ask people about their disabilities.  
Fact: Many children have a natural, uninhibited curiosity and may ask questions that adults consider embarrassing. But telling off curious children may make them think having a disability is “wrong” or “bad.” Most people with disabilities won’t mind answering a child’s question.
- **Myth 8:** The lives of people with disabilities are totally different from the lives of non-disabled people.  
Fact: People with disabilities go to school, get married, work, have families, do laundry, grocery shop, laugh, cry, pay taxes, get angry, have prejudices, vote, plan and dream like everyone else.
- **Myth 9:** Most people with disabilities cannot have sexual relationships.  
Fact: Anyone can have a sexual relationship by adapting the sexual activity. People with disabilities can have children naturally or through adoption. People with disabilities, like other people, are sexual beings.
- **Myth 10:** There is nothing one person can do to help eliminate the barriers confronting people with disabilities.  
Fact: Everyone can contribute to change.

**International Attitudes**

The following are some attitudes that can be specific to an individual country and that the author has experienced in his travels.

- People with physical disabilities also have a mental disability or a speaking disorder!
- **Action** – If you have a question to someone in a wheelchair, always speak directly to them, not through their pusher/assistant! . Whether non-disabled or disabled, assume the other person has average intelligence until you find out otherwise!
- Disability is a direct result of the parents offending their God or their ancestors.
- **Action** – we need to educate religious beliefs that infringe on human rights.
- Disabled people are shameful to the family and must be kept away from society or killed at birth.
- **Action** – education about disability starts in schools, to change this cultural mindset and hopefully prevent anyone else with a disability from unnecessary suffering, rejection or early death.
- Using the same toilet as a disabled person may pass their disability onto others.
- **Action** – a disability is not necessarily a disease. We need to include disability issues in school curricula just as we are doing with gender issues.
- Disabled people cannot be integrated into ‘normal’ society.
- **Action** – Too often we hear of those that are ‘disabled’ and ‘normal’! Careless wording can send out incorrect messages. Integration is simple and does not have to cost any additional money provided there is an acknowledgement that facilities must be designed for all to use, and that forward planning, imagination and improvisation takes place.
- Speak up when negative words are used about disabled people. Others will not realize they are saying or doing wrong unless they are corrected.
- Speak directly to a disabled person –don’t deprive that person of a sense of self worth and dignity.
- Accept people with disabilities as individuals capable of the same needs and feelings as yourself.
- If you are in business, consider hiring disabled persons whenever possible. You will often find that they are more able than the able-bodied staff members in terms of commitment and ability to carry out tasks. Having a colleague with a disability can also create a more relaxed and enjoyable working environment.
- Encourage integration and participation of people with disabilities in community activities. Provide adequate facilities to cater for all.

**‘Only when everyone realizes that we are all equal, valued, and worthy will people with disabilities enjoy the same opportunities as everyone else.’** *(Anonymous)*

**Note:** The author uses a wheelchair himself and has encountered many different types of disabilities. He has been involved in advocacy on related issues throughout his career.

However, the main focus of his work is on the development of water and sanitation infrastructure for the rural poor in South Africa, whether able bodied or disabled. This demonstrates that a disabled person can indeed make a positive contribution to the society we live in as a whole, and assist in making this world a better place for all.

Let’s remove these barriers and free the potential!

### **Things you can do to remove barriers**

- Advocate issues around disability and challenge wrongdoings by individuals, religions and governments.
- Influence policies and legislation to ensure inclusion within education curricula.
- Ensure and advocate representation within different spheres of government and decision structures.
- Understand children’s curiosity about disabilities. Let disability not be a ‘taboo’ subject as this perpetuates misconceptions.

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