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Models of Disability: An Overview

Familiarize yourself with some of the ways in which disability has been framed throughout history, from outdated models to the current model upheld by disability rights activists.

Charity Model

People with disabilities are often treated as objects of charity and pity. The charity model is an older and outdated model of disability.

What it looks like: People in your community assume you will always need help and pity you. You are considered a burden requiring charitable resources for support.

Medical Model

Later, the charity model evolved into the medical model where people with disabilities were treated as sick and needing to be cured, fixed and cared for through medical intervention and therapy. Under the medical model, the experts on disability were considered medical professionals, such as doctors, nurses, therapists. This model, too, is outdated.

What it looks like: People in your community perceive you as “sick” because of your disability. Most services are focused on curing your disability or making you appear non-disabled, instead of making the environment more accessible. For example, wheelchairs may be provided, but the streets are not accessible.

Social and Human Rights Models

Based on a human rights paradigm, these models emphasize that disability-related problems stem from an inaccessible social structure, as opposed to the disability itself. These models focus on environmental and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with disabilities from having equal opportunities in their societies. Many disability rights activists today embrace social and/or human rights models to inform their work.

What it looks like: A person with a disability is able to attend a school, go to work, participate in community activities alongside non-disabled people, perhaps using disability-related accommodations or modifications that make the environment more accessible to them.

This article is part of the International Education Professional Pathway. (<https://miusa.org/exchange-professionals/international-education-professional-pathway/>) We have summarized the definitions of disability and the mental models that give rise to them, so now we can move on to the basics of interacting with and advising people with disabilities.

Previous: What is Disability
(<https://miusa.org/resource/tip-sheets/what-is-disability/>)

Next: Showing Respect by Being Direct
(<https://miusa.org/resource/tip-sheets/respect/>)

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- **Disability and Humanitarian Assistance** (<https://miusa.org/resource/tip-sheets/humanitarian/>)
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