

# COUNTERPOINT

## INTRODUCTION

Our previous booklets have examined attitudinal barriers facing disabled citizens. Negative and/or stereotyping attitudes often obstruct independent, dignified life-styles of disabled citizens. These attitudes often arise from fear or simple lack of knowledge about disability. Most importantly, however, these barriers go unrecognized and contribute to miscommunication.

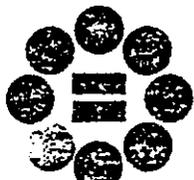
Some barriers which have not been addressed, but are equally important, are those stereotyping and/or negative attitudes held by many disabled people toward nondisabled people. Often stemming from negative experiences or lack of knowledge, these barriers also stand in the way of good communication between disabled and nondisabled people.

This booklet will deal primarily with attitudinal barriers facing nondisabled people: what the major barriers are, how to recognize them, and what you can do about them. We hope it will be helpful in breaking down the barriers to communication encountered by disabled and nondisabled people.

## WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."



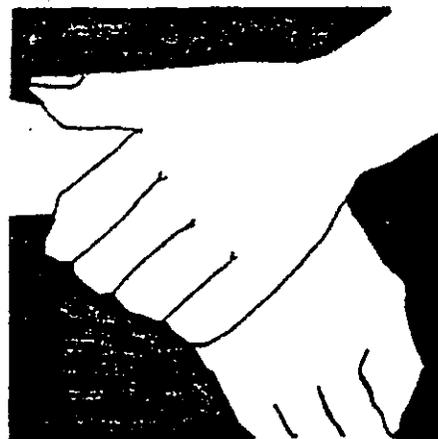
Rehabilitation Research Institute  
The George Washington University  
Washington, D.C. 20052

**MYTH:**

Disabled people can expect nondisabled people to help them.

**FACT:**

Society has a responsibility to provide equal opportunity to all citizens, including those with disabilities. On a personal level, as a matter of common courtesy most individuals will help each other if there is a need. But one cannot take that help for granted or put another person into a "step and fetch it" role. One can only state a need, ask for assistance, and thank the individual who gives it.

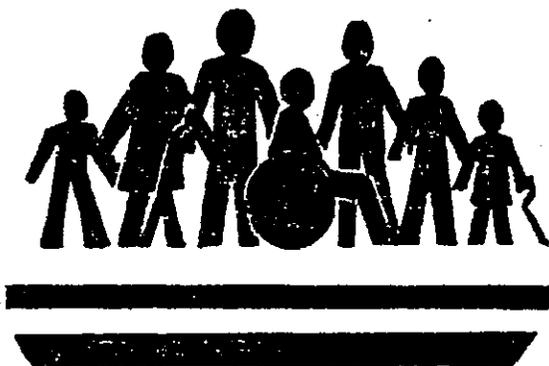


**MYTH:**

Nondisabled people are insensitive about disability and the lives of disabled people.

**FACT:**

Everyone will have some *disability* at some time. Many nondisabled people will have family members, business associates, friends, and/or spouses who are disabled. It is incorrect to assume that *all* non-disabled people are insensitive to disability issues.

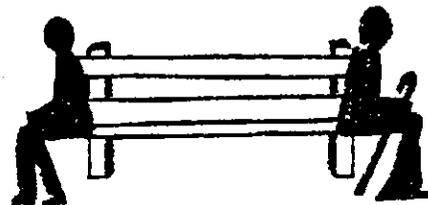


**MYTH:**

Nondisabled people are disgusted by disability.

**FACT:**

Because our society places such importance on youth and beauty, many nondisabled people have mixed emotions when they meet someone who is "different." What may be interpreted as disgust may actually be feelings of guilt, curiosity, fear or sympathy. A nondisabled person who fears saying the "wrong" thing to a disabled person may avoid communication. A disabled person may think (s)he is being shunned because of his or her appearance. This discomfort can be helped if disabled and nondisabled people see and interact with each other more often in work and social settings.



**MYTH:**

Able-bodied and disabled people have widely different goals.

**FACT:**

Disability cuts through all segments of society. Disabled people have different backgrounds, like other people. It is impossible to neatly separate the two groups and stereotype, based on disability or nondisability.



**MYTH:**

Nondisabled people think disabled people are happier being with "their own kind."

**FACT:**

Some nondisabled people do believe the above statement. For years disabled people were seen together because they attended separate schools, and had separate accessible facilities. They naturally socialized with people they met in these settings. But disabled people now are becoming integrated into regular schools, transportation, and social situations. As a result, nondisabled people are and will be seeing and meeting disabled people as individuals, not just as members of a group.

## WHEN YOU MEET A NONDISABLED PERSON....

1. It may be to your advantage to take the first step. Many nondisabled people feel unsure about how much importance should be attached to disability. They don't know whether to ignore it or mention it. If you bring the subject up first, you may all feel more at ease.
2. Answer questions about your disability if you feel comfortable about doing so. A lot of discomfort is caused by lack of knowledge about disability. Try to handle curiosity in a non-hostile manner. Hostility only stops communication and may reinforce negative attitudes about disabled people. Be open and honest.
3. If you need assistance, ask for it. If your request for help is accepted, tell the nondisabled person specifically what you need and explain how to do it. Be sure to thank the person for their help.
4. Don't automatically assume that a nondisabled person is insensitive about your disability. A nondisabled person who asks a wheelchair user to go dancing is not necessarily being ignorant. You may be setting limitations on yourself by not trying new things.
5. Be assertive about your needs and your rights. Able-bodied people are not mind-readers. Many non disabled persons are unaware of the implications of disability and will be cooperative if you explain your rights to equal access and how they can be attained.
6. Be patient with nondisabled people's limitations. Often they are very nervous that they'll say or do the "wrong thing" around disabled people. In their concern, they will sometimes react inappropriately. All people make mistakes. Try to deal with embarrassing situations with humor and grace.
7. Keep communications open during embarrassing or difficult situations. Try to work through problems, not ignore them.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Participate in community activities, task forces, planning committees and professional associations. The more involved you become, the more aware nondisabled people will be of the needs of disabled citizens.
2. When you see a television show portraying disabled people "like everyone else," write a complimentary comment to the producer and to the station carrying it.
3. When you read or view a presentation portraying disabled people in a negative or condescending way (sick, hostile, maladjusted, nonproductive), write a letter stating your opinion to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.
4. Remember that, like it or not, you will often be an example for your whole minority group. If you are comfortable with your disability, it will show and will help others to be more comfortable with disabled people in the future.
5. Learn your legal rights. Try to make people more aware of the legal rights of disabled people.
6. Explain policies and legislation to nondisabled people.
7. Be active. Go to restaurants, social events, recreational centers, conventions, even if it takes a little effort. Once nondisabled people realize that disabled citizens can be part of the crowd, a lot of barriers will be removed.
8. Write to government officials, policy-makers and administrators about your views on issues that involve you. It is one of your responsibilities to educate the nondisabled public about your concerns. Make your presence known, and remind them that you vote and pay taxes, as do all citizens.
9. Politely refuse help if you don't need it.
10. Listen and be sensitive to the opinions of nondisabled people. Keep in touch with their ideas and let them know you want to hear what they have to say.
11. Keep cool.

Section: Exceptionalities  
 Topic: Attitudes Toward People  
 Without Disabilities

Assignment # \_\_\_\_\_  
 Due Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name \_\_\_\_\_

Below are three scenes that typically occur between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. Read each situation, and on a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions:

1. Which myths and attitudinal barriers do you recognize?
2. If you were in the situation, how would you react to the person who has a disability?
3. Suggest a reason that the person with a disability may respond to others in this manner.
  1. Fran, who has had one arm amputated, is at a party at a friend's house and an attractive young man strikes up a conversation with her. They find they have several mutual interests. As the evening draws to a close, the man asks Fran if she would go to dinner and dancing with him the following weekend. Fran abruptly declines. She later asks the hostess, "What's with that guy I was talking to? He asked me to go out on a date with him. Does he like to "help the poor cripples" or does he just get a kick out of disability?"
  2. Tom is an elementary school teacher who has a disability. He is busy preparing for Parents' Day. He is very nervous about the fact that his students' parents don't know that he has a disability, and he expects shocked reactions from them. When the first set of parents arrive, they immediately express their concern about their son's reading problem and ask Tom's advice about how they can help out at home. Tom is amazed that they didn't make an issue of his disability.
  3. Beth is a nondisabled person who has been working in her small town to attain equal rights for citizens with disabilities. She and a number of local people with disabilities have formed a committee and have brought about needed change in the community. Beth is invited to speak at a large community meeting in Metropolis to explain how her small group was organized. In the middle of her speech she is interrupted with the comment, "What right do you have to speak for people with disabilities? You don't understand what it's like to have a disability! We don't want able-bodied people meddling in our affairs."

#### Optional Questions

1. Think about personal experiences you have had. Describe the myths and facts that were involved. Can you suggest solutions or more appropriate ways to handle the situation?
2. Think about the student's in this class. Are there any "myths" being acted out? What can you do to help teach appropriate attitudes?