

What is the social model of disability?

What do we think about when we use the word disability or hear other people use it? What do we think when we say a client is disabled?

Many of our clients have long term health conditions, and have physical or mental impairments. Sometimes a health condition or impairment means we cannot easily do all activities – in fact most of us can't do everything.

The way society has typically defined disability over the centuries makes the disabled person and their impairment the problem to overcome or fix, so it's sometimes called the individual model. It defines the problem of disability as the individual, the impairment (or condition) they have, and the things they can't do.

The 'social model of disability' was developed by disabled people and suggests that our health limitations or impairments (physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological) are not always disabilities in themselves. The practical barriers, negative attitudes and social exclusion that individuals experience as a result of their individual differences can and do play a significant part in disabling people.

To put it simply, it's not people who are themselves 'disabled', but they are disadvantaged or disabled by the ways we expect people to participate in society. The 'problem' of disability is that society is set up to meet the needs of non-disabled people. It's not designed to suit people who have impairments.

Individual model	Social model
<i>John is a person with a disability- he suffers from Multiple Sclerosis (MS): he can't walk, so he can't take the bus.</i>	John's impairment is MS - he is disabled because most buses are designed only to suit people who can walk, so he is disabled by inaccessible buses.
<i>Amy's disability is blindness, she can't see, so she can't get a job</i>	Amy is blind. She is disabled because of the myths and prejudices employers have about blind people.

Under the social model, solutions are much more practical and viable – make all buses properly accessible, challenge employers' myths and prejudices.

There is sometimes confusion about which model and terms we should use. Advisers should use the Equality Act 2010 definition when they give advice about disability discrimination rights, or the relevant definition that applies when advising on benefits or parking. We should all use the social model of disability to help us understand how our disabled clients experience disadvantage, so we can help them to challenge that.