

## **Definitions of Disability**

**Summarized from an online article from [disability.ie](http://disability.ie), written by Alan Moyne**

### **The Medical Model of Disability**

Under this model of disability, an individual's inability to join in society is seen as a direct result of their disability and not as the result of features of our society which can be changed.

When people such as policy makers and managers think about disability in this way they tend to concentrate their efforts on `compensating` people with impairments for what is `wrong` with their bodies by, for example, targeting `special` benefits for them and providing segregated `special` services for them.

The medical model of disability also affects the way people with disabilities think about themselves. Some individuals with disabilities may internalize the negative message that all individuals who have a disability issue stem from not having `normal` bodies. Individuals with disabilities, their parents and guardians can be led to believe that their impairments automatically prevent them from participating in social activities.

This attitude can make individuals who have a disability less likely to challenge their exclusion from mainstream society.

### **The Social Model of Disability**

The social model of disability makes the important distinction between `impairment` and `disability`.

The social model has been worked out by individuals who are disabled who feel that the medical model does not provide an adequate explanation for their exclusion from mainstream society - because their experiences have shown them that in reality most of their issues are not caused by their disability, but by the way society is organized.

In a social model of disability the key definitions are:

**Impairment** - An injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a long term effect on physical appearance and/or limitation of function within the individual that differs from the commonplace.

**Disability** - The loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers.

In this model, the individual model definitions of impairment and disability are combined as `impairment`. This means that both the cause of functional limitation and the functional limitation within the individual itself are separated from external factors.

Disability is shown as being caused by `barriers` or elements of social organization which take no or little account of people who have impairments.

It follows that if individuals who are disabled are to be able to join in mainstream society, the way society is organized must continue to change. Removing the barriers which exclude people who have a disability can bring about this change.

**Barriers can be:**

- Prejudice and stereotypes
- Inflexible organizational procedures and practices
- Inaccessible information
- Inaccessible buildings; and,
- Inaccessible transport

Also, disabling barriers experienced in the past can continue to have an adverse effect.

For example, individuals who attended segregated schools may have gained lower academic qualifications than their non-disabled peers, simply because their `special` school failed to provide a proper mainstream curriculum.

These barriers have nothing to do with individuals. They are created by people which means it is possible to remove them.

A social approach to disability can be taken by identifying and getting rid of the disabling barriers which are within the community's control such as teaching practices and curriculum design.