
Disability and psychosocial disability

Step 1 - Disability and psychosocial disability

To understand psychosocial disability related to a mental health condition, it is helpful to first explore the meaning of 'disability'. This video gives a quick summary of people's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

What is a disability?

A disability can affect the way a person uses their body or brain, as well as their ability to do things in their environment. A disability can be a:

- Sensory disability like being deaf
- Physical disability like a spinal cord injury
- Intellectual disability where people have difficulty learning, or
- Psychosocial disability from a **mental health condition** (which can be a lot harder to 'see' or understand).

There are different ways of understanding what a disability is, mainly the social model and the medical model.

1. Social model

In this model, 'disability' is caused by other people in society not understanding the unique challenges someone faces. The social model sees 'disability' as the interaction between people living with an impairment and an environment filled with challenges, such as physical barriers and other people's attitudes. The social model supports the rights of people living with a disability to fully participate on an equal basis with others.

2. Medical model

In this model, 'disability' is a health condition. Disability is mostly seen as a problem of the individual, not the environment. This model focuses on what a person cannot do.

The social vs medical perspectives

Here is an example of how these two models view the same challenge.
Someone that is born with no legs:

- the medical model of disability would say the disability is not having legs.
- the social model of disability would say that people without legs can't access community facilities because buildings, cars and streets are designed for people with legs. The

barriers in the environment result in disability. By changing the environment, the disability is reduced, e.g. by putting in wheelchair ramps, lifts and fitting cars with hand controls.

It helps if you understand both models of disability, so you can work with both medical and social services to get the support you need.

Remember, recovery is not just about a person changing. Recovery is also about the environment - our society - changing to be more accessible to all people. This also includes seeing how differences can be strengths!

While a person may have differences that impact on their life, our focus is on enabling participation in society on an equal basis with others.

More on psychosocial disability...

Psychosocial disability means that the way you think, feel or interact with other people can form a barrier to fully participating in life.

Like the term disability, there are **two ways** of understanding a disability related to a mental health condition:

- psychosocial disability (based on the social model) and
- psychiatric disability (based on the medical model).

1. Psychosocial disability

The term 'psychosocial disability' comes from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

The word 'psychosocial' comes from two things:

1. Psychology - how you understand your experiences, the world, your emotions and feelings; and
2. Social - how people who experience mental health conditions are viewed by others, or what society defines as 'normal'.

Psychosocial disability mostly refers to social and economic impacts of living with a mental health condition, so things like earning money, buying things you need, or having relationships with friends or family. Psychosocial disability describes the challenges a person experiences that are related to their mental health condition, that affect their ability to participate in life.

2. Psychiatric disability

Psychiatric disability focuses on the impacts and treatments of medically defined symptoms, related to a mental health diagnosis.

The psychosocial vs psychiatric perspective

reimagine.today uses the term 'psychosocial disability' as it focuses on the social and economic impacts of living with a mental health condition.

While not everyone living with a mental health condition will experience psychosocial disability, those who do



are more likely to experience things like:

- unemployment
- poor health
- difficulty with relationships
- inadequate housing or homelessness.

The right support can significantly reduce the impact of psychosocial disability.

Useful links

[United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#)

[Unravelling Psychosocial Disability: A position statement by the National Mental Health](#)

[Consumer and Carer Forum on psychosocial disability associated with mental health conditions](#)