

COUNCIL OF ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES
ACCESSIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE ELEARNING

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT DISABILITIES

There are many myths, or inaccurate assumptions, about disabilities. Here are just a few attitudes that can constitute barriers for persons with disabilities. Have you encountered any of them yourself?

Inferiority

Because a person may be impaired in one of life's major functions, some people believe that the individual is a "second-class citizen". However, most persons with disabilities have skills that make the impairment irrelevant.

Pity

People feel sorry for the person with a disability, which tends to lead to patronizing attitudes. Persons with disabilities generally don't want pity and charity, just equal opportunity to make their own way and live independently.

Hero Worship

People consider someone with a disability who lives independently or pursues studies to be brave or "special" for overcoming a disability. Most persons with disabilities do not want accolades for performing day-to-day tasks. The disability is there, and the person has simply learned to adapt by using his or her skills and knowledge.

Ignorance

Persons with disabilities are often dismissed as incapable of accomplishing a task without the opportunity to display their skills. In fact, persons with quadriplegia can drive cars and have children. Some persons who are blind can tell time on a watch and visit museums. Persons who are deaf can play baseball and enjoy music. Persons with developmental disabilities can be creative and maintain a strong work ethic.

The Spread Effect

People assume that a person's disability negatively affects other senses, abilities or personality traits, or that the total person is impaired. For example, many people shout at persons who are blind or don't expect persons using wheelchairs to be able to speak for themselves. Focusing on the person's abilities rather than on his or her disability counters this type of prejudice.

Stereotypes

The other side of the spread effect is the positive and negative generalizations people form about disabilities. For example, many believe that all persons who are blind are great musicians or have a keener sense of smell and hearing, that all persons who use wheelchairs are docile or compete

in Paralympic Sports (or the Paralympics), that all persons with developmental disabilities are innocent and sweet-natured, or that all persons with disabilities are sad and bitter. Aside from diminishing the individual and his or her abilities, such prejudice can set too high or too low a standard for individuals who are merely human.

Backlash

Many people believe that persons with disabilities are given unfair advantages, such as easier graduation criteria or work requirements. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* does not require special privileges for persons with disabilities, just equal opportunities.

Denial

Many disabilities are "non-visible", such as learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, epilepsy, cancer, arthritis and heart conditions. Accommodating non-visible disabilities can help talented students prepare for rewarding careers, keep valued employees on the job, and open doors for new employees.