

Who is Disabled?

Disability is defined as a health condition or physical impairment that prevents an individual from taking full advantage of life's opportunities such as education, vocation, recreation, and activities of daily living.

For the purposes of discussion: Using this definition, are the individuals in the following scenarios disabled? (Consider just the first bullet point, then the first two points, etc.)

- An individual with ALS cannot walk, talk, or personally perform any of the usual activities of daily living. He has only very limited volitional control of one finger.
 - This individual employs a powered wheelchair for his mobility.
 - This individual employs a speech output communication device to facilitate his communication.
 - The individual is Steven Hawking, often described as the smartest person alive.
- A runner is not good enough to compete in the Olympics.
 - The runner, Oscar Pistorious, has a double lower limb amputation.
 - He wears Cheetah Flex-Foot carbon fiber transtibial artificial limbs made by Ossur that enables him to run faster than his able-bodied competitors.
 - He has been disqualified from competing in the Olympics because his artificial legs give him an unfair advantage.
- A grade school child has an accident that severs the tip of his little finger on his left hand.
 - Because of this, he cannot continue playing his violin.
 - An artificial fingertip is fabricated that enables him to continue to enjoy playing.
- A group of very intelligent and motivated young adults don't have jobs.
 - They are an extreme financial burden to their families
 - They are under-educated, most with no current employment prospects
 - They are Stanford students
- A young woman has a devastating car accident that results in facial disfigurement.
 - She has plastic surgery and when the bandages are removed, she appears beautiful.
 - She lives in a closed society of disfigured people.
- Superman
 - Superman sitting next to a piece of kryptonite.
- An able-bodied intelligent child of ethnic descent
 - She cannot get a decent education in the segregated / poor / remote community in which she lives.
- A world-class professor is hired by Stanford University
 - He has organized an excellent education program
 - His overwhelming administrative responsibilities prevent him from full participation in his courses and relationships with his students and colleagues

- An individual of limited financial means has a severe disability for which there is no cure and there are no assistive devices available to restore lost functionality
 - Students have fabricated a new assistive device for this individual
 - A single crude prototype exists, but the device is not commercially available
 - The students form a company and manage to obtain venture capital to bring this device to market
 - The individual wants to obtain the product, but the health insurance company decides not to provide reimbursement for it
- A young girl lives in rural Afghanistan
 - Girls are not allowed to go to school
 - She dresses as a boy to attend

Questions for Contemplation

10. Are people with disabilities healthy?
11. Is a person who successfully employs an assistive device still considered disabled? What if it is visible like a wheelchair? What if it is implanted, like a pacemaker? What if it is commonly used, like eyeglasses?
12. In a marathon race, who crosses the finish line with the faster time - the elite runners or the wheelchair athletes?
13. Who, on average, has better attendance on the job - an able-bodied worker or her co-worker with a disability?
14. Are persons with disabilities really "suffering" or "afflicted"? Are wheelchair users really "confined"?
15. It was no secret that President Roosevelt had polio and used a wheelchair. Why was he never described as being disabled? How was his obvious disability hidden?
16. Is old age itself a disability? Is being young a disability? Is being different a disability?
17. Are individuals with disability typically considered in discussions about diversity? If not, why not?
18. Are people with phobias considered disabled? What if the fear of flying prevents an individual from working in his chosen profession? Was John Madden's bus then considered a "job accommodation"?
19. What do you make of this true situation? A young Stanford physician in the radiology department was seriously injured in a bicycling accident. Through therapy, he was able to recover some use of his arms and legs. He is now able to stand, but not to walk. He uses a Segway to get around - it makes him feel "less handicapped". However, he is incessantly mocked and made fun of. Some have gone so far as to try to push him off of it - all because he does not look disabled.
20. Jerry Seinfeld asks, "What's the deal with handicapped parking at the Paralympics?"