

# Understanding Psychosocial Disability

From the website *Reimagine; mental health, recovery and the NDIS*

<https://reimagine.today/step-1/disability-and-psychosocial-disability/>

## What is disability?

A disability can affect the way a person uses their body or brain, as well as or 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 learning difficulty, or
- Psychosocial disability from a **mental health condition** (which is a lot harder to explain or understand).

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

### 1. Social model

In the social model of disability, 'disability' is mostly caused by other people and communities not understanding your unique differences or challenges.

The social model sees 'disability' as the result of the interaction between two things:

- people living with impairments (for example a medical condition or a physical difference) and
- an environment filled with challenges and barriers (physical, other's attitudes, communication and social).

The social model of disability has a different perspective to the medical model of disability.

### 2. Medical model

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

## The social vs medical perspective

This is an example of how the two models have different perspectives of the same challenge.

If someone 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 who have no legs can't easily access the community because buildings, vehicles and streets are designed for people who do. The barriers in the environment result in disability. By changing the environment (putting in wheelchair accessible ramps, lifts and building cars with hand controls for example) the disability is reduced or removed.

reimagine.today supports both models of disability because when health and social services work together with a person, to support them to be included in their community, you can achieve a meaningful and contributing life. However, recovery is not just about the person changing. The social model puts the focus on the environment (i.e. society) as the barrier and wants it to change, allowing a person's differences to become less limiting and even be a strength!

The social model does not deny that a person has differences, or that these differences have an impact on their life, but aims to enable them to participate in society on an equal basis with others. It supports the idea that people living with a disability have a right to be fully participating citizens on an equal basis with others.

## What is psychosocial disability?

Psychosocial disability means that how you think, feel and interact with other people cause you to have barriers to (or stop you from) 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 Persons with Disabilities. The convention is important as it is about the human rights of people living with disabilities.

The word psychosocial refers to the interaction between:

- Psychology – for example your way of understanding your experiences, the world, your emotions and feelings; and
- Social – for example the ways that mental health difficulties are viewed by other people, ways people who experience mental health conditions are viewed by others, or what society and culture define as standard.

Psychosocial disability mostly refers to the social and economic consequences related to a mental health condition. In other words, your ability to do things like earn money, buy things you need, have good friends or have a family of your own. It is used to describe the challenges, or limits, a person experiences in life that are related to their mental health condition. It sees these challenges and limits, or impairments, as disabilities that can affect a person's ability to participate fully in life.

## **2. Psychiatric disability**

Psychiatric disability mostly 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 because it focuses on the social and economic barriers associated with a mental health condition rather than focusing on the person as a problem.

While not everyone living with a mental health condition will experience psychosocial disability, those who do are much more likely to experience significant disadvantages including:

- unemployment
- poor health

- poor relationships
- poor housing and homelessness.

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