Factsheet

The Social Model of Disability

Inclusion London

Translated into Easy Read

The Social Model shows how disability is something that is made by society. People are disabled by a number of barriers. These are barriers in the way things are organised or planned and they are barriers that stop people from getting around. There are also barriers that are put up because of the way that people think about disability.

We can change and get rid of these barriers. The Social Model tells us in a good way what the problem is and how to fix it. It takes us away from blaming the person for things that they cannot do. It says that **impairment** is and always will be part of society. This then means that the only real thing to do is to plan and organise society so that it does not leave out disabled people.
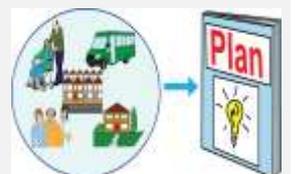
—— **Barbara Lisicki, 2013**

Impairment: there are different types of impairments, some affect the way that a person can move and get around. Others affect how a person can see or hear. Impairments can also affect the way that a person speaks, makes decisions or remembers things.

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Introduction

The aim of this Factsheet is to give the person reading this, some information about the Social Model of Disability. It will also give an idea of what the Social Model of Disability means for us as Disabled people as well as for society.

It is important to say that the word 'model' is a word that means a way of thinking or an idea. There are a number of different 'models' of disability, they are written about later in this factsheet. These models look at disability in very different ways. The Social Model can change and most of the time it does not give the perfect answer.

A lot of the time this type of model is difficult to use in real life examples. The Social Model of Disability was never made to be a perfect way of explaining disability. It was made to explain Disabled peoples' experience in society and as a way of pushing for change.

What is powerful about the Social Model is that it does show the real life experience of Disabled people. It is a different and easy to use way of stopping Disabled people from being put down and left out. With this model, Disabled people do not have to change who they are to get the same rights and opportunities as non-disabled people.
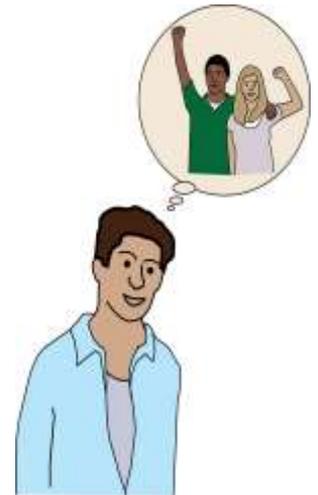
At the Start of the Social Model

In the 1960s and 1970s Disabled people started to ask questions about their experiences and why so many Disabled people were in **institutions** and left out.

Institutions: these are places where Disabled people were sent to live, which were usually far away from their homes.

Disabled people started to talk about and understand their experiences. They started to ask questions about the way that society thought about Disabled people. They also started to ask questions about what society thought Disabled people could and could not do, and how Disabled people should live.

Disabled people started to stand against discrimination and being left out. They started to speak up about not having choice and control in their lives. They also started to stand up to the bad way that people thought about Disabled people. This was the beginning of the 'Disability People's Rights Movement'.

At the beginning, a number of organisations were set up, such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, and the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities. At this time, these groups were very important because they were run by and for Disabled people. The groups meant that Disabled people could think in a political way and get out and campaign for big change.

In the beginning, many of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation members lived in institutions. They wanted to get out of these institutions to live like other people, with choice and control over how they live and who they live with.

They started a new way of thinking about disability which looked at it as a rights and equality issue, instead of a medical or charity issue. These groups started to tell people that they wanted choice and control over their lives. As well as this they started to talk about the changes in society that would need to happen for Disabled people to have the same rights and opportunities as others.

This way of looking at disability was then called the Social Model of Disability. Over the last 40 years the Social Model has been added to, had changes made and is always being looked at. However, it is still both the best way to explain disability and the best guide for making sure there is equality and real change for Disabled people.

Traditional Models of Disability

The Social Model of Disability was put together by Disabled people. It was done to stop Disabled people from being put down and left out. It was put together to go against other models that were around at this time.

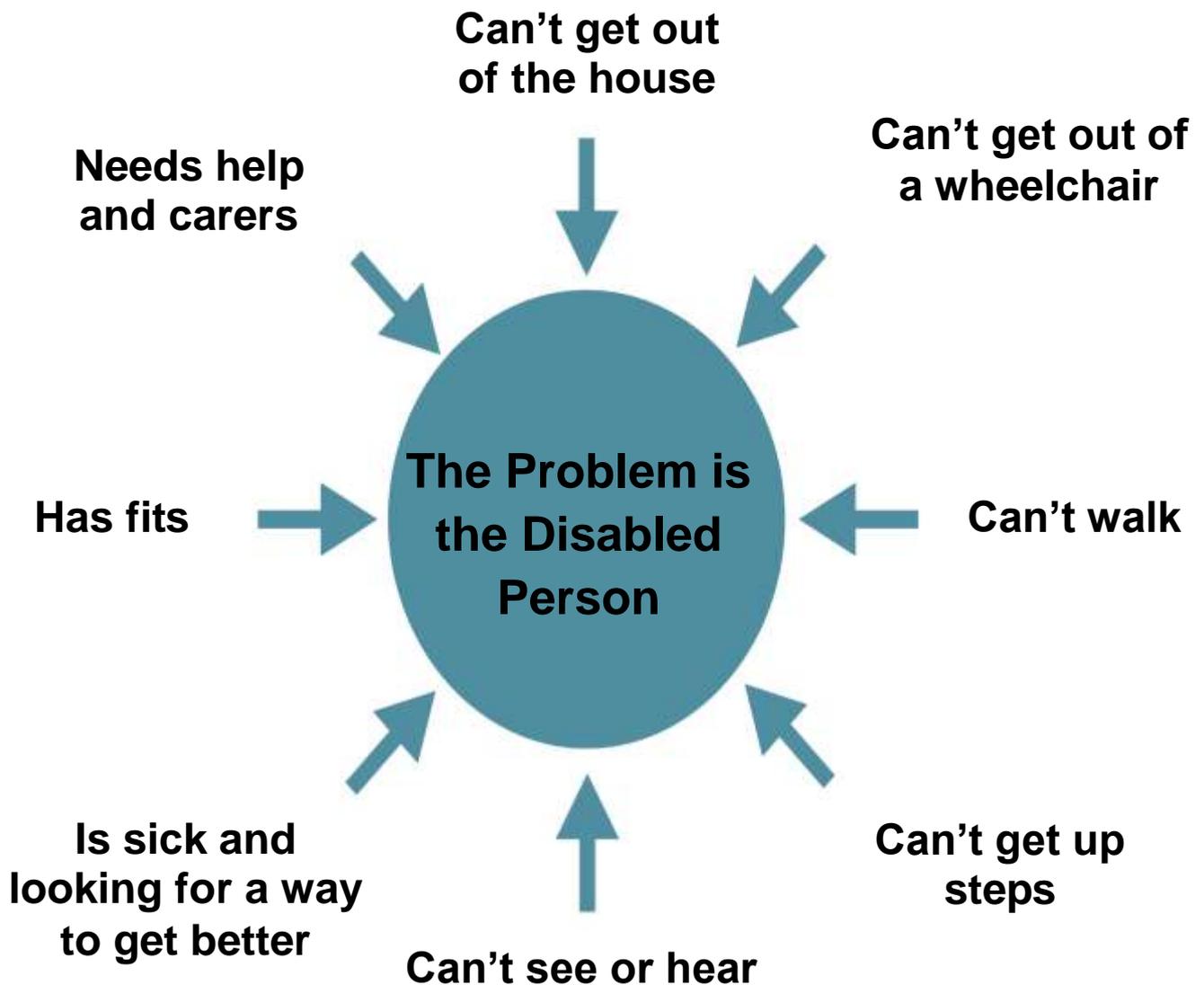These other models see disability as the person's medical problem that needs to be stopped, treated or kept in check.

Some of the models also see disability as something that needs charity and see Disabled people as people who have had bad luck and need to be looked after. The models see Disabled people as needing to use charity services that are different from the services used by other non-disabled people.

Here is a diagram of a Medical Model of Disability that shows some of the thinking of this Model.

Can't get out of the house

Can't get out of a wheelchair

Needs help and carers

Has fits

The Problem is the Disabled Person

Can't walk

Is sick and looking for a way to get better

Can't see or hear

Can't get up steps

The social model came about as a way of going against the Medical Model of Disability

The Medical and Charitable Models of Disability look more at what a Disabled person 'can't do' because of their impairment. For example: "She cannot walk, therefore she will never be able to work". A Medical Model of Disability will then look at trying to help the person to walk again through operations or equipment.
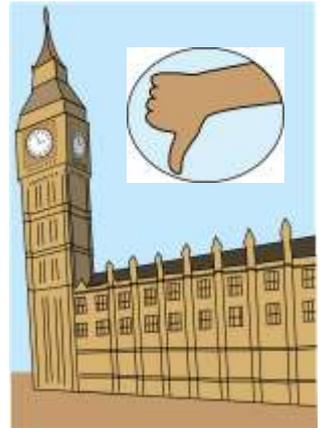
A Charitable Model of Disability will think that the person who cannot walk needs special charity services. A lot of the time these are different services than the services used by non-disabled people. These could be services such as day centres instead of work.

Both of these Models say that the 'problem' is the Disabled person. By doing this the model is saying that it is up to the Disabled person to sort out their problem. They are saying that it has nothing to do with how society is run and organised.

People still use the Medical and Charitable Models of Disability. The models can still be seen in the way that government and public organisations work. This happens even though these organisations say that they work to the Social Model of Disability.

The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability was put together by Disabled people over the last 40 years. It is a very different model to the Medical and Charitable models of disability.

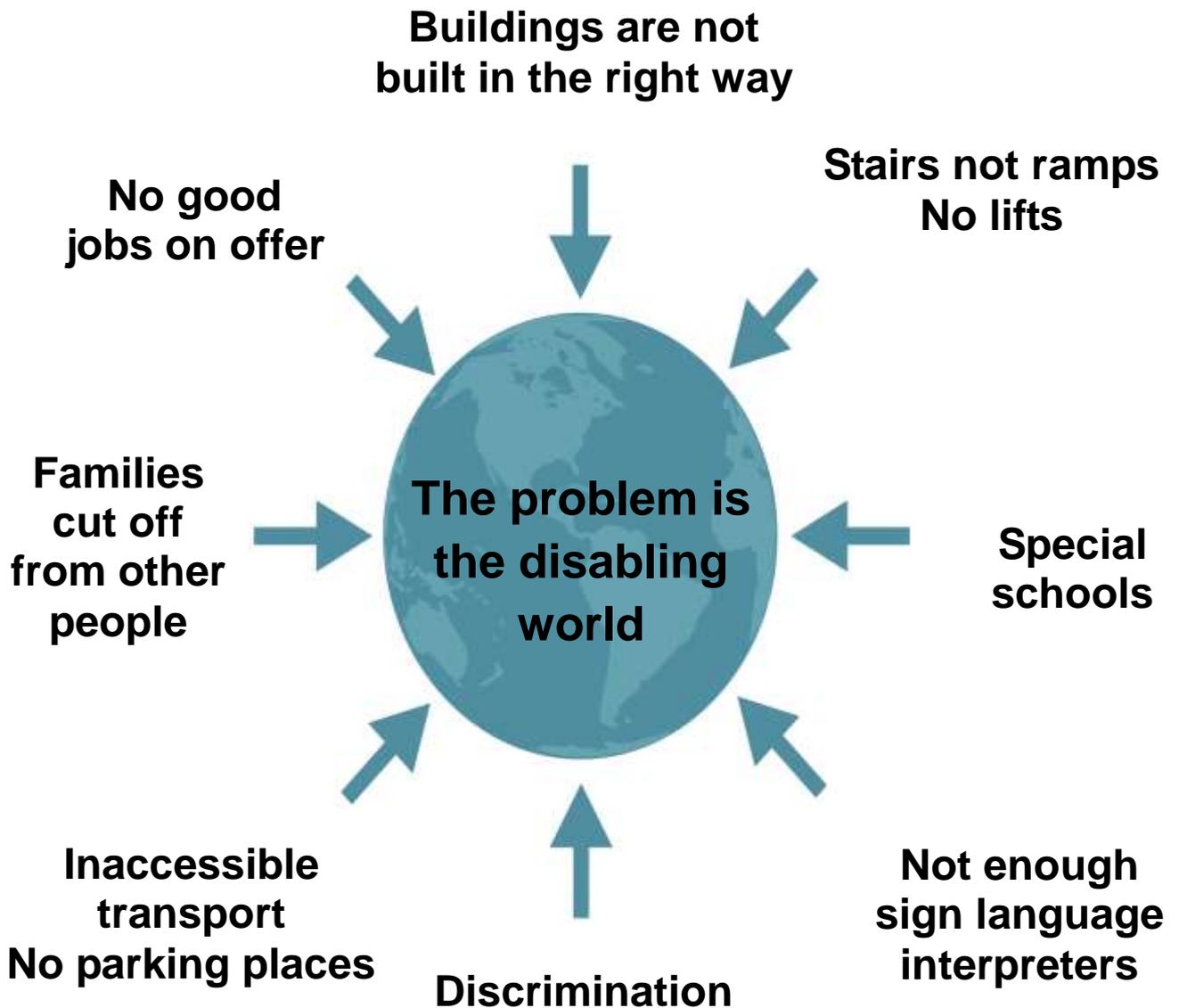
It says that people have impairments but that it is not because of the impairment that they have to deal with discrimination. Discrimination happens because of the way that society is run and organised.

The Social Model of Disability says that people with impairments are 'disabled' by the barriers in society. These barriers discriminate against Disabled people and push them out of society.

Here is a diagram of the Social Model of Disability that shows some of the thinking of this Model.

Buildings are not built in the right way

No good jobs on offer

Stairs not ramps No lifts

Families cut off from other people

The problem is the disabling world

Special schools

Inaccessible transport No parking places

Discrimination

Not enough sign language interpreters

The Social Model of Disability says that the reason that people with impairments are being put down and left out is the way that society is run and organised.

The Social Model not only points out that society is the cause of disability but, it also gives a way of explaining how society disables people with impairments. Sometimes this is called a "barriers-approach".

The Social Model is a guide that points out the barriers that disable people with impairments. It is also a guide that shows how to get rid of these barriers, how to make the barriers smaller or how to give support to get rid of the barriers.

Important barriers from a Social Model way of thinking:

Attitudinal barriers: these are barriers that come from the way that people think about Disabled people

These ways of thinking lead to discrimination and Disabled people being left out of society.

Some examples of this way of thinking are: thinking that some people with impairments can't work, can't be independent, can't have sex, shouldn't have children, need looking after, are like children, are dangerous, should not be seen because they are upsetting, or are **scroungers**, etc.

> **Scroungers:** this has been used to talk about Disabled people, and means that a person is living off other people.

Physical barriers: these are barriers that stop people from getting around and out and about

These are barriers that can be found in public places such as streets and buildings, as well as in houses.

Some examples of the many different barriers are stairs and steps, corridors that are not wide enough, kerbs, houses and toilets that are not accessible, bad lighting, not enough places to sit and broken lifts. These barriers all stop people from having equal access.

Information and Communication Barriers

These are barriers that come about when information and communication is not accessible.

For example when there are no British Sign Language interpreters for Deaf people, when there are no hearing induction loops, when information is not given in different accessible formats such as Easy Read, plain English and large font.

Barriers "disable" people and mean that people are pushed out of society, discriminated against and do not have the same opportunities as other people.

The Social Model points out the barrier which also means that it points out how to get rid of the barrier; for example:

Barrier: The **intercom** in a block of flats does not have a video camera, therefore Deaf and hard of hearing people who live there cannot see who wants to come into the building.

Intercom: when living in a block of flats this is used by the person wanting to come into the building so that they can speak to a person inside the building.

How to get rid of the barrier: Get an intercom with video for Deaf and hard of hearing people who live in the building.

Other benefits: Older people and other people who may feel at risk feel safer where they live.

From a Social Model way of thinking, there needs to be different support in place so that Disabled people can access real independent living and stop discrimination. These are known as the pillars of independent living, a pillar is an important part of something. The pillars are:

- The right accessible information
- Enough money to live on
- The right accessible health and social care support
- Accessible transport
- Full access to all places when out of the home
- Getting the right **aids and equipment**

> **Aids and equipment:** these are things that help a person to do things and get around

- Enough accessible housing
- Enough personal assistant support
- Enough inclusive education and training
- Equal opportunities for employment

- Enough **independent advocacy** and self-advocacy
- Enough **peer counselling**

Independent advocacy: this type of service makes sure that people can get and use their rights, have a stronger voice and have as much control as possible. Being independent means that the advocacy service is not linked to any person or organisation that is part of the person's local authority care and support decision.

Peer counselling: here, this is a way of disabled people supporting each other to talk about issues and experiences going on in their lives.

The Social Model of Disability is good as it looks at the barriers and how to get rid of these barriers. By doing this is gives a guide to inclusion and equality that is good for everyone in society, not just for Disabled people.
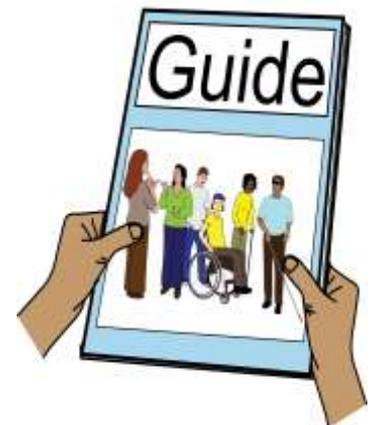
Impairment vs Disability

When looking at this from a Social Model way of thinking, there is a big difference between impairment and disability:

Impairment is a person's **physical, sensory or cognitive** difference. For example, being blind, experiencing bipolar, having M.S. or a learning difficulty.

Physical impairment: this affects the way that a person can move and get around.

Sensory impairment: these affect a person's senses, like touch, smell, being able to see and hear.

Cognitive impairment: this affects the way that the brain works. It might affect the way that people remember things, how they speak or how they make decisions.

Disability is the name for what happens in society when a person has an impairment. People with impairments are disabled by society. So, this means that disability is something that is made by society and can therefore be changed or gotten rid of.

Language: this means the words that people use

Language is one of the ways that we can see the way that society thinks. For a long time, the language and words used to talk about Disabled people have not been good.

They have shown a medical or charitable way of looking at disability. Some of the words used are: "handicapped", "cripple", "wheelchair bound", "retarded", "suffering from" and "special needs".

The Social Model does not use these words or this way of talking. It uses words that show Disabled people's experiences in a better way.

For example, "Disabled person" (not "handicapped" or "cripple"), "wheelchair user" (not "wheelchair bound"), "person with learning difficulties" (not "retarded"), "person with an impairment" (not "suffering from") and "access needs" (not "special needs").

Although the words we use to talk about things change over time, it is important to respect and use the language that Disabled people have chosen.

Disabled people or people with disabilities?

The Social Model way of thinking uses the words 'Disabled people'. People with impairments use this to make it clear that it is society that leaves us out and discriminates against us.

When using the words 'Disabled people' or 'Disabled person', we are not talking about what a person can or cannot do. We are talking about our shared experience of how society disables people with impairments.

The words Disabled people bring together a big and very different group of people with impairments. They come together to point out the reasons for discrimination, tell people about our shared experience and to make change happen in society.

Medical Model words such as "a person with disabilities" makes it sound like disability is the person's issue or something that the person has. This is wrong. It is the barriers in society that disable us, not our impairments.

The Social Model of Disability is very important in the fight for inclusion and equality for Disabled people. However, as with any model, there are some issues.
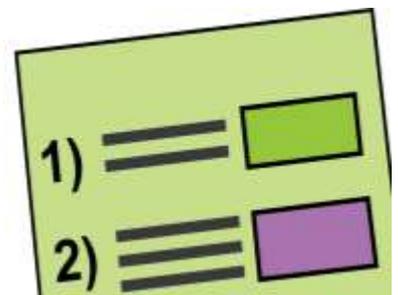
The two issues at the moment are:

1. The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability:

> **Biopsychosocial model:** this model says that a disability can be explained through looking at your body, the way you think and the way that you live your life.

This model of Disability looks at disability as the person's problem. The model was put together by **health insurance companies** in America.

> **Health Insurance Companies:** these are companies that pay for the cost of people's health care when they need to use it. People pay money to these companies each month, whether they are ill or not. This money is then what pays for a person's healthcare.

This model sees what the Disabled person is going through as their problem. For example this model would say that the main reason for Disabled people not having a job is the person's own bad way of thinking about work, which needs changing.

From this way of thinking, if a Disabled person does not find work, it is because they did not really want to get a job or they were not open to different types of work.

This is a scary way of looking at disability because this model says that the answer to disability equality is to take away rights and support. This is because it says that these kind of things stop people from getting out there and looking after themselves.

It also says that to get equality we need to stop seeing disability as something made by society. In the end it puts the blame on Disabled people for being left out, discriminated against and for being poor.

This model is getting more and more support in the UK. It was an important idea used by Atos[1] and is a big part of the Work Capability Assessment [2]. It is pushed for more and more by companies that work in health, employment and public services.

For example the Unum Insurance company pushes for more use of this model. They also tried to get this model to be seen as a good idea by paying for a research centre at Cardiff University.

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[1] Atos Healthcare - part of the UK office of the international company from Paris. Atos carried out the Work Capability Assessment for the DWP from October 2008 until March 2015. Their contract ended before it was meant to because of big worries about how well they were running the assessments.

[2] The Work Capability Assessment is the worrying test that was put together and used by the Department for Work and Pensions. It was used to decide whether people were able to get disability benefits or whether they should be seen as "fit to work".

2. Problems with the Social Model found by Disabled people

Disabled people are mainly worried about the problems that this model has in showing experiences and needs of some groups of Disabled people. For example some people have found problems with explaining the experiences of mental health survivors and people with long term health conditions.

We agree that the Social Model may not have been used to explain the experiences of these groups of people that in many cases are left out. However, we think that this is not a problem with the Social Model, but a problem in the way that it is being used by the Disabled people's rights movement.

We need to get much better at understanding and taking action on peoples different experiences, barriers and needs. We need to make sure that the Social Model can be used to understand more things in a better way, so that it is a tool for all of us.

We need to make sure that it is used in the best way possible to look at, understand and help get rid of the barriers that people with mental health issues experience. For example we need to use the Social Model in the way that it has been used for people with physical impairments.

We also need to do more to enjoy the diversity and differences we have as Disabled people. As well as this we need to enjoy the culture and community we now have. Both of these things will help to plan a different way of understanding society and people in general.

Further reading and links

The aim of this part is to give you some information about where you can start to find out more about the Social Model. It will also give you information to use in training and telling other people about the Social Model of Disability.

Moving Pictures and Still Pictures

Some people like pictures more than words. Pictures or images can be useful to show a point. They can also be useful for people who find it difficult to read or to understand information. Films and DVD clips can also help to show points. You can download and use some of these for free:

- **Cartoons:** These are cartoon pages made by Dave Lupton, a disabled person. The cartoons give funny images that make people think about the way they see Disabled people and the ideas that they have about Disabled people. www.crippencartoons.co.uk

- **Unlimited: Disability on Screen:** This looks at how disability is shown in British film and television across the last one hundred years. www.bfi.org.uk/archive-collections/introduction-bfi-collections/bfi-mediatheques/unlimited-disability-screen

- **Social Model Animation:** This is a short cartoon on YouTube by Geoff Adams-Spink. It plays with the idea of changing roles. It uses a town where only wheelchair users live so they have made a town to meet their needs. Their world changed when people who walk arrive. Very useful YouTube clip for training. www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s3NZaLhcc4

It is always good to try and get people to think about how the things being said can be used for other impairment groups. It is also good to point out where barriers are the same for different groups. This can be great for training.

- **Tom Shakespeare:** Talks about his ideas on the Social Model of Disability (in 2013) www.youtube.com/watch?v=oviU8D4r1nc

History of Disabled People

- **The Disability Archive UK:** This is at Leeds University. It is a place online where lots of information, research and information about campaigns is kept. It is organised by subject.

  Archive: this is when a lot of books, papers and information are brought together and kept in one place for people to use.

  It has a lot of articles and documents about the lives and experiences of Disabled people. It also has information about the beginning of the Disabled Peoples Rights Movement and the organisation that were set up at that time. This can be downloaded using Adobe Acrobat for free. http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library/
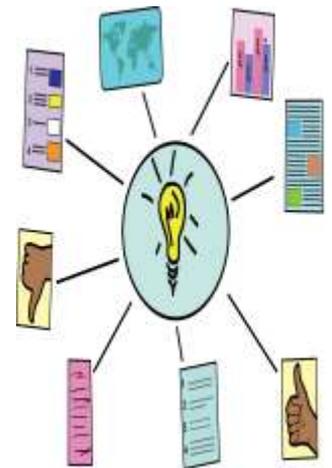
- **UK Disability History Month:** This is the website for UK Disability History Month. This event is run every year and is a way of looking at the history of our fight for equality and human rights. http://ukdhm.org/

- **Nancy McGuire:** This YouTube channel has a number of clips by this disability rights campaigner linked to Disability History Month. All of the clips are short and full of information. www.youtube.com/channel/UCiZ7zdCUiMAYFQ7fkiPEUcA?feature=watch

- **Historic England:** This website has pages on Disability History that are full of information. Some of the words used are not Social Model. However, it is still a site with a lot of information and some interesting areas. For example there is information on the medieval years (around the year 500 to 1500). www.historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history

Blogs and things being talked about now

Blogs: this is usually a page or a website on the internet where a person or group of people can write.

We would like to let you know that the ideas and opinions that are given on these websites may not be the same as those of Inclusion London.

- **Jenny Morris** is a person who has studied this area. In her blog she talks about a number of important issues about disability, rights and how people are seen in society.

  http://jennymorrisnet.blogspot.co.uk/

- **DPAC (Disabled People Against Cuts)** is a **grassroots** campaigning organisation, run by and for Disabled people. Its website is a good way of getting information about what is affecting disabled people now and campaigns that are going on. http://dpac.uk.net

Grassroots: these are organisations that are very in touch with what is happening in the lives of the people that they work with. They usually have lots of members that are a big part of their work.
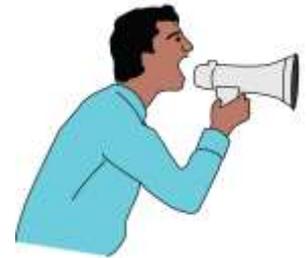
- **Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance** is a grassroots alliance of Disabled people and our organisations in England. http://www.rofa.org.uk/

- **Tom Shakespeare** is a disabled person who studies. In the past he has supported and been an important voice in the disability movement in the UK and internationally.

  In the early 2000s, he started to think again about the Social Model of Disability and said that the time had come to go past this model. We do not agree with what he says but we do think it is good to understand the points that he makes. http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Shakespeare-social-model-of-disability.pdf

  He has moved on and put together an "other" model of disability focusing on Human rights, which you can see him talk about on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oviU8D4r1nc

- **Victor (Vic) Berel Finkelstein (25 January 1938 – 30 November 2011)** was a disabled activist and writer. Vic is known as a person who was at the front of pushing forward the Social Model of Disability.

  He was an important person in understanding how Disabled people were pushed down. His writing gives very good information about how the Social Model came about. He is one of the writers whose ideas were used against the ideas of Tom Shakespeare. A summary of what he thinks can be found here. http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/finkelstein01a.html
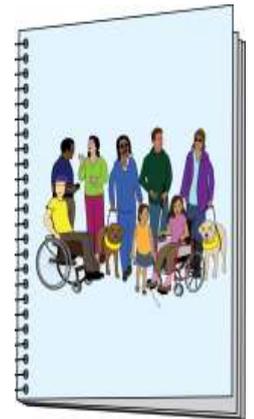
- **Carol Thomas** can be talked about as a **feminist Marxist**. She is also a good person to read about as the tries to look into disability issues from a feminist way of thinking. https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Sociologies_of_Disability_and_Illness.html?id=ushpQgAACAAJ

  Feminist: this way of thinking pushes for women's rights and equality.

  Feminist Marxist: this is a part of feminism which looks at how women are pushed down by how money in the country is run.

For more information, please contact:

Inclusion London

336 Brixton Road

London, SW9 7AA

Email: info@inclusionlondon.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7237 3181

SMS: 0771 839 4687

www.inclusionlondon.org.uk

Registered Charity number: 1157376

Company registration number: 6729420

Trust for London
Tackling poverty and inequality

LONDON COUNCILS

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