

THE REAL MEANING OF "MENTALLY HANDICAPPED"

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[Assignment: A word or phrase can mean different things to different people. Using any the rhetorical modes we have studied so far, write an essay in which you define an idea or term, making it clear to your reader why your definition is useful and important.]

If I asked the average person to picture a mentally handicapped person, his imagination would probably take him no further than physical appearance. He may draw into his mind the memory of a young boy with Down's Syndrome who he encountered at the local Kmart, or maybe he will conjure up an image of the girl he frequently sees at school who walks with her mouth wide open, looks a bit peculiar, and slurs her speech. If I then proceeded to ask him who a mentally handicapped person is, he would most likely be slightly puzzled and a little reluctant to respond to the question. His eventual answer would probably be something like "someone who was born without the same mental capabilities as a normal person, and therefore, completely dependent on other people." Although this idea seems to be a popular one, it is very inaccurate and uninformed.

One common misconception is that the meaning of mentally disabled is the same as or similar to brain dead. This notion is completely false. In fact, people with mental disabilities have varied levels of mental capacity. People with severe handicaps are indeed extremely dependent on others, and sadly, many of them will never exceed the mental level equivalent to that of a baby who is only a few months old. This group of handicapped people are in the minority. The next level of handicapped people are those with moderate disabilities. This is the group that the boy with Down's Syndrome and the girl who was mainstreamed into high school probably fit into. These people generally have the ability to read simple words and sentences, to write, and to complete elementary math equations. They are fully functional in public places and can do things such as iron their clothes, style their hair, and cook basic meals. The final level of mental handicaps is that which includes people with slight mental disabilities or major learning disabilities. The people who fit into this category often look and act like the average person. On an academic level they are slower learners than normal but are capable of succeeding in fairly high levels of English and math. Although they can achieve much more than the severely and moderately handicapped, they will never reach the levels of skill that people without handicaps are capable of. Contrary to what many people may think, not all handicapped people have the same degree of severity in their disabilities.

Mentally disabled people may not be book smart, but that does not mean that they are unknowledgeable. In fact, I would venture to argue that in some areas handicapped people know more than the average person. These areas are those that involve human relations and interactions. On the whole, the mentally handicapped always treat people with respect and are sure to mind their manners. Also, they are more open and sympathetic

to other people's feelings. When I was in high school, I peer-tutored a moderately disabled student named Tim. Tim really knows how to treat people. Whenever he speaks to a teacher, principal, or any other adult, he acts with courtesy and gives them the respect they deserve. When he is being criticized or scolded, he may become defensive but never rude. Tim also knows how to act in public and social situations. He is always sure to say please and thank-you, and "sir" and "ma'am" are permanent and well-used parts of his vocabulary. Tim is constantly concerned about the feelings of others. If someone is hurt, angry, or upset, he is always willing to help in any way that he can. Because he has little or no concept of selfishness, he constantly volunteers to assist others to the best of his ability. The mentally disabled are people who are generous and concerned about others, and they are respectful of authority and very conscious of proper manners.

Many people feel that handicapped people are of no use to the world and even consider them to be a burden on society. This idea shows how blind people can be. Disabled people are a great use to the world, and society actually benefits from them. People with disabilities can often teach others about themselves and about life. The existence of handicapped people makes "normal" people realize that they are fortunate to have the abilities that they do possess; they understand that their talents are gifts that should not be wasted or taken for granted. People who spend time with the handicapped realize that some people have to fight to accomplish the basic tasks necessary to maintain life. This realization makes them appreciate the abilities they are fortunate enough to have. Their contact with the disabled helps them understand that even though others may seem different, it does not mean they actually are. They realize that all people have the same feelings, same hopes, same dreams, and same wants. This knowledge helps them interact with others who may be physically or culturally different from themselves. The mentally handicapped benefit the world because they teach people about acceptance and appreciation.

Handicapped people are not who or what others perceive them to be. The mentally disabled are a group of people whose mental abilities range from very low to fairly high. They are excellent models of respect, manners, and sincerity. They can teach the rest of the population a thing or two about how to treat others and about how to make the best of what they have been given. This sum of characteristics is what makes up a mentally handicapped person. They are more than just someone who was born without the same mental capabilities as "normal" people, and they should be viewed as such. They should be valued for who they are and what they can do, not for who they are not and what they cannot do.