

The Complexity of Disability and Accessibility

Wexner Alumni Institute 2026



Goals

1.

- Develop an understanding of the complex nuances of disability-related language.

2.

- Explore the complexity of the social and medical models of disability.

3.

- Apply learning to navigate complexity in practice.



Agenda

- Welcome & Overview
- Framing Text
- Language Matters
- Models of Disability
- Practical Implications
- Questions and Conclusion



About Gateways

We strive to open the gates to Jewish education and community to every child, regardless of ability, through:



**Specialized
Jewish Education
Programs**



**Therapeutic and
Educational Services in
Jewish Day Schools**



**Professional
Development
Opportunities**

Kavanot - Intentions



Confidentiality



Make space for
all voices



Assume positive
intentions



Take an inquiry
stance



Megillah 24b

Rav Huna said: A priest whose eyes constantly run may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction.

Wasn't there a certain priest like this in the neighborhood of Rav Huna, and he would spread his hands and recite?
That priest was a familiar figure in his town.

אָמַר רַב הוּנָא: זַבְלָגוֹן
לֹא יִשָּׂא אֶת כַּפָּיו.
וְהָא הָהוּא דְהָוָה
בְּשִׁיבְבוּתִיהָ דְרַב
הוּנָא, וְהָוָה פָּרִיס
יְדִיהָ! הָהוּא דָשׁ
בְּעִירוֹ הָוָה.

Why does it matter whether the Kohen is a familiar figure in his town?

How does a community's perception of differences affect the ability of individuals with differences to fully participate?

Centering the Voices of People with Disabilities



Handicap Mentally
restricted Needs
Insane challenged

Wheelchair
person
bound
person
functioning
Personal with
Person with a
Neurological intellectual
Differently disabled
abled

Normal
Person with
Person with
Disability
Person





Language Matters

#SayTheWord

Instead of...	Say...
Special needs, differently abled	Disability
Handicapped person	Person with a disability
Handicapped parking/restroom	Accessible parking/restroom
Mentally challenged	Person with an intellectual disability
Wheelchair bound, confined to wheelchair	Wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair
Normal, regular	Neurotypical, nondisabled, does not have a disability
Low functioning / high functioning	Person with higher/lower support needs
Insane, psychotic, crazy	Person with mental illness/mental health disability

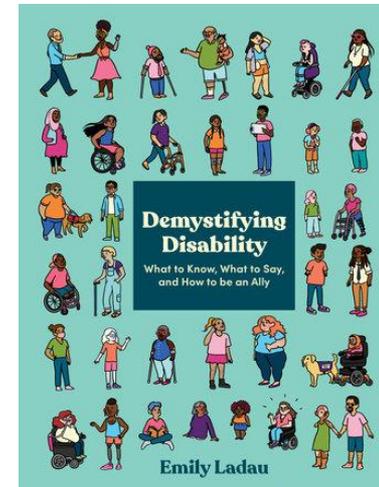


Emily Ladau

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@emily_ladau

I know nondisabled people mean well when they say things like “we should remove ‘dis’ because you’re people with abilities.” It’s true that I have abilities. But that doesn’t mean I’m not disabled. These aren’t mutually exclusive. Disability is part of my identity.



Person First vs. Identity First Language

Always defer to the individual's language preferences, when possible.

Person with Down syndrome

Autistic

Disabled person

Deaf person

Person with a learning disability

Person with blindness/low vision





Neurodiversity 101

Neurodivergent: Describes an **individual** whose brain functions differently from what society defines as “typical” or “normal.” May include Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Epilepsy, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or Cerebral Palsy (CP).

Neurotypical: Refers to an individual whose brain functioning aligns with societal expectations of what is considered “typical.”

Neurodiverse: Refers to a **group** that includes people with a range of brain-based differences leading to different ways of thinking, learning, communicating, and behaving.

Models of Disability

Medical Model

Disability results from medical diagnosis

Individual is disabled by internal factors (i.e. hearing loss, muscle weakness)

“Curing” the person

Deficit-focused

Social Model

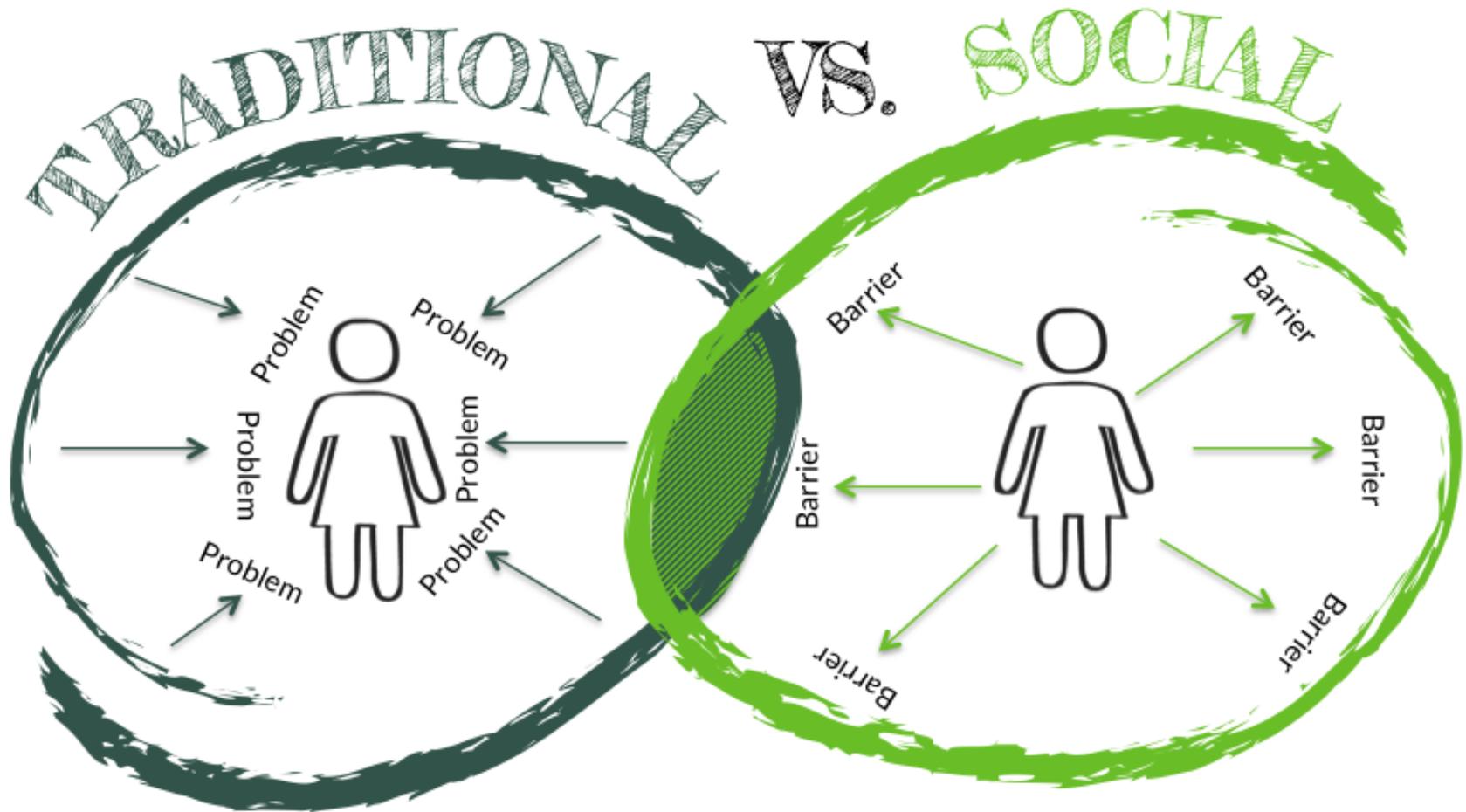
Disability results from interaction between the individual and their environment

Individual is disabled by attitudinal and architectural barriers

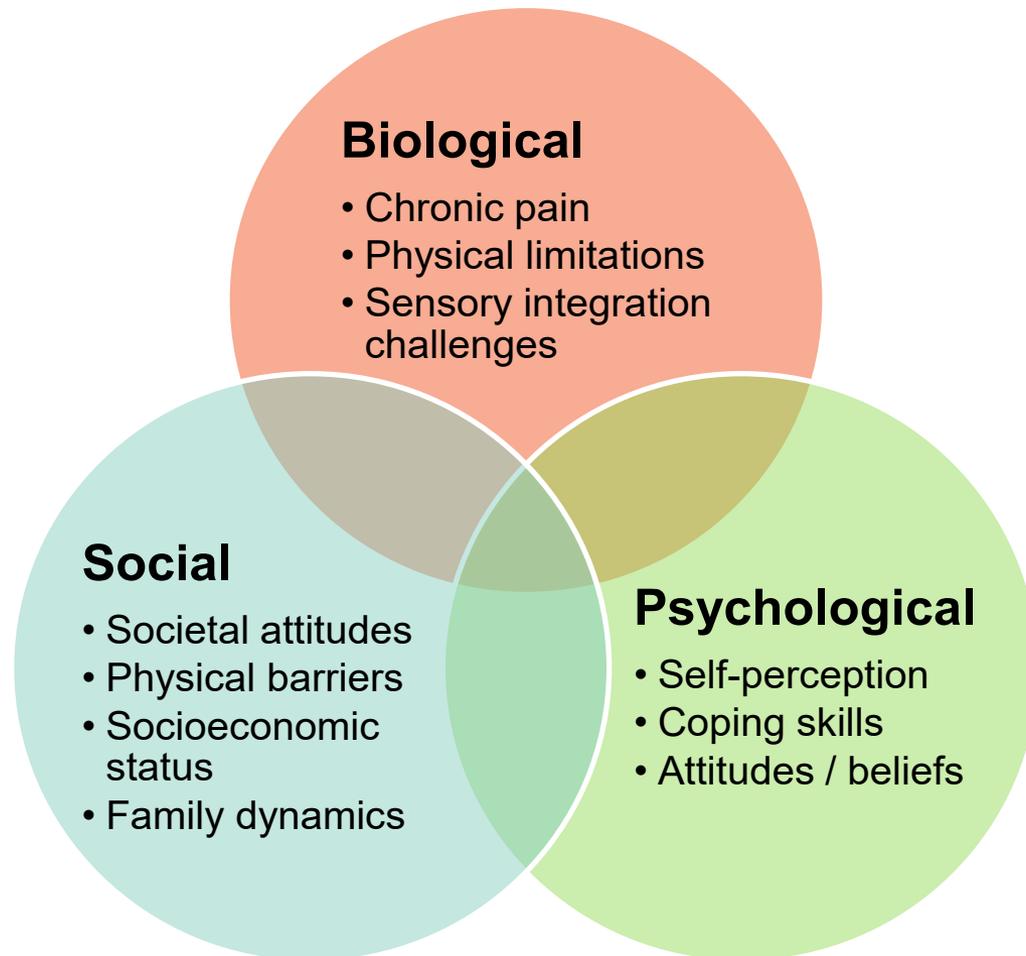
Adapting the environment

Community-focused

Where is the “problem”?



Biopsychosocial Model of Disability



Definitions of Disability

1. A person with a disability is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. (ADA)
2. A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions). (CDC)
3. Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support. (WHO)

Clearing a Path for Everyone





Practical Implications

- How do the ways we think about disability influence the accessibility of spaces or programs?
- Can you recall a time when language or attitude either created a barrier or fostered inclusion for someone with a disability?
- What changes could you make in the way you speak or think about disability that might make your community more welcoming?

Accessibility Checklist



Gateways Accessibility Checklist: A Planning Tool for Inclusive Conferences, Events, and Trainings

This checklist supports organizations in planning events that are accessible to all participants. Remember that accessibility needs differ across individuals, even if they have the same diagnosis—one approach does not fit all. Plan according to your participants' individual needs. This document offers practical suggestions across key areas of event planning, such as venue selection, registration, and accommodations, to ensure meaningful participation. This is a living document and should be updated as new accessibility considerations arise.

Pre-Planning

Budget

- Include a line item for potential accommodations:
 - American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters
 - CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) real-time captioning
 - FM Loop Systems: transmits audio directly to hearing aids/cochlear implants
 - Large print materials
 - Ramps for stage/dais



Competing Access Needs

- Low lighting can support people who are light-sensitive but can reduce access for people with low vision.
- Detailed, precise language supports some people's understanding, while plain, simple language supports others.
- Uncovered faces support lip reading for folks who are Deaf/HOH, while some who are immunocompromised may require masking for health and safety.

Questions?



Thank you!

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