

# Myths and Facts About People with Disabilities

Myths are roadblocks that interfere with the ability of persons with disabilities to have equality in employment. These roadblocks usually result from a lack of experience and interaction with persons with disabilities. This lack of familiarity has nourished negative attitudes concerning employment of persons with disabilities. It's important to learn the facts to remove these roadblocks and to stop discrimination. List below are some common myths and facts about people with disabilities.

**MYTH:** Sign language interpreters are required everywhere.

**FACT:** The ADA only requires that effective communication not exclude people with disabilities, which in many situations means providing written materials or exchanging notes. The law does not require any measure that would cause an undue financial or administrative burden.

**MYTH:** People who are deaf make ideal employees in noisy work environments.

**FACT:** Loud noises of a certain vibratory nature can cause further harm to the auditory system. People who are deaf should be hired for all jobs that they have the skills and talents to perform. No person with a disability should be prejudged regarding employment opportunities.

**MYTH:** All persons with hearing disabilities can read lips.

**FACT :** Lip-reading skills vary among people who use them and are never entirely reliable.

**MYTH:** People who are blind acquire a "sixth sense."

**FACT :** Although most people who are blind develop their remaining senses more fully, they do not have a "sixth sense."

**MYTH:** Accommodating workers with disabilities costs too much.

**FACT:** Reasonable accommodation is usually far less expensive than many people think. In most cases, an appropriate reasonable accommodation can be made without difficulty and at little or no cost. A recent study commissioned by Sears indicates that of the 436 reasonable accommodations provided by the company between 1978 and 1992, 69% cost nothing, 28% cost less than \$1,000, and only 3% cost more than \$1,000.

**MYTH:** The ADA requires extensive renovation of all state and local government buildings to make them accessible.

**FACT:** The ADA requires all government programs, not all government buildings, to be accessible. "Program accessibility" is a very flexible requirement and does not require a local government to do anything that would result in an undue financial or administrative burden. Local governments have been subject to this requirement for many years under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Not every building, nor each part of every building needs to be accessible. Structural modifications are required only when there is no alternative available for providing program access. Let's say a town library has an inaccessible second floor. No elevator is needed if it provides "program accessibility" for persons using wheelchairs by having staff retrieve books.

**MYTH:** All people with disabilities require job accommodations.

**FACT:** Studies have shown that less than one-quarter of employees with disabilities need accommodations.

**MYTH:** Under the ADA, employers must give people with disabilities special privileges, known as accommodations.

**FACT:** Reasonable accommodations are intended to ensure that qualified individuals with disabilities have rights in employment equal—not superior—to those of individuals without disabilities. A reasonable accommodation is a modification to a job, work environment or the way work is performed that allows an individual with a disability to apply for a job, perform the essential functions of the job, and enjoy equal access to benefits available to other individuals in the workplace.

**MYTH:** All persons who use wheelchairs are chronically ill or sickly.

**FACT :** The association between wheelchair use and illness may have evolved through hospitals using wheelchairs to transport sick people. A person may use a wheelchair for a variety of reasons, none of which may have anything to do with lingering illness.

**MYTH:** Wheelchair use is confining; people who use wheelchairs are "wheelchair-bound."

**FACT :** A wheelchair, like a bicycle or an automobile, is a personal assistive device that enables someone to get around.

**MYTH:** It is all right for people without disabilities to park in accessible parking spaces, or use their relatives placard when the relative is not with them.

**FACT :** Because accessible parking spaces are designed and situated to meet the needs of people who have disabilities, these spaces should only be used by people who need them.

**MYTH:** I can't do anything for someone with mental health needs.

**FACT:** You can do a lot, starting with the way you act and how you speak. You can nurture an environment that builds on people's strengths and promotes good mental health. For example:

- Avoid labeling people with words like "crazy," "wacko," "loony," or by their diagnosis. Instead of saying someone is a "schizophrenic" say "a person with schizophrenia."
- Learn the facts about mental health and share them with others, especially if you hear something that is untrue.
- Treat people with mental illnesses with respect and dignity, as you would anybody else.
- Respect the rights of people with mental illnesses and don't discriminate against them when it comes to housing, employment, or education. Like other people with disabilities, people with mental health needs are protected under Federal and State laws.

**MYTH:** People with mental illnesses are violent and unpredictable.

**FACT:** In reality, the vast majority of people who have mental health needs are no more violent than anyone else. You probably know someone with a mental illness and don't even realize it.

**MYTH:** Mental illnesses cannot affect me.

**FACT:** Mental illnesses are surprisingly common; they affect almost every family in America. Mental illnesses do not discriminate—they can affect anyone.

**MYTH:** Mental illness is the same as mental retardation.

**FACT:** The two are distinct disorders. A mental retardation diagnosis is characterized by limitations in intellectual functioning and difficulties with certain daily living skills. In contrast, people with mental illnesses—health conditions that cause changes in a person’s thinking, mood, and behavior—have varied intellectual functioning, just like the general population.

**MYTH:** Mental illnesses are brought on by a weakness of character.

**FACT:** Mental illnesses are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Research has shown genetic and biological factors are associated with schizophrenia, depression, and alcoholism. Social influences, such as loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various disorders.

**MYTH:** People with mental illnesses cannot tolerate the stress of holding down a job.

**FACT:** In essence, all jobs are stressful to some extent. Productivity is maximized when there is a good match between the employee’s needs and working conditions, whether or not the individual has mental health needs.

**MYTH:** Once people develop mental illnesses, they will never recover.

**FACT:** Studies show that most people with mental illnesses get better, and many recover completely. Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that having hope plays an integral role in an individual’s recovery.

**MYTH:** The ADA forces employers to hire unqualified individuals with disabilities.

**FACT:** Applicants who are unqualified for a job cannot claim discrimination under the ADA. Under the ADA, to be protected from discrimination in hiring, an individual with a disability must be qualified, which means he or she must meet all requirements for a job and be able to perform its essential functions with or without reasonable accommodations. No accommodation must be provided if it would result in an undue hardship on the employer.

**MYTH:** When there are several qualified applicants for a job and one has a disability, the ADA requires the employer to hire that person.

**FACT:** An employer is always free to hire the applicant of its choosing as long as the decision is not based on disability. If two people apply for a data entry position for which both speed and accuracy are required, the employer may hire the person with the higher speed and level of accuracy, because he or she is the most qualified.

**MYTH:** The ADA gives job applicants with disabilities advantages over job applicants without disabilities.

**FACT:** The ADA does not give hiring preference to persons with disabilities.

**MYTH:** The ADA is frequently misused by people with vague complaints or diagnoses.

**FACT:** If an individual files a complaint of discriminatory treatment, denial of accommodation or harassment under the ADA and does not have a condition that meets its definition of disability, the

complaint is dismissed. While claims by people with false or minor conditions may get considerable media attention, the reality is that these complaints are usually dismissed.

**MYTH:** The ADA protects employees who have difficult or rude personalities or are troublemakers.

**FACT:** Improper behavior in and of itself does not constitute a disability, and having a disability does not excuse employees from performing essential job tasks and following the same conduct standards required of all employees. The courts have consistently ruled that “common sense” conduct standards, such as getting along with co-workers and listening to supervisors, are legitimate job requirements that employers can enforce equally among all employees.

**MYTH:** Under the ADA, an employer cannot fire an employee who has a disability.

**FACT:** Employers can fire workers with disabilities under three conditions:

- The termination is unrelated to the disability or
- The employee does not meet legitimate requirements for the job, such as performance or production standards, with or without a reasonable accommodation or
- Because of the employee’s disability, he or she poses a direct threat to health or safety in the workplace.

**MYTH:** Disabilities are always visible.

**FACT:** Many people have invisible disabilities. Examples of invisible disabilities include learning disabilities, various medical disabilities, mental impairments and disorders, etc. Also, you may not be able to tell just by looking at a person that they are visually impaired or deaf, for example. Do not make assumptions about a person’s abilities. Ask them if they have any needs that require accommodation.

**MYTH:** There are special requirements and skills involved in interviewing people with disabilities for a job.

**FACT:** The interview would be conducted the same way for every applicant. If you want to know about the disability and how it might affect job performance, just ask.

**MYTH:** Disabled people cannot make their own decisions because they might make a mistake.

**FACT:** Everyone should have the right to make decisions for them, even wrong ones.

**MYTH:** You have to speak loudly to most disabled people because they might have difficulty talking.

**FACT:** People get confused about how to communicate with a people with a disability; they get the disabilities mixed up.

**MYTH:** We have to talk for the disabled because they’re incapable.

**FACT:** People who take over for another person deprive that person of a sense of self-worth and dignity.

**MYTH:** It will be difficult to supervise employees with disabilities.

**FACT:** A Harris poll found that 82% of managers said employees with disabilities were no harder to supervise than employees without disabilities. Employees with disabilities should be held

accountable to the same job standards as any other employee. Managers should be confident that their supervisory skills will work equally well with employees with disabilities.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities are not reliable.

**FACT:** People with disabilities tend to remain on the job and maintain better levels of attendance.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities can only do simple, repetitive jobs or can only do light duty work.

**FACT:** People with disabilities have a variety of skills to offer, which differ from individual to individual, as with everyone else.

**MYTH:** Everyone claims to be covered under the ADA.

**FACT:** The definition of "individual with a disability" is fraught with conditions and must be applied on a case-by-case basis.

**MYTH:** The ADA protects people who are overweight.

**FACT:** Just being overweight is not enough. Modifications in policies only must be made if they are reasonable and do not fundamentally alter the nature of the program or service provided. The Department has received only a handful of complaints about obesity.

**MYTH:** The ADA is being misused by people with "bad backs" and "emotional problems."

**FACT:** Trivial complaints do not make it through the system. And many claims filed by individuals with such conditions are not trivial. There are people with severe depression or people with a history of alcoholism who are judged by their employers, not on the basis of their abilities, but rather upon stereotypes and fears that employers associate with their conditions.

**MYTH:** Non-disabled people are obligated to "take care of" people with disabilities or people with disabilities always need help.

**FACT :** Many people with disabilities are independent. Anyone may offer assistance, but most people with disabilities prefer to be responsible for themselves. If you would like to help someone with a disability, ask if he or she needs it before you act.

**MYTH:** Hiring employees with disabilities increases workers' compensation insurance rates.

**FACT:** Insurance rates are based solely on the relative hazards of the operation and the organization's accident experience, not on whether workers have disabilities.

**MYTH:** Employees with disabilities have a higher absentee rate than employees without disabilities.

**FACT :** Studies by firms such as DuPont show that employees with disabilities are not absent any more than employees without disabilities.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities are inspirational, courageous, and brave for being able to overcome their disability.

**Fact:** People with disabilities are simply carrying on normal activities of living when they drive to work, go grocery shopping, pay their bills, or compete in athletic events.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities need to be protected from failing.

**FACT :** People with disabilities have a right to participate in the full range of human experiences, including success and failure. Employers should have the same expectations and work requirements for all employees.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities are unable to meet performance standards, thus making them a bad employment risk.

**FACT :** In 1990, DuPont conducted a survey of 811 employees with disabilities and found that 90 percent rated average or better in job performance compared to 95 percent for employees without disabilities.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities have problems getting to work.

**FACT :** People with disabilities are capable of supplying their own transportation by choosing to walk, use a car pool, drive, take public transportation, or a cab. Their modes of transportation to work are as varied as those of other employees.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities are more likely to have accidents on the job than employees without disabilities.

**FACT :** In the 1990 DuPont study, the safety records of both groups were identical.