



Module 2: Disability as an Aspect of Diversity

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Learning objectives:

1. Understand diversity from a disability perspective, including individuals with mental health conditions
2. Identify the importance of diverse park users
3. Identify the prevalence of mental health conditions

Introduction

Parks are places where people of all backgrounds gather and should feel welcomed! The people who visit and participate in a park should be representative of the broader community. When we talk about diversity, we often focus on race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. These are all important and essential aspects of a person's identity. The experience of disability is also an essential aspect of diversity and developing inclusion practices which are welcoming of individuals with disabilities, including mental health conditions, is necessary in order to establish parks that are welcoming to everyone. Diversity and inclusion initiatives are an opportunity to promote the social well-being of all community members. They are also at the forefront of many businesses, educational institutions, and community resources such as public libraries, parks, and recreation centers.

Disability and Mental Health as an Aspect of Diversity

Diversity is defined as the "inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization."¹ Disability and diversity initiatives are focused on targeting specific groups of people who have repeatedly experienced social exclusion.² With this understanding, we aim to develop diversity training programs which promote full inclusion of people with disabilities. You might be asking yourself what this looks like in practice! An important part of developing inclusive and diverse parks and recreation environments is learning a bit about the disability rights movement, and how this has informed diversity training initiatives.

¹ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Diversity. In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved September 23, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity>

² Friedner, M. & Weingarten, K. 2016. Disability as diversity: A new biopolitics. (Somatosphere, blog). Accessed on 13 Sept 2020. <http://somatosphere.net/2016/05/disability-as-diversity-a-new-biopolitics>

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Broadly, diversity initiatives are rooted in the civil rights movement. These movements continue to impact social change by developing understandings of diversity and reducing discrimination against different groups of people. To date, there has been a lack of attention given to developing training materials and best practices regarding disability and diversity.³ Why, you may ask? One possibility is that culturally, we are not accustomed to people with disabilities being a regular part of our social spheres. Think about it! Depending on when you were a child, did you have many classes with other students with disabilities? Did you know of a specific type of school or classroom that only kids with disabilities went to? Maybe you have personally experienced disability and a lack of opportunity in your own education based on your disability status. These are examples of social exclusion and discrimination based on a person's disability.

While social exclusion processes have certainly contributed to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities, we must also be willing to examine our own perceptions and understandings of disability as an aspect of diversity. A study examining the definitions of disability among 48 adults who had a sibling with a disability found that most participants preferred being around people who did not have disabilities.⁴ Attitudes toward disability can also differ regarding disability type. For example, attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disability, mental illness, or a dual diagnosis of both were examined among 158 social workers.⁵ Fear towards people with a mental illness was far greater than those with intellectual disability, further demonstrating the complexity of diversity within disability. Indeed, the emotional responses of pity, fear, and anger that social workers reported toward people with disabilities are likely to appear at varying degrees among all community members, making the prioritization of disability diversity initiatives a necessity.

Disability Prevalence

Just how many people experience a disability? The World Health Organization reports that 15% of the world's population has some type of disability--that's more than one billion people!⁶ According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 4 adults lives with a disability in the United States, and adults living in rural areas have higher rates of disability than those in larger urban areas.⁷

Mental health conditions are disabilities that can affect a person's thinking, feeling, and behavior. There is a broad range of mental health conditions, including anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and mood disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 18.9% of the U.S. population, or 46.6 million adults, lives with a mental illness,⁸ while the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that roughly 19% of adults in the U.S. experienced a mental illness in 2018—a statistic that translates to 1 in 5 adults. As we covered in the Introduction Module, serious mental illnesses include major depressive disorder, bipolar disorders, and schizophrenia



³ Phillips, B. N., Deiches, J., Morrison, B., Chan, F., & Bezyak, J. L. (2016). Disability diversity training in the workplace: Systematic review and future directions. *Journal of occupational rehabilitation, 26*(3), 264-275.

⁴ Friedman, C., & Owen, A. L. (2017). Defining disability: Understandings of and attitudes towards ableism and disability. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 37*(1).

⁵ Werner, S. & Araten-Bergman, T. (2017) Social workers' stigmatic perceptions of individuals with disabilities: A focus on three disabilities. *Journal of mental health research in intellectual disabilities, 10*(2), 93-107.

⁶ World Health Organization. (2018, January). *Disability and health*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2016). Prevalence of disability and disability types by urban-rural county classification. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/disability-prevalence-rural-urban.html>

⁸ National Institute of Mental Health. (2019, Feb). *Mental illness*. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

spectrum disorders; NAMI reports that roughly 4.6% of the population, or 1 in 25 adults, experiences a serious mental illness.⁹

Why Does this Matter?

Disability does not discriminate—it is something that anyone can experience at any time. Social institutions, people, and environments do discriminate. Developing an understanding of disability as an aspect of diversity, rather than a problem to be solved, is crucial for us to foster welcoming spaces in our communities. Remember the statistic! 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. lives with a mental illness. The next time you're in a park, take a look around! How many people do you see? Five? Ten? Twenty? Thinking of the prevalence of disability and mental health in this way reminds us that we aren't simply exchanging ideas, but that we are directly affecting the lives of the people we encounter. Having diverse park users—people who go to the park that other people in your community can share a recognition of experience with—communicates your values, commitment to advocacy, and ally-ship. The work that parks and recreation professionals do may be the center of the community, while the fabric of the community is every person within it—including people with disabilities and mental health conditions.

Lived Experience Spotlight

People with mental health conditions use parks for the same reasons everyone else does. Read through the following quotes from our research participants who visited parks in their communities. How does each quote demonstrate aspects of disability and diversity?

“Most depressed people go to parks, because they have to collect their thoughts and stuff, and it's a peaceful environment. So sometimes even in passing, that has happened, that I've seen people sitting down there, very sad. Then just out of conversation, they were able to open up what was going on in their lives.”

“I guess because I isolate and I'm home a lot because I have loneliness. I go there to see the people, to see people walk around or getting off the train or ... just to watch others.”

“It clears your mind and gets you focused. It gives you beautiful thoughts and relaxes your brain. Just like if you go sit in the park. Even if you just go sit or maybe you might even feel better if you just come out of the house and just sit in front of the door. You know, breathe and smell the sunshine and stuff.”

Looking forward

Understanding disability as an aspect of diversity is a foundational concept for the remaining modules. If you accept this idea, it's easier to understand that there may be specific strategies to take in order to be more inclusive of individuals with mental health conditions. It might also inspire ideas about ways to include individuals with mental health conditions in broader community discussions and those activities that may influence the programming and direction of your park or recreation facility. The following lessons will expand on these ideas!

⁹National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2019, Sept). Mental health by the numbers. Retrieved from <https://nami.org/mhstats>