

Changing Mindsets

Martin Elks began his career as a psychologist for the Victorian government before completing a PhD in disability studies at Syracuse University. He has since worked as a behavioural specialist and in the areas of self-determination, school inclusion and advocacy. Martin and his wife Darcy have 3 children. They have remained vigilant that their daughter Mary be actively involved and included in her community with a variety of roles including work.

In this article Martin explores the influence of mindsets and why they must be considered in any change effort. By outlining common mindsets in relation to disability he shows how mindsets shape systems, create their own legacy and define what is considered possible in the lives of people with disability.

My mind has changed significantly at least three times in the course of my professional career. These changes include letting go of the Special Programs and Objects to be Fixed mindsets (I explain these mindsets below) and adopting Social Model and Person Centered mindsets. I also changed from an individualistic behavior management approach to a family systems and positive behaviour supports mindset. I changed my mind as a result of exposure to new ideas and new theories that made sense of my experiences and embodied a vision I could identify with. I attended workshops by the best leaders in the field and can still remember the ‘ah ha’ moment when I was first introduced to the concept of disability imagery via the rating “deviancy image juxtaposition”. The images of half-naked people wandering aimlessly across institution day room floors in Burton Blatt’s book *Christmas in Purgatory* have never left me and serve as a kind of baseline for me.

At the time I thought, very naively, that all that was needed to change mindsets was to give people the same experiences I had—surely they would see things the way I did! But I have learned that while some people change their mindsets quite readily others take a lot of convincing and some never change their minds. I have also learned that while individuals may be convinced of the need to change, changing a society’s mindset is a much more complicated process.

What are mindsets?

Mindsets are a particular mental framework of attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and expectations. They determine our thoughts and reactions to many situations we find ourselves in. Mindsets are especially prevalent in politics. For example, politicians who talk about “asylum seekers” have a different mindset to others who talk about “illegal immigrants”. These fundamentally different mindsets lead to fundamentally different policies about how to handle contentious issues surrounding unauthorized immigrants.

Mindsets are very important because they have long term consequences. With respect to aboriginal Australians we are still living with the consequences of a colonial mindset and its policies of genocide and cultural eradication more than two centuries after the First Fleet. Whether 26 January is Australia Day or Survival Day depends very much on one’s mindset.

Fortunately mindsets do change. Freakshows are no longer popular entertainment and sheltered workshops are increasingly being seen as obsolete whereas once they were seen as a great advance. We also used to think that a continuum of services was ideal but we now realize that it is much better to live and learn in the community than have to “work your way up” to your own home after demonstrating success in learning skills in various halfway houses or home simulations.

Mindsets in Disability

There are five common mindsets in disability.

- The **Special Programs** mindset is perhaps the most dominant mindset, especially for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This mindset assumes that people with disabilities need separate “special” programs such as special schools, special transportation, special teachers, special games and special workshops for “special people.”
- The **Personal Tragedy** mindset sees disabled people as victims of a personal tragedy that is an unfortunate consequence of being dealt a “bad hand” in life. Financial compensation and charitable works by compassionate people are what is needed to help these people deal with their unfortunate life circumstances. Seeing people as “better off dead than disabled” is an extreme but not uncommon example of this mindset.
- Seeing people with disabilities as **objects to be fixed** is also a common mindset. Disabled people are not seen as persons but collections of behaviours that need to be improved by particular arrangements in their environment, especially by manipulation of regimes of rewards and punishments. People with autism are particularly vulnerable to this mindset and are often forced to live in strange and highly manipulated settings and sometimes subjected to harsh consequences aimed at shaping them up to have more socially acceptable behaviours
- A **risk management** mindset assesses each new course of action according to its potential to negatively impact on a person or organization’s existing program budget, image, political profile or reputation. A new initiative is implemented only if the assessed risk is minimal or adequately safeguarded or considered to be otherwise acceptable.
- A mindset of **inclusion** sees people as having the same aspirations and need to belong as we all do. Disability is seen as a difference rather than a deviance and a natural and universal part of life rather than an abnormal condition to be cured, treated or prevented. This mindset believes services and supports should be developed using person-centred approaches and that disabled people should live in their community and make their own decisions about their lives.

Understanding these different and often competing mindsets is crucially important because mindsets interact with policy initiatives in ways that can expand or reduce the impact of the policy on the lives of people with disabilities.

Why mindsets are hard to change

Talking about mindsets is a lot easier than actually changing mindsets. Old mindsets may take generations to disappear and the consequences of past mindsets can last for centuries and can become deeply ingrained in society. Why should this be so? There are many reasons why changing mindsets is not easy.

- Most people think their personal mindsets are true and correct and do not need to be changed. This is not surprising since humans have a bias towards searching out evidence in support of their existing personal opinions and assumptions and rejecting evidence that may contradict these.
- Many people have a bias towards maintaining the status quo, not necessarily out of a rational examination of all the evidence but because it is easier to continue as they have always done in the past. New ideas bring risks and unforeseen consequences which can be unsettling.
- Sometimes the reasons for the continued existence of programs are not the benefits they provide to their users but due to meeting other interests such as providing employment or assisting the local economy or even simply out of tradition.

- Changing one's mind can be hard work. Thinking new thoughts and having one's assumptions challenged can be difficult and it can take a great deal of courage to be open-minded and willing to look at new ideas as non-prejudicially as possible. New mindsets may also be perceived as embodying an implied criticism of the past which can lead to defensiveness.
- People can become cynical about change having seen new mindsets come and go but not creating the big changes that were promised. After a few such examples it is easy to see people "sit this one out" anticipating that in a few years time this too will pass, go away after the next election or won't affect me since I will have a new job by then.
- Finally, dialogue between adherents of different and sometimes incompatible mindsets is sometimes fraught with complicated dynamics and sometimes common ground is hard to find without a lot of effort.

What it takes to change mindsets

So what does it take to change mindsets? While mindsets change one mind at a time it is necessary to eventually achieve a tipping point if significant social change is to be achieved. Here are a few key aspects and processes involved in changing mindsets.

- Personal experience with disability, personal relationships with people with disabilities and education are essential. They lift the veil of complacency that surrounds and obscures injustice, prejudice, life-wasting, stereotyping, discrimination, stigma and disadvantage and how these prevent the realization of the talents and contributions people with disabilities can make
- Over time these issues and injustices become overwhelming. After meeting others in similar circumstance to their own, people realize their private problems are shared by many in what is a systemic and widespread devaluation of people with disabilities
- Leaders agree it is time to organize for change. This involves implementing any number of activities in a planned manner, perhaps involving protests and other disruptions to "business as usual".
- A well articulated description of the current problem and a vision of a better way forward is developed. We are working for the day when children grow up with friends and neighbours with disability in their schools and communities and think this is the way it has always been and are shocked when old people tell stories about how it used to be.
- Leaders who embrace and advocate for the new vision become highly visible. Such leaders are hard to find but are essential for change. These leaders have a sense of justice, are open to new ideas, want to do things well and not just adequately, have an idealistic vision about what could be and are willing to accept the costs involved in advocacy.
- Competent, ongoing, relevant education and training about the rationales and evidence in favor of the new mindset, especially emphasizing points of coherency with prevailing broader cultures and worldviews, are developed and offered widely
- Clearly documented examples of the new mindset in action, especially from the perspective of people with disabilities, are documented and disseminated
- Opportunities for open and respectful discussion of concerns, especially concerns raised by those with competing mindsets take place regularly

- Financial and other support for former mindsets is gradually phased out as laws and regulations and funding streams change in line with the new mindsets
- Gradually a tipping point is reached and the vision is at least partially realised

All of this takes time but we are in the business of changing mindsets and participating in social change can be very exciting. The revolution in disability began in the 70s and continues to the present day. Contributing to this ongoing revolution with our voice and energy is one of the most rewarding and worthwhile aspects of working to improve the lives and life circumstances of people with disabilities. Theodore Parker, an American Abolitionist, said in 1857 “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice”. We are doing our part to bend that arc.