

All Blind People are the Same

Stereotypes about disabilities are some of the most common, and they can negatively affect people. The most negatively perceived disability is blindness. The definition of blindness is having 20/200 vision or less. In addition, what the public thinks blindness is, is an example of a stereotype. While many people assume that individuals who are blind can only see black, this is false. In fact, 90% of all blind people have some kind of remaining vision. The most common type of vision that blind people have, is light and shadow perception, and this is kind of vision that Youtuber Molly Burke has. After being diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at age 5, she ultimately lost the majority of her vision at age 14. Through her web docuseries, she explains the myths and stereotypes of blindness, and how it has affected her life. (Burke)

When I was conducting research on Molly Burke, I showed my roommate a picture of Molly and said she was blind. My roommate was very surprised and said “she doesn’t look like she’s blind” (Harner). So naturally, I wanted to interview some of my friends and see what they thought a blind person had to look and act like. When asked what they thought a blind person should look like, the most common answer was “their eyes are clouded over and they wear sunglasses”. Another friend of mine in the room mentioned that people who are blind “have heightened senses because they can’t see” (Maldonado). Both of their answers are examples of common stigmas with blindness. Even though these types of stigmas can seem harmless, in reality they have a negative affect on people who are blind.

Some common misconceptions about blindness include the two seen above, as well as many others. One of the lesser known misconceptions about blindness, is that all blind people

use guide dogs. It may seem like the majority of blind people use guide dogs, but in actuality only about “5% of blind people are guide dog users” (Burke). Even though some of the misconceptions are completely false and outrageous, there can sometimes be truth behind the stigmas. Another one of the widely popular stigmas about blindness is that after one meets a blind person, the blind person will want to touch his or her face to get to know them. That is a stigma that can be offensive to blind people. To get to know someone, the blind person will act the same as the general population and talk to them to get to know them; no awkward face touching is necessary. This is a perfect example of how the media can play into society’s idea of blind people and how they live their lives differently.

To be able to understand how blind people are affected by these common misconceptions, we must understand how some stigmas originated. The majority of stigmas originated from movies and TV shows. The misconception about blind people having super senses “stems from Marvel’s Daredevil” (Man). The protagonist in Daredevil is blind, and has superhuman senses. He can “hear heartbeats and smell things from extreme distances” (Man), and even though many people realize that such superhuman abilities are not possible, many dial down the extreme scenarios and assume that blind people have better senses than the general sighted community (Man).

Another example of how Hollywood plays into the formation of stigmas surrounding blindness, is through movies. In John Green’s “The Fault in Our Stars”, one of the characters goes blind. While the process of his character going blind is more accurate than most movie portrayals, his character is happy and go-lucky even after he loses his vision. According to an article published by Susan DeRemer, a psychologist for the visually impaired, “29-58% of people who suffer from significant vision loss have a major depressive episode a year or more later” (DeRemer). Furthermore, she explains that “people who are visually impaired are 2

times as likely to be depressed than people without vision loss” (DeRemer). However, in John Green’s book, and later movie adaptation, the character with vision loss comes off as the comedic relief, and even though such a heavy movie is in need of comic relief, it really does not do justice to people who have lost their sight. Another example of the media’s portrayal of blindness is Netflix’s hit movie *Bird Box*, which sparked a massive challenge among the youth. The challenge consisted of people blindfolding themselves and trying to navigate the world around them. Even though the challenge may seem harmless, it is and can be dangerous, as well as offensive to the blind community. Being blind is not a joke or a challenge, it is a major change in lifestyle.

Thinking about stigmas, it is easy to assume that they are harmless and cannot really hurt anyone. In reality, many blind people are mistreated by the public because of the stereotypes surrounding blindness. One of the best examples of this mistreatment comes from Molly Burke when she talks about an experience with a waitress at a restaurant. When Molly asked to have a braille menu, the waitress responded with “Well, you don’t look blind. Where are your sunglasses?” (Burke). Simply because Molly feels uncomfortable wearing sunglasses during the day, she was immediately put into a stereotype and unable to get the help she needed. Treatment like this is seen quite often from the sighted community, and many times as a result of the stereotypes surrounding blindness affect them negatively due to the need to “fit the mold” of blindness. Some of the ways blind people should look according to stereotypes are that their eyes should be grayed, they should wear sunglasses, have a cane or guide dog and they should always have a sighted person with them. Molly explains that when people find out she is blind they will often “Turn to whoever I’m with and ask questions about me, in front of me” (Burke). Her biggest complaint is that she is a person too and

should not be treated differently just because she has impaired vision. This goes with all disabilities and not just blindness.

Another major pet-peeve about blindness and impaired vision is when someone asks ‘well how many fingers am I holding up?’ This is one of the most annoying things to me, because I myself am nightblind, which means I cannot see in low or no light. When I tell people this, their first response is to ask what exactly I can see. One night at dinner I was with my friends, and when I mentioned that I was nightblind, his first response was to ask “well, can you see that bush over there?” This bothers me as well as many others with impaired vision, because that is the point. I cannot see anything more than a vague silhouette in low or dim light, and in darkness, I cannot see anything. This problem does not happen just with me, in fact the majority of people with impaired vision have dealt with these kinds of comments as well. Ask one of your friends with glasses how often they take off their glasses and are asked how far away they can see and read.

Even though stigmas and stereotypes are generalized and often times not true, the real question is can they be true? In some cases a few of the common stereotypes have truth, but there are a few that are simply outrageous. When someone loses their sight from cataracts, their eyes may be “slightly grayed over” (Burke), so that is where one of the ‘characteristics’ of blindness comes from. With wearing sunglasses, the reason some blind people decide to wear sunglasses is because they never learned to eye track. This is a skill that sighted people do not even know that they have, and as cool as it may sound, it is just knowing that sound comes from a source, so when someone talks, we look at them. When someone is blind from birth or loses their vision when they are young, they may never learn how to eye track. If they feel uncomfortable not being able to track their eyes correctly, or are worried about making other people feel uncomfortable, some blind people will wear sunglasses.

Blindness is not the only disability that deals with stigmas. In fact, it is not just disabilities that have to overcome stereotypes. People that have autism face some of the harshest stereotypes, because most of them come after their intelligence and the way they act. The amount of people that believe people with autism are slower is astonishing, because in fact many people are very skilled and have the ability to be incredibly smart and may have “higher IQs and excel at math, music or art”. In addition, many people think that only children can have autism, but “many children with autism grow up to be adults with autism” (11 Myths). These kinds of stereotypes lead to people having a negative perception of people with autism without ever getting to know them. In addition, this leads the media to put people with disabilities on pedestals for achieving basic things. For example, the media likes to hype up students that accomplished things such as getting a driver’s license or graduating high school and college. Even though some people find such treatment degrading, many with down syndrome enjoy and need that attention, many others find it very degrading. Molly Burke explains in her last video that when the media hypes up normal things, it makes it seem like “we were unable to do something just because of a disability” (Burke). This is exactly what is happening with my brother, who had a stroke at birth. He is currently in honors classes and is a member of the W.E.B DuBois honor society. The teachers that run the society wanted to recognize my brother for being inducted. My parents and brother all decided to decline this offer because my brother should not be treated any higher or lower than other students who were being inducted.

Learning about how to ask people about disabilities can be tricky and scary out of fear of offending someone. When asking someone with a disability about how it affects their life there are certain rules they should follow. The biggest one is to not ask a stranger about their disability. Even if you mean it with the best intentions, it can come off as rude or insensitive.

Another general rule to follow is try to avoid questions that could ask about why they have a disability. For some blind people, they could have lost their sight after something as traumatic as a suicide attempt or car accident, and simply asking what happened could trigger a traumatic experience or remind them of a dark time.

The stigmas that surround blindness, and disabilities as a whole can be very negative and cause unfair treatment from the public. The media also does not help with the stereotypes of blindness due to the surprising number of them in television shows, and movies. Even though some of the stereotypes may have some truth, it does not mean that every single blind person follows those stigmas. I believe it is important to learn about stereotypes and stigmas so we, as society can learn what is true so one day everyone will be treated with the same love and respect even if they do have a disability. Disabilities do not change someone, because people who are disabled are not disabled people- they are people with disabilities.

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