



## Disability and Overlapping Identities: What Makes You Who You Are?

### Introduction

Everyone has different characteristics that make them unique. Some people like cooking and other people like baking. However, gender, race, sex, age, ability, and more makeup who people are too!

### Why does it matter?

The characteristics or traits that make us who we are—our likes, dislikes, gender, race, sex, age, etc., often influence, and are influenced by, our life experiences. Different people are made up of different traits and have different life experiences. Sometimes, some of our traits can make some life experiences different than others. For example, one person who does not speak English and lives in a rural area may have a harder time getting healthcare services than someone who does speak English and lives in an urban area. When these traits affect our life experiences like this, it can be called “intersectionality.”

### What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality is simple. It is when multiple parts of someone’s identity affect other parts of their identity or life experience. Some people are discriminated against because of their

identities—and some people are discriminated against even more so because they have multiple identities that are both often discriminated against (Miller & Bassett, 2020; YW Boston, 2017).

### Why is it important to address intersectionality when working with people with disabilities?

A person with a disability could be black, female, elderly, and live in a rural area. This person has to search for services in a rural area that may have less services. Their identity as black and female may also influence how they are treated when they are looking for services.

Someone with a disability may identify as a 21-year-old, straight, single, Asian male. He may not only encounter discrimination because of his disability but also his identity as an Asian man.

### How do you acknowledge someone’s intersectionality in working with people with disabilities?

Intersectionality can be influenced by the bias of the people around us. It’s important to recognize where explicit and implicit bias may be showing up ([for](#)



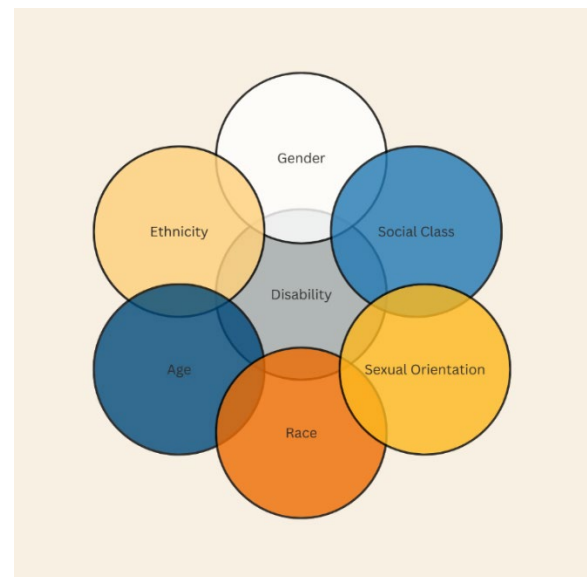
[a refresher on implicit bias, visit this fact sheet\).](#)

One common point of intersectionality for people with disabilities is between mental health and disability. People with disabilities are 5 times more likely to experience mental health concerns than people without disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). The term “dual diagnosis” refers to the diagnosis of two disorders that occur at the same time. For example, someone with an intellectual/developmental disability may have the diagnosis of depression at the same time, which is considered a “dual diagnosis.”

Diagnostic overshadowing is when symptoms of mental health concerns are seen as the result of an intellectual/developmental disability and vice versa (Bradley & Hollins, 2006). It's important to be aware of diagnostic overshadowing because sometimes something is attributed to a psychiatric disorder or an intellectual disability without acknowledging the existence of one or the other (Bradley & Hollins, 2006)

A person with a disability is influenced by more than just their disability status. It is important to think about other parts of their identity that might influence their life experiences. When working with

someone with a disability, ask yourself: “Am I seeing the whole picture here? Are there other parts of this individual's identity that need to be considered?”



## Conclusion

Overall, microaggressions are things that we say and do that are harmful to others, but we may not realize it. However, we can take specific steps to prevent them and create safe living and working environments for everyone. We can help prevent microaggressions towards people with disabilities by thinking about how what we say and do affects the people around us, standing up for others when they experience microaggressions, and intentionally supporting others through micro-affirmations.



## Recommended Citation

Zebe, T. & Byers, R. (2023). *Disability and overlapping identities: What makes you who you are?* [Fact sheet]. Institute for Disability Research, Policy, & Research.

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