

DISABILITY HISTORY

SOCIETAL VALUES:
Physical perfection, beauty, intelligence.

Living conditions for persons with disabilities were brutal during this period. Some people were able to survive through acts of charity or as objects of curiosity, but most were not as fortunate. Intolerance, sickness, and disregard for persons with disabilities often meant death or a very low quality of life.

Principle of the Least:
"For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest." (Luke 9:46)

"disenfranchised" could include people with mental retardation, epilepsy, mental illness, leprosy, physical disability, or deformity.

- indicates disability from a moral viewpoint
- indicates disability from a medical viewpoint
- indicates disability from a minority, or social, viewpoint
- indicates a connection to a different time in history

*please note that not every event falls easily into one category; these color codes are used to indicate trends in how disability has been viewed over time.



Early Greeks and Romans valued physical perfection. Appearances mattered. Racial and physical differences were seen as marks of inferiority.



Jesus Christ (6 B.C. - 30 A.D.) showed compassion for persons with disabilities. In the New Testament Jesus is frequently credited with showing kindness and effecting miraculous cures of those who were lame, blind, and otherwise disabled. St. Paul directed Christians to "comfort the feeble-minded." Jesus also welcomed those who were poor and disenfranchised and treated them as equals.



With the rise of Christianity, there was a gradual influence on how persons with disabilities were treated. By the fourth century A.D., the rise of Christianity led to more humane practices toward persons with disabilities. Infanticide (the practice of killing children) was discontinued, and helping "the afflicted" became a sign of strength.

DISABILITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN, AND WILL LIKELY ALWAYS BE, A PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

STEREOTYPE:
Holy Innocents: belief that individuals are special children of God, with a special purpose; seen as incapable of committing evil, and sometimes viewed as living saints.

The philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) believed, as did most others in Ancient Greece, that man was the most highly evolved being, and that woman was one giant evolutionary step below, representing "the first step along the road to deformity." Aristotle also recommended that there should be a law "to prevent the rearing of deformed children." In his *Politics*, Aristotle wrote "As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live."

Exposure: To expose meant to leave one out in the weather to die. Exposing young children with severe disabilities was a common practice in ancient Greece.

The Ancient Era idealized physical and mental perfection. Disability, although common at this time, was viewed as a mark of inferiority.

Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) believed that health involved a balance of the four "humors," or basic body substances: "blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile." This belief led later physicians to relate mental illness and mental retardation to an imbalance of "black bile."



INVOLVEMENT BY PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES:
Objects of scorn or charity, survival as beggars.

RESPONSES TO DISABILITY:
Abandonment, exposure, mutilation.

"There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."
— Socrates

TIMELINE

3500 BC
The Rig-Veda, an ancient sacred poem of India, is said to be the first written record of a prosthesis.

470 – 399 BC
The philosopher Socrates challenges Athenian citizens to consider what constitutes a good quality of life.

335 – 280 BC
The physician Herophilus founds one of the earliest medical schools in Alexandria. He finds connections between brain defects and disability.

1552 BC
An obscure document called the Therapeutic Papyrus of Thebes marks the first recorded reference to mental retardation.

355 BC
Aristotle said those "born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason."

6 BC – 30 AD
The life of Jesus Christ.

476 – 1000 A.D.
The Dark Ages: a time marked by indifference, neglect, and fear.

130 – 200 AD
The Greek physician and scholar Galen recognizes the brain as the central organ of the nervous system and the seat of intellect.

