



Stephen Hawking (01/08/1942 – 03/14/2018) was a brilliant theoretical physicist who revolutionized our understanding of time and space. He also shifted societal perceptions of people with disabilities and used his fame to advocate for disability rights.

Hawking and Our Understanding of Disability



At the age of 21, Hawking was diagnosed with a rare neurological disease known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and given only a few years to live. Although he did gradually become paralyzed and lose his ability to speak, Hawking exceeded his life expectancy by decades and continued to make seminal contributions to the scientific world. He also became one of the first and probably most famous users of high-tech [augmented and alternative communication \(AAC\)](#); Hawking talked through an infrared sensor that could



How Stephen Hawking Normalized Disability and Spoke for Those Who Could Not

detect movement in his cheek and translate that into synthesized speech. His computerized voice quickly became iconic for its robotic quality. As Karin Willison noted in an [article](#) for *The Mighty*, “Before Stephen Hawking came along, people with [speech disabilities](#) were often dismissed as mentally unaware and unable to contribute to society...he made talking through a computer not just acceptable but cool.”

Hawking didn’t just improve broad societal perceptions, however – he also influenced the ways in which many people with disabilities saw themselves. In an [opinion piece](#) for *The Guardian*, Frances Ryan describes what Hawking meant to her:

“Growing up disabled in Britain, I didn’t have many role models. There are hardly any statues of disabled leaders, no great lives with chronic disability documented in the history books. As a child, it’s easy to believe that disabled people have never really existed, and that when they did, it was as cripples to be pitied or burdens on society. In Hawking, we had a figure – brilliant, witty, kind – who confounded the negative stereotypes and the low expectations so often forced on those of us with a disability.”

Despite her praise of Hawking for raising expectations of people with disabilities, Ryan notes that excessively high expectations can also be harmful. She mentions that Hawking’s image was often featured on “inspirational” memes, along with statements like “The only disability is a bad attitude.”

Ryan and others have also emphasized that Hawking’s success was due not only to intelligence and determination (though he undoubtedly possessed both of those characteristics), but also to certain circumstances and opportunities. In an [article](#) for *New Statesman*, Alex Taylor points out that Hawking completed much of his education prior to manifesting symptoms of ALS. Taylor writes that had Hawking been born with a disability, “it is likely that even the most basic access to advanced education would have been deemed out of the question, blocking the groundwork from which the mind-boggling theories emerged.”



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Even after he developed ALS, Hawking possessed resources that many other people with disabilities lack access to. Willison notes that he had “a loving and financially stable family, a top-notch education and a wife, children and professional colleagues who valued and supported him.” She goes on to ask, “How many Stephen Hawkings have been overlooked because they can’t afford an AAC device or access transportation to college? How many potential writers, business owners and teachers are out there struggling to prove their ALS, blindness or [cerebral palsy](#) doesn’t make them incapable of achieving great things?”

“I Speak for the People You Can’t Hear”

Hawking himself frequently acknowledged that much of his success was thanks to a financially-privileged background. In particular, he emphasized how different his life would have been without access to the technology that stopped him from becoming locked in his body. “My communication system broke down for three days, and I was shocked by how powerless I felt,” he said in a [video message](#) for UNESCO’s international conference in 2014. “I want to speak up for people who live their whole lives in that state...We need to make sure this technology becomes available to those who need it so that no one lives in silence. Please listen to me. I speak for the people you can’t hear.”

Hawking also advocated for access to healthcare by highlighting the ways in which he was relatively fortunate. In an [article](#) for *The Guardian*, discussing the U.K. National Health Service (NHS), Hawking noted that, “I have received a large amount of high-quality NHS treatment and would not be here today if it were not for the service.” He went on to criticize underfunding, moves to privatize services, and other issues that limit access to medical care.

“People value the NHS, and are proud that we treat everyone equally when they are sick,” Hawking wrote. “The NHS brings out the best in us. We cannot lose it.”



Conclusion

“We have a moral duty to remove the barriers to participation, and to invest sufficient funding and expertise to unlock the vast potential of people with disabilities,” wrote Hawking, in a foreword to the [*World Report on Disability*](#).

In the wake of his death, some have suggested that the best way to honor Hawking is by working to remove these barriers. Of course, most people with and without disabilities do not have Hawking-level genius, but they shouldn’t need to in order to be treated as valued members of society. Willison sums this up well:

“We all have something to offer, a gift to share with the world. We can contribute – if we’re given the chance. If you admired Stephen Hawking, honor his life by doing your part to bring support systems and opportunities to more people with disabilities. Encourage a child with a disability in your school or neighborhood. Hire someone with a disability at your company. Cast an actor with a disability in your play or movie. Look for the talented people around you whose potential others may not see.”

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