

David W. Oaks
Founder
Revolutionary Consultant



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Aciū! Institute, LLC

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Mind Justice Survey: Initial Report

by David W. Oaks, Aciū! Institute

How can we unite the mental and physical disability movements?

As a wheelchair-riding psychiatric survivor, I am in both movements. Our consulting firm addressed this question.

From mid-September 2021 to 23 December 2021, we conducted a brief survey, reaching out by social media and email, especially to people who work on disability issues. The nonprofit human rights coalition, [MindFreedom International](#), co-sponsored. This is a very brief summary of early results. Of course, there is no claim at all that any of this is “scientific.”

A total of 368 surveys were completed online. About 43% of the total respondents identify as psychiatric survivors. Neatly, around the same percent (42%) identify as mental health consumers. Combining both groups, a large majority (65%) were either mental health consumers and/or psychiatric survivors. Of the total respondents, 133 (about 38%) said they had experienced being held in a locked psychiatric or nursing facility. Only 12% identify as mental health care providers.

Exactly half of total respondents identify as currently having a physical disability. Of those with current physical disabilities, two-thirds (66%) have what they call an “invisible disability” and about a third (34%) have a visible disability. Fifty-one

respondents use a wheelchair at least some of the time. Only one-in-four of all respondents say they have never had a physical disability.

Although the survey invited people of all faiths or no faith, and was non-denominational, I am a Unitarian Universalist, who works with many other UUs, locally and nationally, on disability rights. Therefore, we included a question about UU. Of the total respondents, 83 identified as UU, about 1 in 5.

Two Open-Ended Questions: Barriers & Unifying

The first question we had for open-ended replies: **“What do you think are one or two of the main barriers to uniting the movements for mental & physical disability?”**

The words that are frequently used, is that there is a need for more communication about stigma and discrimination.

Here are a few of the highlighted replies:

“People are diagnosed as having either a mental health problem/disability or a physical problem/disability. In our culture they are seen as separate and not from a holistic perspective. Funding for researching conditions or helping people comes from sources specified separately for either mental or physical health.”

“Lack of awareness of the history of psych survivors being part of the disability rights movement. Stigma that keeps people apart and silenced for fear of being targeted and shunned.”

“Some with physical disabilities may not trust the sanity or reliability of those with mental health disabilities.”

“Many organizations offering services to people struggling with mental issues do not have barrier-free spaces and offerings.”

“[M]any physically disabled people have experienced trauma caused by being told that their serious illness is just anxiety, etc.”

“I think the main barrier uniting the mental & physical disability movement is misunderstanding each other's perspectives and issues.”

“Mental disability movement is very disjointed, consisting of many little groups and individuals that do not communicate much. ... Once the mental disability movement is more united, there will be a chance to unite it with the physical disability movement.”

“In the financial realm, both are competing for scarce resources.”

“Lateral ableism [discrimination between people with disabilities] in both communities.”

“Popular perception that 'disability' refers only to mobility issues and eyesight. Popular perception that 'mental disability' refers only to cognitive impairment or major psychiatric illness.”

“Our false binary of mind and body issues.”

The second question requesting open-ended replies: **“Your suggestion(s) to unite the mental & physical disability movements, especially to address the emergency of the climate crisis.”**

Frequent words included making mediated dialogues focused on unity, by bringing together people with *lived experience* from different perspectives. Marginalized people are united by being especially vulnerable to climate crisis. (Also, a surprising number of replies were that they had no idea!)

Some of the highlighted responses:

“Continue to emphasize that the climate crisis is global and it is affecting all living entities on this planet.”

“For advocates to continue trying to have joint functions, and to work together for legislation affecting people with disabilities.”

“Networking with each other on social media, Zoom events, and in-person if possible.”

“Share stories, help people understand the need and dispel the false narratives.”

“Teach-ins and forums in which people with physical disabilities presented their experiences, alongside people with psychosocial disabilities, even if there were disagreements and conflicting perspectives and a good facilitator to handle the conflicts.”

“Recruiting leaders in [Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living](#) (APRIL) to the importance of joining forces and the climate.”

“We need to develop a grassroots intersectional movement with bringing everyone together within one voice with support from our Allies.”

“The organization I’m now most active with, [Citizens’ Climate Lobby](#), has active attention to people w disabilities and several people in my chapter are focused on educating/lobbying around health impact of climate.”

“Emphasizing disability as a creative space of possibility and connection opens people to new perspectives and understandings.”

“Make using mental health language/labels as ugly and faux pas as the ‘r’ word. Open up more forums for people with both ‘disabilities’ in order to create visibility.”

“Initially concentrate on the intersectionality of the physically and mentally disabled and then concentrate on our strengths and brainstorm on how to make ourselves heard as we are one of the most vulnerable persons in this climate crisis.”

“Focus on areas of commonality and connection, foster the sharing of resources.”

Prepared for the Mental Health Subcommittee of the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL).

For further information about the Mind Justice survey, contact David W. Oaks at revolution@aciu.info. Produced by [Aciu! Institute](#) 2021.