

The public thinks support workers are saints – some are anything but



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As far as the assumption goes, every support worker is a saint, sacrificing themselves to better the life of another. As someone within that industry, let me dispel that right now.

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There is a widespread and problematic misconception that all support workers, by virtue of their employment, are intrinsically charitable, kind-hearted, decent individuals who find nothing more rewarding than being lickspittle

servants to what are perceived as society's less than desirables. So much is the applause afforded support workers that you'd presume all of us were the second coming of Jesus Christ Superstar; that in the morning when we open our bowels rainbows shoot from our nether regions.

The amount of times I've heard a family member, friend or acquaintance



remark 'you must have such a good heart— I certainly couldn't do your job, is truly staggering. Despite their probable good intentions, I loathe this commendation because I've come to realise that deep down it is laden with gross, ableist presumptions.

The first, and probably most problematic, is that this mindset implies support work isn't the attempted facilitation of peoples' natural rights but rather a social act of charity; something people with disabilities are *gifted* by a sympathetic society, as opposed to *entitled* to in a just community. Not only does this reinforce reductive pity, it also suggests people with disabilities are lesser beings, less entitled to the good things in life by the sheer implications of their disability; and that they should be joyously thankful for receiving the absolute bare minimum in support. Once again, it maintains the mantra that there is something wrong with the individual (look at the Medical model as opposed to the social model in disability discourse) rather than asking the question *what is wrong with a society that largely marginalises some of its most vulnerable?*

Furthermore, this 'you must be a good person' is really a rewriting of the question 'who would want to work with those people?'— a less than subtle hint suggesting the speaker carries an image in their head of a petulant, unreasonable, or outright dastardly client who craps where ever they can just to upset me at my workplace. These presumptions aren't just based on our belittling stereotypes; they are also abhorrently ableist, because they reinforce a wider, historic dehumanisation and depersonalisation of people with disabilities.

Thus, there is no reflection on the continued marginalisation of the disabled, but rather a reaffirmation of a society where the disabled are persistently infantilised, demeaned, denigrated and denied basic rights.

About a year back I worked for a not-for-profit support organisation which held quarterly meetings, inviting all 150+ staff to attend. One particular *All-in* our CEO declared to the staff 'all of you must be decent people because of the field you've gotten into'. I felt like jumping onto my feet, running up to the front and shaking the CEO. I wondered what alternative reality was at play. I'd worked there for over a year. There were a couple of decent individuals but by and large staff were just getting by— they weren't (myself included) extending themselves in any particular way. I wondered if he forgot that we were paid— that we'd be out the door in half a second if our pay wasn't deposited on time.

So our CEO, effectively, had given us a pat on the back for applying the standard.

Meanwhile, he'd fed into a problematic common falsehood amongst support workers; a semi-mantra that allows us psychologically offset our less than employable attributes. From my experience in the support sector, those who think they're Mother Teresa's kin tend to be impudent ableists, because from their perspective everything they do is kind or decent or good-hearted— the right thing to do. Effectively, they can do no wrong; effectively, the people they



work for are charity cases who rely solely on the support worker's sound, strong-arming judgement. Rather than advocating, supporting, listening to, or attempting to facilitate the decisions of their clients, they just make all the decisions for them— because of course their clients are *incapable* and require the *gift* of rigorous intervention. You'd be surprised how often those who claim to be advocates for the disabled engage in overtly ableist behaviour.

If you're a support worker and you consider yourself charitable, or good-hearted, *just for doing your job*, I'd suggest you find different employment.

Look, I'll let you in on a secret: support work is largely easy employment. Often, you're out and about. It's art classes, bowling, movies, parks, cooking classes, events, long drives, putt-putt, shopping, trips to the city etc. (I could write an entirely different article about the lacklustre nature of day programs and in house support— frequently a continued infantilization). The work is, by and large, assisting people in living their lives. So, if you honestly believe support work is so horrendous, perhaps you should ask yourself a few questions.

Namely, why do I assume that people with disabilities are difficult to work with? If you make the assumption that the profession is hard, how do you perceive the lives of the disabled? If you assume their lives are difficult, perhaps it is society's job to remedy this, rather than celebrating support workers whilst demonising the disabled.

Sure, support work it has its unpleasanties. But, guess what? Everyone shits and showers. Of course, there are the days where you feel like you want to walk out of your job, and most of the time you'd rather be elsewhere, but — isn't that the nature of work? I couldn't be a bartender, a postman, a garbage collector, a doctor or a lawyer, but for some reason, I've never felt the necessity to tell anyone with these professions that I couldn't do what they do.

It's time we started appreciating employees for what they offer in their jobs, not what their job is. Because we wouldn't call a pigheaded doctor known for malpractice a hero, would we?

For all those who cry but, 'it's a caring profession!' let me assure you that support workers are lumped right in with the rest of humanity— they represent a wide variety of personalities and approaches to work; not all of us are caring. Some are bad at their job. Some are good. Some are dedicated. Some are slackers.

If the personal accounts which have lead to a Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability show us anything, some employees, even with checks and balances in place, aren't even equipped

with the most basic levels of empathy, work ethic or general human decency— some are just plain bastards.



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