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Ableism 101: What it is, what it looks like, and what we can do to fix it

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As buzzwords like social justice, equity, and inclusion permeate our collective consciousness, it's essential for advocates of progress to remember another 'ism,' one that is frequently left out of conversations.

Ableism.

The world wasn't built with people with disabilities in mind, and because of that, the world we live in is inherently "ableist."

So...what is ableism?

Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing' and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, [ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than,'](#) and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities.

What does ableism look like?

Ableism can take many forms including:

- Lack of compliance with disability rights laws like the ADA
- Segregating students with disabilities into separate schools
- The use of [restraint or seclusion](#) as a means of controlling students with disabilities
- [Segregating](#) adults and children with disabilities in institutions
- Failing to incorporate accessibility into building design plans
- Buildings without braille on signs, elevator buttons, etc.
- Building inaccessible websites
- The assumption that people with disabilities want or need to be 'fixed'

- Using disability as a punchline, or mocking people with disabilities
- Refusing to provide reasonable accommodations
- The [eugenics](#) movement of the early 1900s
- The [mass murder](#) of disabled people in Nazi Germany

But what about ‘everyday’ or minor ableism? What does that look like?

- Choosing an inaccessible venue for a meeting or event, therefore excluding some participants
- Using someone else’s mobility device as a hand or foot rest
- Framing disability as either tragic or [inspirational](#) in news stories, movies, and other popular forms of media
- [Casting a non-disabled actor](#) to play a disabled character in a play, movie, TV show, or commercial
- Making a movie that doesn’t have audio description or closed captioning
- Using the accessible bathroom stall when you are able to use the non-accessible stall without pain or risk of injury
- Wearing scented products in a scent-free environment
- Talking to a person with a disability like they are a child, talking about them instead of directly to them, or [speaking for them](#)
- [Asking invasive questions](#) about the medical history or personal life of someone with a disability
- Assuming people have to have a visible disability to actually be disabled
- Questioning if someone is ‘actually’ disabled, or ‘how much’ they are disabled
- Asking, “How did you become disabled?”

What are ablest micro-aggressions?

Micro-aggressions are everyday verbal or behavioral expressions that communicate a negative slight or insult in relation to someone’s gender identity, race, sex, disability, etc. [In the case of ableism](#):

- “That’s so lame.”
- “You are so retarded.”
- “That guy is crazy.”
- “You’re acting so bi-polar today.”
- “Are you off your meds?”
- “It’s like the blind leading the blind.”
- “My ideas fell on deaf ears.”
- “She’s such a psycho.”

- “I’m super OCD about how I clean my apartment.”
- “Can I pray for you?”
- “I don’t even think of you as disabled.”

Phrases like this imply that a disability makes a person less than, and that disability is bad, negative, a problem to be fixed, rather than a normal, inevitable part of the human experience.

Many people don’t mean to be insulting, and a lot have good intentions, but even well-meant comments and actions can take a serious toll on their recipients.

What can we do to recognize and avert ableism?

- Believe people when they disclose a disability
- Similarly, don’t accuse people of ‘faking’ their disability
- Listen to people when they request an accommodation
- Don’t assume you know what someone needs
- Never touch a person with a disability or their mobility equipment without consent
- Keep invasive questions to yourself
- Don’t speak on behalf of someone with a disability unless they explicitly ask you to
- Talk about disability with [children and young people](#)
- Incorporate accessibility into your [event planning](#)
- Learn more about being a [good disability ally here](#).

But one of the most important things to do to push back against ableism? **Make sure people with disabilities are at the table where decisions are being made.**