Ableist language

Best practice guidelines

Recommended supplement: Social model of disability

Content warning

Ableist words and phrases are used throughout the guide as examples.

Definitions

'**Ableist language**' describes any words, phrases, or expressions that have historically been used or are presently used to stigmatise, exclude, ridicule, devalue, or hurt disabled and neurodiverse people.

Examples

Some ableist words have fallen out of use as their offensive nature has become more widely known, such as 'retarded' and 'mongoloid'. Others, however, still remain extremely common—to the point where some users might not realise they are ableist terms. Words like 'lame' and 'stupid' have a basis in the ostracisation of disabled people, while terms phases like 'you must be blind!' or 'wow, you're so autistic' lessen the impact of valid terms for disability and neurodivergence by using them to describe the behaviour of ablebodied people.

We recommend learning to identify potentially ableist terms and use research skills to investigate their etymology, rather than attempting to memorise an ever-changing list of ableist words. The task of removing ableist language from your vocabulary becomes easier when you are applying a skill rather than remembering a list.

Contemporary use and impact

Ableist words are typically used today to describe something or someone as inferior or inadequate. The chosen term intends to describe the target as pathetic, broken, frustrating, ridiculous, wrong, annoying,

etc. By conflating descriptors of disability with these negative adjectives, we create harmful parallels between being disabled and having each of these negative traits.

These connotations are often unintended; many ableist words are ingrained in everyday language, and the people using them are commonly unaware of a word's history as a term to degrade a group. However, even without malicious intent, using ableist language can be harmful and should be avoided.

Avoiding ableist language

The easiest way to avoid ableist language is to be more thoughtful about what you mean.

For example, if you mean 'ridiculous' or 'unusual', use those words instead of 'crazy' or 'insane'. If you mean 'broken' or 'confused', use those words instead of 'retarded' or 'spazz'. If you mean 'silly', 'childish', or 'unclear', use those words instead of 'stupid' or 'dumb'.

In some circumstances, it's easier to find new words or phrases instead of other existing synonyms. This can be especially effective when removing ableist language from our angry, frustrated, or annoyed vocabularies. One example could be taking everyday household items and using them in place of ableist words; calling somebody an 'ironing board' or a 'bowl of fruit' instead of an 'idiot' can communicate your point while still being respectful to disabled people.

It should also be noted that we should aim to avoid ableist language no matter who our audience is.

Note:
- It's impossible to know whether people are offended or uncomfortable and simply do not feel safe explicitly acknowledging this and requesting that we change our behaviour.
- Avoiding ableist language in all circumstances makes breaking the bad habit more effective.
- It is our responsibility to break the negative connotations around disability and neurodiversity.
- Modelling respectful behaviour encourages others to be more respectful too.

Altering behaviour

Ableist language is an habitual part of our vocabularies, so we're guaranteed to make mistakes as we attempt to improve our language choices.

If you do make a mistake, you should:

- Acknowledge the mistake. Say something simple like 'I shouldn't have used that word, it's ableist. I meant *x* instead.' Or, alternatively, simply say another word and move on with the conversation.
- Focus on using different words in future conversations.

Being called out

If you use an ableist word and somebody feels safe enough to call you out, there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to respond. We recommend the following steps:

1. Listen. Somebody has just told you that you said something that hurt them or hurt people they care about. Even if you feel ashamed, accused, embarrassed, or defensive, your first job is to listen to what they have said and respond with respect. It's completely fine to have those feelings, but you should process them in your own time rather than prioritise them at this moment.

2. Apologise for using the word or phrase and for hurting people.

When you apologise:

> ✔ apologise for **things you have done:** "I'm sorry I used that word."
> ✔ acknowledge **you hurt someone**: "I can see that word hurt you."
> ✔ say **what you will do to improve**: "I won't use it again."
>
> ✗ **do not** apologise only for the consequences of your actions: "I'm sorry I hurt you."
> ✗ **do not** apologise for the other person's feelings: "I'm sorry you are hurt."

3. Thank the person for calling you out. People often call out ableist language because they believe the world—and you personally—can be better. This is really cool, and shows they see potential in you to learn and improve.

4. In your own time, do some research to educate yourself about how your language may have hurt people. Checking online is an easy, quick process that allows you to discover if any of your commonly used words might have unintended connotations, and carries the added benefit of not asking someone else to perform any extra emotional labour. You can internet search 'ableism +' any word you would like to learn more about.

5. Improve your language choices in future conversations.

Queerly Represent Me Ltd   http://representme.charity   hello@representme.charity

Calling out others

If somebody else uses ableist language, you may like to consider calling them out. Learning how to call people out is particularly important for allies because people directly impacted by ableism may feel less safe calling out ablebodied and neurotypical people or may find this more emotionally draining.

Before calling somebody out, you should first consider:
- your safety if you speak out
- who the other person or people are
- your role in the context where the language was used
- the power difference between you and the person or people using the language
- your relationship to the person or people using the language
- the context and culture where the language was used
- whether it is the first time or whether there is a history or pattern

If you feel safe and comfortable, you can call somebody out by following these steps:
- Clearly identify the action, word, or phrase that you are calling out
- Explicitly tell the speaker that this is ableist
- Acknowledge that the speaker was likely not deliberately ableist
- Explain that unintentional ableism is still harmful to you and others
- If you feel able, answer the speaker's questions as well as you can
- Alternatively, politely let the speaker know that there are plenty of resources designed to help people learn more about ableism and how to change their language

You may want to share your favourite resources about ableism and language with the speaker, either in the moment or via an alternative method (email, instant messenger, etc) so they can learn more in their own time. You can also help the speaker with identifying some key search terms they can use in their own research.

However, remember that it's not your responsibility to educate the speaker and at any stage you can inform the speaker that you don't have the capacity to talk about this further with them right now.

Reclaiming language

Occasionally, some ableist words may be reclaimed by disabled and/or neurodiverse people as a term of empowerment. If this happens, those words do not automatically become available for everyone to use.

Generally, if you are part of the group who was historically harmed by the word, you are able to reclaim it because the connotations of its use today would be harming you. If you are not part of the group who was historically harmed by the word, it's not your place to reclaim it. Either way, it is important to be respectful of each individual's experience; even if you have reclaimed a word, you may be interacting with people who still find the word harmful and offensive, and avoiding harm should always be the priority.

Resources

Autistic Hoya: Ableism / language
https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html
This article by Lydia X. Z. Brown (Autistic Hoya) contains a comprehensive list of ableist words and phrases, and what groups of people they refer to, as well as alternative terms to use while trying to avoid terms with ableist roots.

Iwazaru Bot
https://github.com/silasary/iwazaru_bot
This Discord bot provides gentle reminders when ableist or other exclusionary and hurtful language is used. Developed by silasary.