

## TOOL – UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

Disability can be defined as a physical or mental condition that impacts a person’s ability to do certain activities and interact with the world around them. According to the [Center for Disease Control](#), one in four adults (26.8%) in the United States have a disability. Although the phrase “people with disabilities” may suggest a single, unified group, the needs and experiences of individuals within this community vary widely. Even people with the same disability can have vastly different perspectives.

### **ABLEISM**

People who self-identify or are labelled by others as disabled often face intentional and unintentional discrimination referred to as ableism. Ableism defines people by their disability, viewing them as inherently inferior to people without disabilities. When people view disability as a personal tragedy, or a problem to be fixed, they fail to recognize the ways that the environment creates barriers. Creating accessible spaces is a shared social responsibility that provides people with disabilities equal opportunities to participate.

The prevalence of ableism in society prevents many people with invisible disabilities from disclosing or embracing this identify, and getting the supports they need. Ableism can manifest in a variety of ways including:

#### ***Asking someone what is “wrong” with them***

Besides being intrusive, this question frames disability as a defect. Acknowledge disability, just as you would acknowledge anyone else’s uniqueness but don’t ask personal questions to satisfy your curiosity. Remember, disability is just one aspect of identity. Disabled people have multidimensional identities and interests.

#### ***Calling a person with a disability an inspiration.***

While this might be intended as a complement, being pitied is dehumanizing. Disability is a natural part of the human condition, not a tragedy. Calling people heroic or inspirational for living with a disability is condescending. Learn more: Watch Stella Young’s amazing TED talk, [I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much - TED](#)

#### ***Using terms like “differently abled” and “special needs”***

Disability isn’t a bad word. Avoid euphemisms which imply that there is something shameful about acknowledging disability. Most people prefer person-first language that puts the person before the disability (i.e. person with a disability), but some prefer identity-first language that puts the disability before the person (i.e. disabled person). Note how a person refers to themselves and follow their lead. Don’t let the fear of saying the wrong thing stop you from engaging with people with disabilities. Be vulnerable and willing to risk making a mistake.

#### ***Saying “you don’t look disabled” or “I don’t see you as disabled”***



Minimizing a person's disability or implying that there is something inherently bad about having a disability is problematic. Disability is a part of an individual's identity. You can appreciate the unique qualities and characteristics of a person, without minimizing their disability.

### ***Talking to a person with a disability as if they are a child***

Don't "other" people. Treat adults like adults regardless of ability or background. Speak directly to the individual, not their companion or sign language interpreter. Assume competence. Look beyond perceived limitations and challenge your assumptions about what people with disabilities are capable of. The soft bigotry of low expectations denies people with disabilities opportunities for participation and growth.

### ***Offering help without asking***

If you are unsure of how you can support a person with a disability, ask them. Do not give assistance without first asking if help is wanted. Don't ask repeatedly or say, "are you sure?" Respect someone's choice even if it appears to you that they are struggling. A person's mobility equipment, such as a wheelchair or cane, is part of their personal space. Never touch or move it without permission. Do not pet or engage with service animals without permission.

### ***Speaking for someone with a disability***

Listen attentively. When you are talking with a person who has difficulty speaking, be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than interrupting or speaking for them. Don't pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.

## **LEARN MORE**

- [Disability Sensitivity Training Video](#)
- [Crip Camp](#) -Available on Netflix Crip Camp is a 2020 documentary that tells the story of how relationships formed at a summer camp for teens with disabilities, led to a powerful movement for disability rights.
- Stella Young's amazing TED talk, [I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much - TED](#)
- World Institute on Disability [General Accessibility and Etiquette Guides](#)
- [Communicating With and About People with Disabilities \(wa.gov\)](#)