

TOOL – UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

A disability is a condition that can make it harder for someone to do certain activities or interact with the world. In the U.S., about 1 in 4 adults has a disability. But not all disabilities are the same. Each person's experience is different. Even people with the same disability may have different challenges and perspectives.

WHAT IS ABLEISM?

Ableism is treating people with disabilities unfairly. It happens when people think those with disabilities are less capable or when they see disability as a problem instead of recognizing that barriers in society make life harder. We all have a role in making spaces more accessible so that everyone has equal opportunities.

Some people with invisible disabilities (disabilities that are not easy to see) may not tell others about their disability because of ableism. Ableism can show up in many ways, such as:

Asking “What’s wrong with you?”

This question is rude and makes it seem like having a disability is bad. Instead, treat people with respect and don't ask personal questions unless they choose to share.

Calling someone with a disability “inspiring”

People with disabilities are just living their lives like everyone else. Saying they are “brave” or “heroic” for doing everyday things can feel insulting.

Using words like “differently abled” and “special needs”

Most people prefer the word “disability.” Some like “person with a disability,” while others prefer “disabled person.” Listen to what someone calls themselves and follow their lead.

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

Disability is part of a person's identity. Saying these things can make someone feel invisible or ignored.

Talking to a person with a disability like they are a child

Treat adults like adults, no matter their disability. Speak directly to them, not to their helper or interpreter.



Washington State

OFFICE OF EQUITY

Offering help without asking

If you want to help someone, ask first. Don't keep asking if they say no. Also, never touch someone's wheelchair, cane, or service animal without permission.

Speaking for someone with a disability

Be patient and listen. If someone has trouble speaking, give them time. If you don't understand, repeat what you heard and let them correct you.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Here are some great resources to help you understand more about disabilities and how to be respectful:

- [Crip Camp \(Netflix\)](#) – A documentary about a summer camp that helped start a big movement for disability rights.
- TED Talk: [“I’m Not Your Inspiration, thank you very much”](#) – A powerful talk by Stella Young about why people with disabilities don't want pity.
- [Disability Sensitivity Training Video](#) – A guide to treating people with disabilities with respect.
- World Institute on Disability [General Accessibility and Etiquette Guides](#)
- Accessibility and Etiquette Guides – Learn how to communicate and interact with people with disabilities in a respectful way.