

# FACT SHEET

## THE EFFECTS OF ABLEIST LANGUAGE

BY RACHEL CULP AND KATHLEEN BOGART

Words have power. This is also true of the words we use around disability. If you scroll through news articles about people with disabilities, you may see words or phrases like “stricken with multiple sclerosis,” “burn victim,” or “suffering from polio.” This language is rooted in ableism and uses loaded, emotion-heavy words rather than neutral language.

Ableism can be defined as bias, prejudice, or discrimination on the basis of disability. Ableism can be intentional or unintentional and is often rooted in the belief that disabled people aren’t as capable or valuable as people without disabilities. Ableist language comes in many forms, including the emotion-heavy language above, euphemisms, backhanded compliments, or pity.

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A **euphemism** refers to when a word or phrase is substituted for another. Euphemisms are often used when talking about taboo subjects to avoid being offensive. An example of a disability euphemism is the phrase “differently abled” in place of “disabled.” While the intentions behind a euphemism may be good, their usage can feel dismissive and implies that the word that is being replaced (in this case disability) is something so taboo that it shouldn’t be discussed openly. In reaction to these euphemisms, a social media movement asserts that #DisabledIsNotABadWord.

Ableist language can also take the form of **backhanded compliments** that have the appearance of flattery but include some negative or qualifier. Examples of backhanded disability compliments include “You don’t look disabled,” “You don’t come across as autistic,” or “You’re too pretty to be in a wheelchair.” In fact, this form is so common that it even has its own Twitter hashtag: #DisabledCompliments started by @Imani\_Barbarin.

Backhanded compliments can be particularly hurtful when they are qualified by a negative expectation or stereotype because it boils a person down to one singular part of their identity (in this case a disability) and insinuates that this part is inherently “bad.” In other words, backhanded compliments can perpetuate stereotypes and stigma under the guise of flattery.

Similarly, **pity** is also a frequent response to disability. Pity language can be a comment like “It’s such a pity you’re disabled, you’re so smart!” or an infantilizing tone where someone talks down to an adult as if they were a child.

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Such language can be hurtful because of the ideas underlying the words. In these examples above, the subtext is that “disabled people can’t be smart” or that “it’s okay to talk to and treat disabled adults like children.” This subtext is hurtful because it perpetuates the idea that disabled people are “less than” people without disabilities and that people with disabilities are incompetent.

Again, it is important to underline that, like all of the previous forms of ableist language, while the comment may be well-intentioned, such language can be extraordinarily hurtful, particularly when repeatedly used.

Ableist language is just one of the possible forms of **ableist microaggressions**. Ableist microaggressions are words, actions, or behaviors that may be well-intentioned, but reflect a negative belief about people with disabilities. It is important to note that the prefix “micro” does not necessarily mean that the aggression was small; instead, it means the aggression happened at the personal level rather than the structural or group level. For example, imagine a person seeing someone with a physical disability, grimacing, and then walking in the opposite direction. Since the exchange happened on a personal level, this would be a microaggression. On the other hand, imagine if a group started spreading misinformation insinuating that people with disabilities should not be parents, this is targeted at people with disabilities as a group, so it would be a macroaggression.

It is important to acknowledge the harm caused by microaggressions as studies have shown that experiencing more ableist microaggressions can have negative mental health outcomes for people with disabilities. These findings support the minority stress model, which suggests that members of minority groups, in this case, disabled people, experience chronic stress as a result of discrimination, bias, and prejudice. This in turn can lead to health disparities, which impact things like access to healthcare, quality of healthcare, and education. Simply put, microaggressions and other forms of discrimination contribute to higher levels of chronic stress, which can then have adverse health impacts.

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#### SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Ableist microaggressions are all too common, but they don't have to be. Here's how you can help.

1. Listen. First and foremost, listen to and respect disabled voices and experiences.
2. Educate yourself about ableism. There are many resources on ableism, including books, podcasts, and even social media posts.
3. Ask, don't assume. Don't assume someone's disability or needs. If you want to help, ask if it is okay for you to do so and what help (if any) would be appreciated. Remember to be respectful if the person declines help.
4. Think before speaking. Taking a few extra seconds can have a big impact! Before saying something, take a few moments and ask yourself:
  - *What kind of language am I using? Is my language negative, neutral, or positive?*
  - *Are there any negative beliefs underlying what I want to say?*
  - *Am I perpetuating a disability stereotype or cliché?*
  - *Is my comment unsolicited?*
  - *Why do I want to say this?*
  - *Am I treating this person as an equal?*
5. Address ableism. When you see ableism, point it out. There are a variety of non-confrontational ways to do this, for example:
  - *Ask why. "I'm sorry I don't understand, could you explain that wording?" or "I don't think that's funny, could you tell me why you think it's funny?"*
  - *Educate. Politely let the person know that what they just said or did was ableist and hurtful. Explain what ableism is and why our words and actions are important and impactful, even if they aren't intended to harm.*

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