Avoiding Ableist Language

**Purpose:** Disability metaphors are abound in our culture, and they exist almost entirely as pejoratives. As Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg wrote on DisabilityandRepresentation.com, “If a culture’s language is full of pejorative metaphors about a group of people, that culture is not going to see those people as fully entitled to the same inclusion as people in a more favored group.” This handout’s primary purpose is to serve as a reference for linguistic microaggressions and everyday, casual ableism.

**Barren**
Refers to people who are infertile and carries sexist connotations as well as ableist ones.

**Blind to ____ / turn a blind eye to ____ / blinded by ignorance/bigotry/etc.**
Refers to Blind people or people with visual impairments.

**Bound to a wheelchair (wheelchair bound)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Confined to a wheelchair**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Crazy**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Cretin**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Cripple/Crippled (by ____)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Daft**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Deaf-Mute**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments.

**Deaf to ____ / turn a deaf ear to ____ / etc.**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments.

**Derp (also herp-derp and variations)**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.
**Diffability**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Differently abled**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Dumb**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments, people with speech impairments, or people with linguistic or communication disorders or disabilities.

**Feeble-Minded**
Refers to people with mental, psychiatric, intellectual, or developmental disabilities.

**Handicap(ped)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Handicapped**
Usually refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities, but can also mean any person with a disability.

**Harelip**
Refers to people with cleft-lip palette or similar facial deformities.

**Hearing-Impaired**
Refers to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

**Idiot(ic)**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Imbecile**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Insane or Insanity**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Lame**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Loony/Loony Bin**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Lunatic**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.
**Madhouse/Mad/Madman**
Refers to an institution housing people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Maniac**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Mental/Mental Case**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Mental Defective**
Refers to people with mental, psychiatric, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities.

**Mongoloid**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities and specifically Down Syndrome. Derives from a double-whammy of racism AND ableism, from the belief that people with Down Syndrome look like people from Mongolia.

**Moron(ic)**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Nuts**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Psycho**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Psychopath(ic)**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Psycho(tic)**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Retard(ed)/[anything]-tard**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**[you belong on the] Short-bus/ that's short-bus material/etc.**
Refers to people with intellectual, learning, or other mental disabilities.

**Simpleton**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Spaz(zed)**
Refers to people with cerebral palsy or similar neurological disabilities.
**Specially Abled**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Special Needs**
Usually refers to people with learning, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, but can mean any person with a disability.

**Stupid**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities (i.e. "in a stupor").

**Suffers from _____**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Wacko/Whacko**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

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**Instead of an ableist word, perhaps you actually meant to say...**
(more invective replacements that use profanity/swears are included at the very bottom in a separate list)

Asinine
Bad
Bleak
Boring
Bullish
Callous
Careless
Confusing
Contemptible
Coward
Dense
Devoid of _____
Disgusting
Dull
Enraged
Evil
Extremist
Furious
Gross
Half-hearted
Horrible
Ignoramus
Ignorant
Impolite
Incomprehensible
Inconsiderate
Inconsistent
Infuriating
Insensible
Irrational
Jerk
Lacking in _____
Livid
Mean
Nasty
Nefarious
Nonsense
Nonsensical
Obtuse
Outrageous
Overwrought
Paradoxical
Pathetic
Petulant
Putrid
Rage-inducing
Reckless
Ridiculous
Rude
Scornful
Self-contradictory
Shameful
Solipsistic
Spurious
Terrible
Tyrannical
Unbelievable
Unconscionable
Unheard of
Uninspired
Unoriginal
Unthinkable
Unthinking
Useless
Vapid
Vile
Vomit-inducing
Without any _____ whatsoever
For describing people with disabilities/disabled people in general:
Disabled
Has a disability
With a disability
With a chronic health condition
Has a chronic health condition
Neurotypical
Neurodivergent

For describing people on the autism spectrum:
On the autism spectrum
Autistic
With autism [if preferred by individual]
Aspie [if preferred by individual]

For describing people with intellectual disabilities:
With an intellectual disability
Has an intellectual disability
With a cognitive disability
Has a cognitive disability

For describing people with sensory disabilities or impairments:
Blind
Low vision
Deaf
Hard of hearing

For describing people with physical or mobility disabilities:
With a physical disability
With a mobility disability
Uses a wheelchair
In a wheelchair
Uses crutches
Uses a cane
Uses a walker
Has [specific condition here]

Thanks to the following websites:

http://www.disabilityandrepresentation.com/2013/09/14/ableist-language/