

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.

Handicapable

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.

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

Wretched

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

Neuroatypical

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.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>

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

