

Ableism in Language

Source: Lydia X.Z. Brown

Barren

Refers to people who are infertile, carries sexist connotations as well as ableist ones.

Blind to ____ / turn a blind eye to ____ / blinded by ignorance/bigotry/etc.

Refers to Blind, low-vision, or sight-limited people.

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 or hard of hearing people.

Deaf to ____ / turn a deaf ear to ____ / etc.

Refers to Deaf or hard of hearing people.

Derp (also herp-derp and variations)

Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

Diffability

Can refer to any person with a disability, and is usually a euphemistic phrase to avoid saying "disability" or "disabled."

Differently abled or different abilities

Can refer to any person with a disability, and is usually a euphemistic phrase to avoid

saying "disability" or "disabled."

Dumb

Refers to d/Deaf or hard of hearing people, people with speech-related disabilities, 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, and is usually a euphemistic phrase to avoid saying "disability" or "disabled."

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 palate or similar facial deformities/cosmetic disabilities.

Hearing-Impaired

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

Hermaphrodite

Refers to people with intersex conditions, whether or not they were coercively assigned to a particular sex/gender, and whether or not they currently identify with a binary gender.

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.

Invalid (as a noun, as in "my neighbor is an invalid and never goes outside")

Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities or chronic health conditions.

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.

Manic

Refers to someone with bipolar (used to be called manic depression).

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.

Midget

Refers to little people or people with small stature or a form of dwarfism.

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.

Morbidly obese (or just obese)

Refers to fat people/people of size. It's okay to use the word "fat."

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 (examples: libtard, fucktard, etc.)

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. Usually a euphemistic phrase to avoid saying "disability" or "disabled."

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.

The term "impairment" is sometimes acceptable and sometimes not. Blind, low-vision, and limited-sight people generally find "visual impairment" or "vision impairment" offensive. Likewise, d/Deaf and hard of hearing people generally find "hearing impairment" offensive. Other disability communities use the word commonly, as in, "learning impairment," "cognitive impairment," or "functional impairment." Your mileage may vary.

Other Examples: use of a disability term to describe anything not related to a person with that disability (e.g. "that presentation was all over the place. Totally schizophrenic," "Ugh, I can't be around other humans today. I'm so autistic," "the weather today has

been totally bipolar!”)

Non-ableist language:

Always respect an individual person's preference for identifying or describing themselves, even if that is not what the majority in a community prefers. Again, as above, not every person with every disability is personally upset or hurt by every term on this list, even ones that reference their specific disability. That's why this list is meant as a learning/awareness/consciousness tool, not a litmus test or a censorship guide.

Instead of an ableist word or phrase, 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
Crappy
Dense
Devoid of _____
Disgusting
Dull
Enraged
Evil
Extremist
Furious
Gross
Horrible
Ignoramus
Ignorant
Impolite
Inane
Incomprehensible
Inconsiderate
Inconsistent

Infuriating
Insensible
Inspid
Irrational
Jerk
Lacking in _____
Livid
Mean
Nasty
Nefarious
Nonsense
Nonsensical
Obtuse
Outrageous
Overwrought
Paradoxical
Pathetic
Petulant
Pissant
Putrid
Rage-inducing
Reckless
Ridiculous
Rude
Scornful
Self-contradictory
Shameful
Solipsistic
Spurious
Terrible
Tyrannical
Unbelievable
Unconscionable
Unheard of
Uninspired
Unoriginal
Unthinkable
Unthinking
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:

Person/people on the autism/autistic spectrum
Autistic person/people
Person/people with autism
Aspie/Autie (note -- this term is often only really used by people who claim it, and often not by many politically autistic people)

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:

Blind
Low vision
Deaf
Hard of hearing
DeafBlind
DeafDisabled

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/With [specific condition here]

