

# Avoiding Ableist Language

**Purpose:** Disability metaphors are abounded 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 every day, 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 derp-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.

**Suggested words to use instead:**

Asinine	Enraged	Insensible	Pathetic	Unbelievable
Bad	Evil	Irrational	Petulant	Unconscionable
Bleak	Extremist	Jerk	Putrid	Unheard of
Boring	Furious	Lacking in _____	Rage-inducing	Uninspired
Bullish	Gross	Livid	Reckless	Unoriginal
Callous	Half-hearted	Mean	Ridiculous	Unthinkable
Careless	Horrible	Nasty	Rude	Unthinking
Confusing	Ignoramus	Nefarious	Scornful	Useless
Contemptible	Ignorant	Nonsense	Self-contradictory	Vapid
Coward	Impolite	Nonsensical	Shameful	Vile
Dense	Incomprehensible	Obtuse	Solipsistic	Vomit-inducing
Devoid of _____	Inconsiderate	Outrageous	Spurious	Without any _____
Disgusting	Inconsistent	Overwrought	Terrible	whatsoever
Dull	Infuriating	Paradoxical	Tyrannical	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]

**The terms contained in this glossary have been reproduced from the following resources:**

1. Decolonizing the Music Room. *Definitions*. <https://decolonizingthemusicroom.com>
2. Anti-Violence Project. *Glossary*. University of Victoria
3. Colors of Resistance. *Definitions for the Revolution*
4. Cram, R. H. (2002). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook*
5. Equity and Inclusion. *Glossary*. UC Davis
6. Potapchuk, M., Leiderman, S., et al. (2009). *Glossary*. Center for Assessment and Policy Development
7. Center for Diversity & Inclusion. *Glossary of Bias Terms*. Washington University in St. Louis
8. Ontario Human Rights Commission. *Glossary of human rights terms*
9. W.K. Kellogg Foundation. *Racial Resource Guide*
10. Augsburg University. *Avoiding Ableist Language*
11. Autistic Hoya. *Ableism/Language*
12. Disability and Representation. *Doing Social Justice: Thoughts on Ableist Language and Why It Matters*
13. DC.gov. *Person First Language*.