



Starkloff Disability Institute Guide for Disability Allies

Stereotypes and misconceptions about disability are so common that we can exclude or misjudge people with disabilities without intending to. This guide will help Disability Allies understand and counter misconceptions about disability in your everyday life.



Starkloff
Disability Institute

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Disability is the only minority group that anyone can join at anytime.



The Seven Pillars of Disability Allyship

1 Disability is Not a Dirty Word

Euphemisms like “differently abled,” “special,” or “superpower” do more harm than good.

2 Disability is Common

People with disabilities represent the largest and most diverse demographic group world-wide. Ignoring us means ignoring 27% of the U.S. population, over two billion people world-wide, and a combined global spending power of \$13 trillion.

3 We are People First

People with disabilities are not “freaks,” “victims,” or “heroes.” We are not “afflicted with” or “overcoming” anything. Though our bodies are different, we are human beings like everyone else and deserve to be treated as such.

4 We are a Community

People with disabilities have built communities of support across the world. We have our own languages, in-jokes, cultures, and etiquette that deserve to be respected.

5 We are the Experts

We know our bodies better than anyone else and have the right to speak for ourselves. Don’t make assumptions about our capabilities or talk to us through our companions, assistants, or interpreters. Speak to us directly.

6 Our Bodies are Our Property

Don’t touch us, our property, or our service animals without our permission first. Don’t ask invasive questions like “What happened to you?” or “What can you do?” Don’t assume we need or want your help. We will ask for help when we need it.

7 Our Biggest Barrier is Our Environment

The biggest challenge people with disabilities face is that we live in a world that was never designed with us in mind. A Disability Ally doesn’t ask “How can we make disabled people more normal?” They ask, “How can we make the environment more accessible?”



Words Matter: Person with a Disability vs. Disabled Person

Person-first language like “person with a disability” is used by those who feel their disability is only a part of who they are. They want to be recognized as a person first. **Identity-first** language like “disabled person” is used by those who see their disability as a key part of who they are. Identity-first language is preferred by the Deaf (capital D) and Autistic (capital A) communities.

There is no right or wrong when it comes to person-first or identity-first language. Each individual and community chooses for themselves what works best for them. Words that are offensive to some might be preferred language to others. We invite you to research the language used by the different disability communities, and **when in doubt, ask.**

USE	AVOID
Person with a disability, disabled person	Cripple, invalid (literally means “not valid”), differently-abled, disAbled (with a capital A), special, special needs, handicapped, superpower
Person who has, person with (e.g., person who has cerebral palsy)	Victim of, suffers from, afflicted with (e.g., suffers from cerebral palsy), survivor, superhero
Uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user	Restricted or confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
Nondisabled, neurotypical (having “typical” neurology)	Normal (referring to nondisabled persons as “normal” insinuates that people with disabilities are abnormal)
Deaf (capital D), hard of hearing, nonspeaking, speech impairment	Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb
Disabled since birth, congenital disability, born with...	Birth defect
Mental health condition, psychiatric history, psychiatric disability, consumer of mental health services	Crazy, insane, mental patient, nuts, lunatic, psycho, schitzo, disturbed, unstable
Epilepsy, seizures, traumatic brain injury	Fits, brain damaged
Person with dwarfism, person of short stature, limb-difference, amputee, craniofacial anomaly	Dwarf, “midget,” deformed, freak
Neurodivergent, learning disability, intellectual disability, developmental delay, cognitive disability, autistic, autism spectrum, ASD, ADHD, high or low support needs	“Retarded,” slow, lazy, stupid, underachiever, sperg, spaz, spastic, savant or autistic-savant, “high-functioning autism” and other functioning labels, Mental Retardation and Asperger’s (no longer valid diagnoses, but some may still use these to describe themselves)

For Specific Disabilities

The following is not a comprehensive list. Remember, when in doubt, ask.

For People who are Blind or have Low Vision

DO:

- ✓ Identify yourself by name such as, “Hi, it’s Jason.”
- ✓ Provide detailed descriptions like “four doors after turning right from the elevator.”
- ✓ Lead a person who is blind only after you have offered, and they have accepted.
- ✓ Research how to be a sighted guide for the blind.

AVOID:

- ✗ Phrases like “over there” as they have little meaning to a visually impaired person.
- ✗ Moving object or furniture after their position has been learned by the person.
- ✗ Holding onto or pulling the person.
- ✗ Interacting with someone’s guide dog without permission.

For Deaf People or People who are Hard of Hearing

DO:

- ✓ Speak directly to the person, not their interpreter.
- ✓ If the person reads lips, speak as you normally would and not in an exaggerated way. Face the person when speaking so they can see your lips.
- ✓ Seek out nearby quiet spaces with minimal background noise.

AVOID:

- ✗ Physical barriers between you and the person while conversing.
- ✗ Becoming impatient if it takes longer to communicate.
- ✗ Standing with a light behind you. This makes it harder to see your face.

For People with Speech Impairments or who use Alternative Communication Styles

DO:

- ✓ Ask the person to repeat themselves if needed. They would prefer you to understand what they say rather than spare their feelings.
- ✓ Repeat what the person said to confirm you understood them correctly.
- ✓ Use alternative communication if asked, like texting, chatting, or email.
- ✓ Provide extra time if requested.

AVOID:

- ✗ Completing the person's sentences for them.
- ✗ Ignoring what the person said or humoring them without listening.

For People who use Mobility Aids

DO:

- ✓ Adjust your viewing angle during conversation. It is very uncomfortable to consistently look up for a wheelchair user.
- ✓ Find a place to sit. It can be hard to stand for long periods even with a cane or walker.
- ✓ When asked to fold, carry, or store a device, treat it with the same respect you would when holding a pair of eyeglasses.

AVOID:

- ✗ Assuming the person needs assistance by pushing their wheelchair.
- ✗ Leaning, moving, or hanging things on a mobility aid without permission. It is their personal space.

For People Experiencing Physical or Mental Health Issues

DO:

- ✓ Treat illnesses as illnesses, not weaknesses.
- ✓ Give time and space if requested.
- ✓ Be flexible. Flair-ups and bad days can't always be predicted.
- ✓ Stay calm during emotional moments like manic episodes, panic attacks, and meltdowns.
- ✓ Encourage people to get appropriate, qualified help.

AVOID:

- ✗ Trying to "fix" things.
- ✗ Offering unsolicited health advice, especially if you aren't qualified.
- ✗ Doubting. Just because someone looks healthy now doesn't mean they aren't struggling.
- ✗ Blaming. No one can predict physical or mental health issues.

For People with Atypical Body Structures including People with Dwarfism

DO:

- ✓ Approach and interact with the person like anyone else. The person is already aware of how their body is structured and likely has a plan for how they'll interact.
- ✓ Be flexible. For example, if the person can't shake with their right hand, use your left hand.

AVOID:

- ✗ Not interacting. It might make you more comfortable to avoid the person, but it's being rude to them.
- ✗ Staring too long. The person knows their body will attract attention, but staring is rude.
- ✗ Asking "What happened to you?" That's none of your business.

Demystifying Neurodiversity

A lot of people get confused by terms like neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and developmental disabilities.

Neurodiversity recognizes that everyone is wired differently. Some of us are big picture thinkers while others prefer to focus on the details. Some of us need quiet to focus while others work best with background music. All of us need some level of accommodation to get the most out of our brains.

Neurodivergent refers to people living with disabilities that impact how their brains function. Examples include ADHD, auditory processing disorder, autism, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, developmental delays, Down syndrome, Fragile X, OCD, panic disorder, schizophrenia, traumatic brain injuries, and more. People without disabilities like these are called neurotypical.

Developmental disabilities are disabilities that impact how children grow and develop. These can include disabilities that impact brain function, but they also include mobility impairments, low vision, hearing loss, and a host of other disabilities.

DO:

- ✓ Treat neurodivergent people in an age-appropriate manner. Every adult deserves to be treated like an adult.
- ✓ Make meaningful adjustments if requested. For example, providing job interview questions beforehand.
- ✓ Make documents accessible to screen readers. This also benefits people with low vision.
- ✓ Use multiple means to convey and organize information. For example, combining words, pictures, and colors.

AVOID:

- ✗ Assuming developmental disabilities and developmental delays are the same thing.
- ✗ Using outdated or disproven concepts like “mental age” and IQ.
- ✗ Expecting neurodivergent people to “act normal.”
- ✗ Assuming neurodivergent people are unintelligent, can’t think for themselves, or are like children.

What an Ally Would Say

Ableism is the discrimination of people with disabilities in favor of the nondisabled. Being a Disability Ally means fighting ableism when you see it.

Remember that **actions are ableist, not people**. Most people usually don't intend to discriminate, but we can still do so without realizing it. When you encounter an ableist action, here's your ally approach:

1 Respect Privacy

Pull the person aside to speak with them privately.

“Can I talk to you in private for a minute?”

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2 Assume Innocence

Get clarification before trying to correct someone.

“When you said she was acting crazy, what do you mean by that?”

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3 Take Ownership

Make it personal to you.

“I felt uncomfortable because language like that has been used to put down people with mental illnesses for years.”

4 Offer Alternatives

What could they do or say instead?

“It sounds like ‘erratic’ might be a better word to use in this situation.”

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5 Provide Resources

Where can they go to learn more?

“If you want, I have a guide I could share with you.”

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6 Give Thanks

They took the time to hear you out.

“Thanks for listening to my concerns.”

Is Your Organization a Disability Ally?

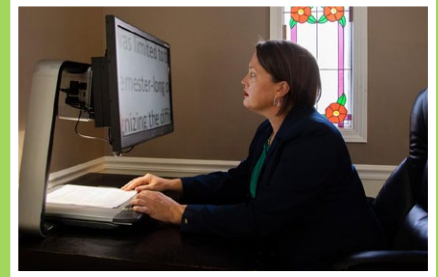
Starkloff Disability Institute offers consulting services for employers aiming to become more inclusive. Contact us at info@starkloff.org or visit starkloff.org to ensure your workplace is providing a positive, accessible, and welcoming space where people with disabilities can thrive!



LEARN MORE

Scan the QR code below to learn how we can help your company recruit, prepare for, and welcome professionals with disabilities.





OUR MISSION

We build inclusion where we live, learn, work, and play through disability-led programs that advance economic opportunity and transform lives.



Starkloff Disability Institute
133 S. 11th Street, Suite 500 | St. Louis, MO 63102
Phone: (314) 588-7090
www.starkloff.org | info@starkloff.org