Avoiding Ableist Language

What is ableism and how does it harm the autistic community?
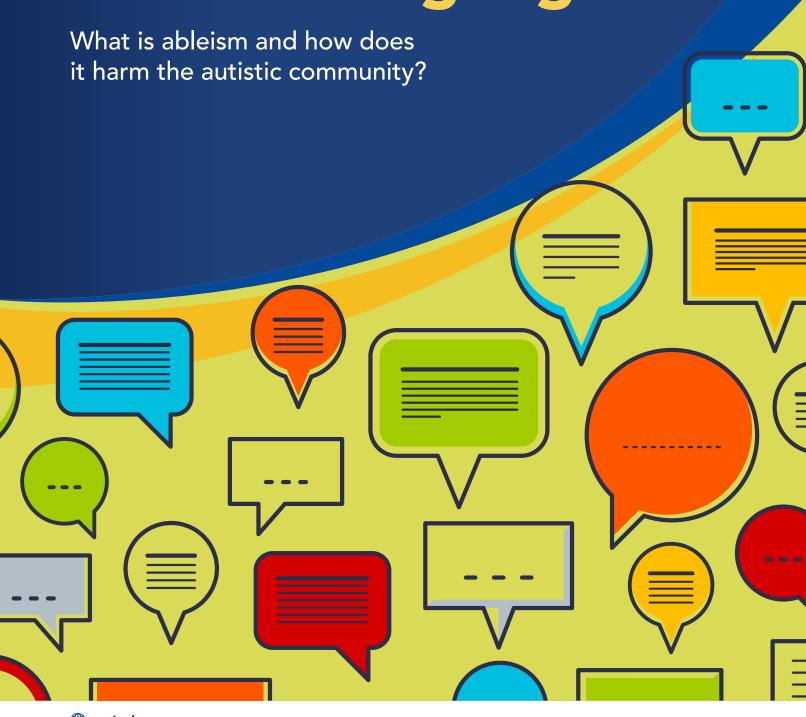
Avoiding Ableist Language

What is ableism and how does it harm the autistic community? This tip sheet is designed to describe ableism, how to avoid it, and ways to replace our language to be more neuroinclusive.

❏ **What is ableism?**
Ableism is the discrimination against disabled people based on the belief that typical development is not only superior, but the **correct** model for development. As such, there is a stigma that disabled people are "broken" and need to be "fixed" to be more like their typically developed peers.

❏ **Ableism has always been prevalent in our society and affects how we see and talk about disabilities, including autism.**
Misinformation, overgeneralizations, and stereotypes can impact how autistic individuals are viewed. As such, autistic individuals may be put in situations where competence is not presumed, and they are viewed as incapable of demonstrating any functional skills.

Alternatively, autistic individuals who are more independent may be presumed to not need any support when there may still be areas in which they struggle. In some situations, these autistic individuals may be told their autism is not impactful enough for them to claim this label or have this part of their identity questioned.

> "I cringe when people make comments based on assumptions founded on misinformation—particularly when they generalize behaviors and skill sets (or lack thereof). It becomes incredibly harmful when these generalizations lead to pigeon-holing people regarding what they can and cannot 'do.'"
>
> *~Emelyne Bingham, self-advocate*

❏ **Because society's growing awareness and acceptance of disabilities is still evolving, there are times where even the most well-meaning individuals might say something offensive.**
It is important that when these mistakes occur, we acknowledge them rather than cover it up and work to educate ourselves to prevent future occurrences.

> *"'You don't seem autistic' or 'I don't think you're autistic' triggers immediate cringe, but I often pivot to translating that to 'I don't understand autism' and then I'm okay."*
>
> *~Dave Caudel, self-advocate*

Potentially Ableist Terminology		
	Language to Avoid	**Say Instead**
Patronizing Language	Special interest(s)	Area(s) of interest/expertise; focused, intense, or passionate interest(s)
	"Special needs" (as a general descriptor)	Description of specific needs and disabilities
	Challenging/disruptive/problem behavior	Meltdown*, stereotypy*, or specific description of the behavior
	Person-first language (to refer to autism)	Identity-first language; "on the (autism) spectrum" **
Medicalized Language	High/low functioning; high/low severity or support needs	Describe specific strengths and needs while acknowledging that the levels of supports needs likely varies across domains
	"At risk" or "red flags" for ASD	Increased likelihood/chance of autism
	Co-morbid	Co-occurring
	Autism symptoms	Specific autistic characteristics, features, or traits***
	Treatment	Support, services, educational strategies
Discussions on Autism Discourse	Cure/recovery; "optimal outcome" rhetoric	Discussions focused on quality-of-life outcomes
	Prioritizing "passing" as allistic (non-autistic)****	Prioritizing mental health and well-being, which can include embracing autistic identities
	Autism as a puzzle	Autism as part of neurodiversity
	Autism as an epidemic	Autism as increasingly recognized/ diagnosed

* When applicable
** See "Person First vs. Identity First" for more information
*** See "Discussing Autistic Traits" for more information
**** See "Masking and Self-Advocacy" for more information

❑ **Summary:**

Ableism is harmful to autistic community because it creates a stereotype that minimizes the unique strengths and needs of each individual. Even though mistakes are bound to happen, it's important to learn (1) what the autistic community is saying about potentially harmful language and (2) be an example for others by practicing more inclusive language.

❑ **Additional Resources:**

Here is an article that highlights how you can avoid ableist language.
Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers

This resource was created with direction, input, and feedback from TRIAD's Advisory Committee. For more information about this committee, please visit our website on Community Informed Practice.