

This week's question to consider:

What is ableism? Also, what do you mean we don't owe each other healthy? Shouldn't we be promoting health?

Pro tip: We are all in the process of learning, or unlearning. I unlearned three expressions this week, and my, how uncomfortable it can be to revisit the times I have said those things! Join me in thinking about what we say so casually, and the discomfort of confronting it, so that we can do better.

In the education sector, a familiar term is "universal learning." It has meant something different to different people, but ultimately, it's a stab at accessibility, with a list of suggestions.

Larger text, chunking questions, more time, providing notes. These things can make a significant difference for someone who has trouble seeing small text, has sensory overload when asked to focus on several things at once, takes time to process, or cannot physically hold a pencil. We are familiar, then, with the notion of equity as a *raison d'être* in education.

There exist examples of new considerations of disabled people in our non-education sector society. For example, to get in the building, an accessible button that automatically opens the door. A ramp, to enable wheelchair users to enter. It stands to reason that those who use wheelchairs, who are using crutches or carrying heavy things, benefit from this accessibility.

Another example is the grocery store that offers an hour of dimmed lighting and no music; a reduction in sensory overload hour. This appeals to those who experience migraines in fluorescent overhead light, those with heightened senses who experience the world so fully that it is overwhelming to be amid lights and sounds, those who are nervous or anxious when there is more noise, those who are introverted and feel calmer in the quiet and in reduced light.

Importantly, it takes nothing away from others to include considerations of this nature.

Let's expand on this idea, then, and have a closer look at a few common statements to parse out why they are problematic.

Brace yourselves friends, for you will have heard these expressions.

I have even *said* some of these as recently as one week ago, which I will not be doing going forward. I mention it because this isn't about blaming, whether self or other. In the spirit of expanding our ideas around ableism and what the effect that words can have that perpetuate them.

So! Let's learn together.

a·ble·ism /'ābəˌlɪzəm/

noun

discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and/or people who are perceived to be disabled.

characterizes people who are defined by their disabilities as inferior to the non-disabled.

Expression	Intended meaning	Why it's problematic	Alternative (s)
1. It was insane!	Describing an atypical situation.	Using this expression stigmatizes mental health diagnoses, an othering of people.	It was difficult / chaotic/ atypical / unexpected /challenging!
2. Well, that is kind of lame.	Antonym of cool, fun, pleasant, good, or interesting.	Lame describes a physical impairment. Stigmatizes those who have one.	Well, that is not very interesting/lousy.
3. Are you off your meds?	Behaving in an unusual way.	Stigmatizes the need to take medications, whether for mental or physical health.	Are you alright?
4. She's a psycho!	Behaving in an unexpected way.	Stigmatizes mental impairments, psychosis, or other mental disorders.	She is unpredictable!
5. It's like the blind leading the blind.	Neither person knows what is happening.	Stigmatizes the visually impaired; implies that loss of sight implies lack of knowledge here.	No one knows what's happening here.
6. That fell on deaf ears.	Tried communicating and it did not land with the audience.	Stigmatizes the hearing impaired.	I spoke to the walls in the room.
7. That's dumb.	Describing something that is illogical.	Etymological origin is conflating the hearing impaired with a lack of intelligence.	That's illogical.
8. They are nuts, so... you know.	Dismissing someone's opinion.	Further stigmatizing mental health.	They are often wrong, and I do not value their opinion, so... you know.
9. What a spaz!	Describing a person who is behaving erratically or unpredictably.	This expression has origins in describing the physicality of someone who is experiencing a seizure. Stigmatizes seizures.	What an... unexpected thing you have done, just now! Was that on purpose?*
10. You, sir, are a maniac!	Describing someone who has done an unexpected and dangerous thing, such as cutting you off in traffic despite it <i>definitely</i> being your right-of-way.	Stigmatizes bipolar disorder; mania is an aspect of this disorder.	You, sir, are an absolute danger on these roads!
11. I'm so OCD about cleanliness.	Describing a need for a clean space.	Stigmatizes those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder, minimizes its debilitating effects on a person's daily life.	I love it when my spaces are clean. Clean space, happy face.
12. Take a chill pill / take a pill.	A request for someone to calm down.	Those with anxieties do need to take medication to calm the anxieties. It stigmatizes this need.	What's going on? **
13. Ah, we can't park there, it's a handicapped spot.	The parking spot is designated as an accessible spot, for those who need it.	Stigmatizes those living with a disability, requiring proximity to access a building.	Oh, that's an accessible parking spot, we don't need to use it.
14. It's stupid, is what it is.	Disagreeing with what is happening, disliking what is happening, etc.	Use of this word in this way demeans the intelligence of those involved, and implies that there is something wrong with living with a cognitive impairment.	It's unreasonable, is what it is.

* I admittedly do not have an excellent suggestion here, but I think and hope this expression is rare these days.

** Better to redirect entirely. Truly, it is never helpful to say, "you need to calm down," unless you are Taylor Swift, because that song is fantastic. Proposing that you sing "what's going on."

I have listed 14 things. There are more, of course, and it can be difficult to change these speech patterns, when the first alternative is one that would also find its way on this list.

This is a lot of information, but I believe in you. Maybe screenshot the list and look at it from time to time to unlearn one? Or perhaps focus on the most frequent one that shows up in your life, whether your comments or your near and dear ones' speech patterns.

All this to say, we can always improve. It's often about noticing things we haven't had occasion or reason to notice before.

So why did I say in the title that we don't owe each other healthy? I said this because although health is magnificent, it is not a pre-requisite to treating people with dignity and respect.

Recommended Readings:

Access Living.org Article (Ashley Eisenmenger, Dec. 2019) | [Ableism 101](#)

Everyday Feminism Article (Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg, Nov. 2014) | [Ableist Language Matters](#)

The Body is Not an Apology Article (Mihran Nersesyan, Aug. 2018) | ["Stupid" is an Ableist Slur](#)

Tune in next week for a tip on anti-racism!

Rethinking the origin of every idiom,

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach
Therese Trofimencoff (*she/her*)

a·ble·ism /'ābəˌlɪzəm/

As per www.AccessLiving.Org

Ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing' and defines people by their disability.

Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than,' and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities.