

Handout: Attitudinal Barriers

The biggest challenge for those who have disabilities is typically not the disability itself, but rather the attitudinal barriers imposed by others. “Attitudinal barriers” are ways of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limit the potential of people with disabilities to be independent individuals. The following examples are adapted from **Shout Out to Disabled People – Overcoming Ableism**, by Dia Sutton, which is available at <http://www.evancarmichael.com/Human-Resources/3398/Shout-Out-to-the-Disabled--Overcoming-Ableism.html>.

Dehumanizing

- Seeing the person only in terms of his/her disability.
- Not recognizing the whole person; assuming everything in his/her life – emotions, relationships, work, and choices – revolves around the disability.
- Acting as if people with disabilities have no emotions, no sexuality, impaired intelligence, and/or no ability or desire to make decisions for themselves.
- Not talking directly to the person. Talking about the person in his/her presence.
- Not establishing eye contact.

Generalizing

- Denying people's uniqueness as individuals because they have disabilities.
- Assuming that one person represents (or is just like) all people with disabilities.
- Assuming that someone with one disability necessarily has others, too (for instance, believing that someone with a speech impediment must also have intellectual disabilities).
- Not recognizing the diversity of disabilities, and the diversity of people who share any particular disability.
- Searching for the single right answer about how to act with people with disabilities; not recognizing that every individual is in a unique place with his own process and self-identity.

Disempowering

- Assuming that people with disabilities cannot know what is best for themselves.
- Not listening to people with disabilities.

- Imposing “help” rather than offering it, thereby taking control away from the person.
- Withholding the authority and/or information that would enable a person with a disability to make his/her own decisions.
- Always hiring able-bodied people to design and administer social services for people with disabilities.

Using Oppressive Language

- Equating sick with bad, as in “ill-will,” “ill-fated,” “sickening,” “spastic,” and “deaf and dumb.”

Segregating

- Hiring people with disabilities only to work in handicapped services.
- Believing people with disabilities will all want work related to their disability.
- Assuming people with disabilities should work, live, or learn only with other people with disabilities.
- Scheduling only special activities for accessibility, rather than making all activities accessible.

Overprotecting

- Holding lower expectations of people with disabilities, or giving work that’s too easy.
- Soft-pedaling negative feedback for fear of disabled peoples’ reaction.
- Making decisions for people with disabilities to “protect” them from failing or getting hurt.
- Tracking people with disabilities only into certain job fields.

Excluding

- Not shaking hands.
- Not including a person with disabilities in social or work-related activities.
- Choosing activities or meeting places that are inaccessible (no elevators or wide bathrooms for people with wheelchairs, no sign language translators, etc.).
- Seeking an opinion or perspective from someone with disabilities only on disability-related issues; imagining that he or she does not have valuable opinions and experience on the same breadth of issues you do.