

What does it mean to be ally in the disability community?

To be an ally to people with disabilities, let's first review what the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines as a disability and what that means. According to the ADA, **you are considered to have a disability if you have a physical or mental impairment or medical condition that substantially limits a major life activity, or if you have a history or record of such an impairment or medical condition.**

Disabilities do not recognize race, gender, age, economic status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.

Disabilities cross all segments of the population and people with disabilities is the largest minority group, and it keeps growing. It is not a matter of **if** you will have a disability, it is a matter of **when** you will become a person with a disability.

Disability Statistics

- 26 percent of adults (about 1 in 4) have a disability in the U.S., of which 20 percent will experience a mental health crisis in their lifetime, either temporary or long-term.
- 480,828 people (age 18 to 64) in Washington State are people with disabilities; approximately 17,000 are state workers.
- Washington State ranks 20th out of 50 states for employing people with disabilities.

Definitions

Ability: A concept that symbolizes or categorizes people based on person's ways of navigating and negotiating society – physically, emotionally, psychologically, and/or mentally.

Ableism: The discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior.

At its heart, 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.

Examples of ableism:

- **Not complying with ADA** (i.e. forced sterilization, marriage inequality, employment and equal pay, lack of affordable and accessible housing).
- Assumption that people with disabilities need to be fixed, or seek a “cure at any cost.”

- Representation of disabled people in media is either lacking or largely negative (i.e. seen as disposable).
- **Language:** “I am so OCD,” “pardon my Tourette’s,” or, “that gave me PTSD,” when you have not been diagnosed with the condition marginalizes those who do struggle with it on a daily bases. Other ableism language includes: “the weather is so bipolar,” “are you feeling triggered?” and “what are you, blind?”
- **Stereotypes:** Supercrip, or presenting a disability as a challenge that one must overcome in order to be seen as normal or heroic, such as believing in special abilities to make up for lacking in other areas. Other ableism stereotypes include: dangerous or violent, unintelligent, and better off dead.
- **Micoagressions:** Are you retarded, That feel on deaf ears, can I pray for you, I am so sorry that you have disabled sibilings, She is so psycho, are you off your meds, I’m super OCD about how I clean my apartment, I don’t think of you as disabled you seem normal to me

Able body: Used to describe a person who is not physically disabled, chronically ill, severely obese, or otherwise physically limited; sometimes “temporarily able bodied.”

Access: One’s ability to know, find and/or use the tools and resources that will allow them to live whole and healthy lives.

Advocate: The role of an advocate is to offer independent support to those who feel they are not being heard and to ensure they are taken seriously and that their rights are respected. An advocate does not represent their own views, but instead, amplifies that of the person they are supporting.

Ally: Someone who supports the cause of a marginalized group — women, people of color, people with disabilities, people in the LGBTQ community, people with low income, etc. — and uses their privilege to learn from that group and amplify their cause.

Allyship in the disability community often requires one to look at ableism in a broader scope and to recognize that you might have biases that you didn’t know that you had. Our desire to help sometimes can further hurt those in the disability community because we forget to ask what they want, what they need, and what works for them. Listening is more vital in moments like these. How we speak to individuals with disabilities is important in order to avoid further marginalization of a community that is already marginalized. While people-first language and disability etiquette is important, the most important action you can take is, if you do not know to be an ally, just ask.

Resources

[Example of People's First Language](#)

[Examples of Disability Etiquette](#)

[Job Accommodation Network for people with Disabilities and Employers](#)

[Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Network](#)

[Diversity Includes Disability: Accountable Allyship](#)

[Doing Disability Ally Work](#)

[Disability Justice](#)