

Doing Disability Ally Work

Disabled people are everywhere, and yet are mostly invisible to the nondisabled world. Everyone grew up learning stereotypes about disabled people. Some of these stereotypes are negative (“helpless,” “dependent,” “useless”). Others seem positive but are just as limiting (“cheerful,” “inspiring,” “brave”). In order to end ableism (the system of oppression targeting disabled people), nondisabled people need to learn how to do disability ally work.

respect

- **Recognize** that disabled people are inherently worthwhile.
- **Listen** to disabled people’s stories, experiences, and perspectives.
- **Understand** that having a disability does not make our lives any more inspirational, pitiful or tragic than yours. Our disabilities are ordinary and familiar parts of who we are.
- **Ask before you offer help** to a disabled person. What you assume is helpful may not be. Start with a friendly but non-intrusive question: “Can I provide assistance?” or “Can I get that for you?” Be aware that your offer may not be accepted. Disabled people are the experts about our own lives and what we need.
- **Don't ask** intrusive questions, however well-intentioned. Because of how disabled people are separated from society, many of us deal with daily curiosity about our bodies, minds, and lives. This can be irritating, exhausting, and demeaning.
- **Challenge** your own assumptions. Many people have disabilities that might not be apparent to you. Everyone has a right to request and use the access they need without being criticized or questioned.
- **Ignore** service dogs while they’re working. Don’t pet, feed, or interact with them.

language

- **Don’t use** the words “cripple,” “defect,” “spastic,” “lame,” “retard,” and “crazy.” These words have long been used to bully and oppress disabled people. You may hear disabled people calling each other “crip” or “gimp,” This is "insider" language, akin to LGBT people calling each other “queer,” but isn’t appropriate language for non-disabled people to use.
- **Use** the phrase “disabled people” or “people with disabilities.”
- When you hear other people use ableist language, **take the opportunity** to challenge and educate.
- **Don’t ask**, “What’s wrong with you?” Disabled people have many different relationships with our bodies and minds. Don’t assume you know what’s right or wrong.

a community resource—please distribute widely

created by disability rights activists

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access

- **Work to create** accessibility in your community, workplace, and place of worship. Ramps and elevators are vital, but access doesn't stop there.
- **Access means** creating an inclusive and welcoming space for all members of your community:
 - Ensure** that people with mobility aids and/or personal attendants can use the bathrooms.
 - Minimize** the presence of scented products and other triggers for people with chemical sensitivities with the goal of creating scent-free space.
 - Offer** printed materials in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print, and audio.
 - Provide** sign language interpreters and real time captioning.
 - Choose** locations for community events near public transportation.
 - Offer** sliding scales at events that cost money.
 - This is not an exhaustive list, only a starting place.**
- **Understand** that no single accommodation will work for all disabled people. One solution doesn't fit all, but increased access does benefit everyone.
- **Take your lead** from disabled people. We know what works best for us.
- **Be creative.** Don't use lack of money as an excuse not to create access.

activism

- **Educate yourself.** Read about the disability rights movement. Attend disability culture events.
- **Recruit** members of the disability community to leadership positions within your organizations.
- **Confront** disability stereotypes and oppression ableism wherever you encounter them.
- **Integrate** disability issues into your understanding of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. These systems of oppression are all interrelated.

resources

- Fleischer, Doris Zames and Zames, Frieda, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
- Linton, Simi, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
- *Ragged Edge Magazine Online* (www.raggededgemagazine.com)

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