



## Ableism and disablism

Ableism and disablism are both ways of describing the difficulties and discrimination that disabled people face.

Did you realise that when a video on social media doesn't have captions, a person with a hearing impairment might not know what it's saying?

Or that when a building doesn't have a ramp or lifts, a person using a wheelchair can't get inside?

These are examples of barriers that disabled people face in everyday life. These barriers are sometimes described as ableism or disablism.

On this page, find out more about the definitions of ableism and disablism, internalised ableism and disability discrimination.

### What is ableism?

Ableism is a word for unfairly favouring non-disabled people.

Ableism means prioritising the needs of non-disabled people. In an ableist society, it's assumed that the "normal" way to live is as a non-disabled person.

It is ableist to believe that non-disabled people are more valuable to society than disabled people.

### Examples of ableism

The following are some common ableism examples:

- Designing a building with no ramps or lifts for wheelchairs.
- Failing to make information available in an accessible format, such as braille or British Sign Language (BSL).
- Telling someone that they "don't look disabled" as a compliment.
- Choosing a non-disabled job candidate over a disabled one, because you think disability will make someone less productive.

## What is disablism?

Disablism is a word for negative opinions, behaviour or abuse against disabled people.

You are being disablist if you treat someone differently, or choose to offend or hurt someone, because of their disability.

### Examples of disablism

Examples of disablism include:

- Calling someone by an offensive slur for disabled people.
- Ignoring someone who is disabled or speaking condescendingly to them.
- Assuming that a disabled person can't do something.

## The difference between ableism and disablism

There is some overlap between ableism and disablism and what they can look like.

Disablism is a newer word. Some disability activists prefer the word "disablism" to "ableism" because they believe it makes it clear that disablism has nothing to do with the disabled person's "ability". It's a form of discrimination like racism or sexism.

In general, ableism can be used to describe the way society and people tend to favour non-disabled people.

Disablism can be used to describe more direct, conscious acts of discrimination or abuse against disabled people.

Many people use these words interchangeably.

## What is internalised ableism?

Internalised ableism is all about the impact that living in an ableist society can have on disabled people.

After being on the receiving end of ableism or disablism, you might feel low self-esteem or a sense of shame about your disability. Some call this internalised ableism.

It's important to remember that you deserve respect and dignity, and you have rights like everyone else.

## What is disability discrimination?

Disability discrimination is when you're treated differently because of your disability.

It could be a one-off incident, or something that happens continually as a result of inaccessible policy or design.

Discrimination could look like:

- Being passed over for a job, or being fired.
- Being denied entry into an event or building.
- Your employer, school or university failing to make reasonable adjustments for you.

### Disability discrimination in the workplace

In the UK, being discriminated against because of your disability at work is illegal. This is thanks to the Equality Act in England, Scotland and Wales, and the Disability Discrimination Act in Northern Ireland.

The Equality Act says that it is illegal to discriminate against anyone because:

- They have a disability.
- Someone thinks they have a disability.
- They are connected to someone with a disability. (This includes carers. [See our page about carers' rights at work for more.](#))

### What counts as a disability?

The Equality Act defines who is considered as "disabled" for the purpose of protecting them from discrimination.

The definition is very broad. It says you're disabled if:

- You have a physical or mental impairment.
- That impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

[Find out more about how the Equality Act defines "disability" from Citizens Advice.](#)

## The social model of disability

At Sense, we follow the social model of disability.

This model understands that disability is something created by society. This is because disabled people face barriers that stop them from taking part in society in the same way as non-disabled people.

[Find out more about the social model of disability.](#)

### Looking for support?

If you've got any questions about getting support from Sense, our friendly team is here to help.

[Get in touch](#)

This content was last reviewed in November 2022. We'll review it again next year.

Sense is here for everyone who is deafblind. For everyone who is living with complex disabilities.

Everything we do supports individuals to express themselves, to develop their skills and confidence, to make choices and to live a full life.

Sense is a registered charity number 289868. Registered as a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales number 01825301.  
Registered office at 101 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LG. Copyright © 2023 Sense