Avoiding Ableist Language

**Purpose:** Disability metaphors are abound in our culture, and they exist almost entirely as pejoratives. As Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg wrote on DisabilityandRepresentation.com, “If a culture’s language is full of pejorative metaphors about a group of people, that culture is not going to see those people as fully entitled to the same inclusion as people in a more favored group.” This handout’s primary purpose is to serve as a reference for linguistic microaggressions and everyday, casual ableism.

**Barren**
Refers to people who are infertile and carries sexist connotations as well as ableist ones.

**Blind to ____ / turn a blind eye to ____ / blinded by ignorance/bigotry/etc.**
Refers to Blind people or people with visual impairments.

**Bound to a wheelchair (wheelchair bound)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Confined to a wheelchair**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Crazy**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Cretin**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Cripple/Crippled (by ____)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Daft**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Deaf-Mute**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments.

**Deaf to ____ / turn a deaf ear to ____ / etc.**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments.

**Derp (also herp-derp and variations)**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.
**Diffability**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Differently abled**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Dumb**
Refers to Deaf people or people with hearing impairments, people with speech impairments, or people with linguistic or communication disorders or disabilities.

**Feeble-Minded**
Refers to people with mental, psychiatric, intellectual, or developmental disabilities.

**Handicap(ped)**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Handicapable**
Usually refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities, but can also mean any person with a disability.

**Harelip**
Refers to people with cleft-lip palette or similar facial deformities.

**Hearing-Impaired**
Refers to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

**Idiot(ic)**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Imbecile**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

**Insane or Insanity**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Lame**
Refers to people with physical or mobility disabilities.

**Loony/Loony Bin**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Lunatic**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.
Madhouse/Mad/Madman
Refers to an institution housing people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Maniac
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Mental/Mental Case
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Mental Defective
Refers to people with mental, psychiatric, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities.

Mongoloid
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities and specifically Down Syndrome. Derives from a double-whammy of racism AND ableism, from the belief that people with Down Syndrome look like people from Mongolia.

Moron(ic)
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

Nuts
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Psycho
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Psychopath(ic)
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Psycho(tic)
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

Retard(ed)/[anything]-tard
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

[you belong on the] Short-bus/ that's short-bus material/etc.
Refers to people with intellectual, learning, or other mental disabilities.

Simpleton
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities.

Spaz(zed)
Refers to people with cerebral palsy or similar neurological disabilities.
**Specially Abled**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Special Needs**
Usually refers to people with learning, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, but can mean any person with a disability.

**Stupid**
Refers to people with intellectual disabilities (i.e. "in a stupor").

**Suffers from ____**
Can refer to any person with a disability.

**Wacko/Whacko**
Refers to people with mental or psychiatric disabilities.

**Instead of an ableist word, perhaps you actually meant to say...**
(more invective replacements that use profanity/swears are included at the very bottom in a separate list)

Asinine
Bad
Bleak
Boring
Bullish
Callous
Careless
Confusing
Contemptible
Coward
Dense
Devoid of _____
Disgusting
Dull
Enraged
Evil
Extremist
Furious
Gross
Half-hearted
Horrible
Ignoramus
Ignorant
Impolite
Incomprehensible
Inconsiderate
Inconsistent
Infuriating
Insensible
Irrational
Jerk
Lacking in ______
Livid
Mean
Nasty
Nefarious
Nonsense
Nonsensical
Obtuse
Outrageous
Overwrought
Paradoxical
Pathetic
Petulant
Putrid
Rage-inducing
Reckless
Ridiculous
Rude
Scornful
Self-contradictory
Shameful
Solipsistic
Spurious
Terrible
Tyrannical
Unbelievable
Unconscionable
Unheard of
Uninspired
Unoriginal
Unthinkable
Unthinking
Useless
Vapid
Vile
Vomit-inducing
Without any ______ whatsoever
Wretched

For describing people with disabilities/disabled people in general:
Disabled
Has a disability
With a disability
With a chronic health condition
Has a chronic health condition
Neurotypical
Neurodivergent

For describing people on the autism spectrum:
On the autism spectrum
Autistic
With autism [if preferred by individual]
Aspie [if preferred by individual]

For describing people with intellectual disabilities:
With an intellectual disability
Has an intellectual disability
With a cognitive disability
Has a cognitive disability

For describing people with sensory disabilities or impairments:
Blind
Low vision
Deaf
Hard of hearing

For describing people with physical or mobility disabilities:
With a physical disability
With a mobility disability
Uses a wheelchair
In a wheelchair
Uses crutches
Uses a cane
Uses a walker
Has [specific condition here]

Thanks to the following websites:

http://www.disabilityandrepresentation.com/2013/09/14/ableist-language/