

Ableist Language Used by Disability Professionals: Accessible Summary

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Ableism is when people with disabilities are treated poorly or discriminated against. Sometimes they are thought to be worse than people without disabilities. One way people can be ableist is by using language that is harmful and shares ideas that having a disability is bad.

Some ableist language is easier to recognize as bad (this is called obvious), such as the 'R-word' (retarded). Sometimes people use this language to hurt people. But some ableist language is more difficult to recognize as bad (this is called subtle). Examples are the terms 'differently abled' or 'suffering from mental illness.' A lot of this subtle language tries not to talk about disability, implying that it is too bad to talk about. It can also make people feel sad. Some of this subtle language also implies that disability is something negative people suffer from, instead of just a part of their identity and who they are.

People who work with people with disabilities or who study disability (called disability professionals) have a long history of using hurtful language about disability. In this study, we were interested in learning more about the language disability professionals use and if they know they are using ableist language.

About This Study

A total of 347 disability professionals completed our online survey. Most people did not have disabilities and were white, and women. The disability professionals had a lot of different jobs, including support staff, health care provider (like doctor), educators, and researchers.

In the survey, we asked people to select from a list what disability words they used. The list included obviously bad words, more subtle words, and some other random disability words. We also asked them to select which words they thought were problematic. Problematic can mean upsetting, horrible, nasty, or ableist. We then looked at the information to see which words disability professionals commonly used and what they thought was problematic.

Findings

Which Words Disability Professionals Used Most Often

The Top 5 **Obviously Ableist** Words Used Were:

- Crazy (38%)
- Stupid (27%)
- Insane (20%)
- Dumb (18%)
- Delusional (14%)

The Top 5 **Subtly Ableist** Words Used Were:

- People living with disabilities (51%)
- People struggling with mental illness (36%)
- Special needs (30%)
- People with abilities (27%)
- People affected by disability (24%)

Which Words Disability Professionals Knew Were Problematic

Disability Professionals **Most Often** Thought These Words Were Problematic:

- Retarded (96%)
- Crippled (94%)
- Moron (88%)
- Cuckoo (84%)
- Deranged (84%)

Disability Professionals **Least Often** Knew These Words Were Problematic:

- People living with disabilities (10%)
- People experiencing disability (17%)
- People with abilities (17%)
- People affected by disability (18%)
- People struggling with mental illness (22%)

Many disability professionals said they used words that they **knew** were problematic. For example, **50%** of disability professionals that used the word 'crazy' knew they should not be using the word **but did so anyway**. But a lot of disability professionals had a harder time understanding that more **subtle** words could be problematic. We believe these findings mean disability professionals **need better education** about disability and language.