

The interesting thing about Ableism.

As mentioned in my previous article “The Words We Use”, we live in a time where the language that we use and the way in which we behave, is scrutinized very closely. As people strive for a greater understanding and level of acceptance across many different areas, we are often confronted by lists that outline different types of segregation and discrimination. Occasionally, on some of these lists, tucked alongside the more obvious and well-covered terms like sexism, racism and homophobia, you may see the little word “ableism. In the fair and equal society that, I believe, people should be working towards, all types of discrimination should be addressed, equally understood, and subsequently eradicated. However, I wish to focus this article on ableism, both because it is the most pertinent to my experience, and because I believe that it is the least understood and discussed word on the list.

As you search for the definition of ableism, you are likely to come across many different variations, as people and organisations seem to define it in differing ways. For example, according to the (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025) Ableism is defined as: “policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in unfair or harmful treatment of disabled people”. This is, perhaps, the most obvious way of understanding ableism, seeing it as a legal term makes it more quantifiable, and therefore, easier to understand. Indeed, a building that isn’t wheelchair accessible, or signage that doesn’t have braille, are examples of ableism. As such, they make the lives of disabled people much harder, and, should, naturally, be minimized so that everyone accessing the space is included. However, my favourite definition cuts much more deeply into the issue. (Dictionary.com, 2025) defines ableism as: “the tendency to regard people with a disability as incomplete, diminished, or damaged, and to measure the quality of life with a disability against a nondisabled standard.” This definition underlines the fact that ableism isn’t always seen in the obvious things, it is hidden in the everyday occurrences that most people don’t think twice about. To the majority, someone who has an obvious disability such as myself (I am blind) seems more vulnerable and more in need of help than others. The result of this view is an inherently negative understanding of disability, and this affects how we respond when confronted by it.

This common bias shows itself in the frequency by which ableism can be observed in the everyday lives of those living with a disability. Almost every time I leave the house, I am either spoken to like I am a young child, spoken for as if I can’t speak for myself, or on the receiving end of an assumption that I can’t do something which I have expressly said I am fully able to accomplish. A prime example of this occurred a month or so ago when I was alighting a train whilst travelling independently. With my left hand holding the train handle, and my right gripping my cane which was locating the step and platform, I was grabbed by two or more women. They were all asking if I was okay, and, even after I said I was not in need of help, they didn’t let go, and insisted on telling me multiple times about the step which my cane had already identified. Similarly, one of the routes I often take involves climbing over a knee-high wall. Whenever I explain this to most people, they either seem impressed that I can manage such a task, or horrified at the prospect. Any other 19-year-old climbing over a knee-high wall would, I’m sure, not be met with these responses. So, it can be demonstrated that ableism is as common, if not more so, than other types of well-known discrimination, and yet, it is rarely thought of.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about ableism is also demonstrated above. When examples of other forms of discrimination are given, it is obvious that those being marginalized are on the receiving end of deliberate ignorance or cruelty; this is not usually the case for ableism. For onlookers, the women “helping” me off the train would be interpreted as kind, and those who are concerned about me climbing the wall are, almost certainly, completely well meaning. However, both interactions leave me feeling less-than, and different. The assumption that “I can’t” in spite of what I say, robs me of the dignity that anyone else climbing over a wall or stepping off a train may take for granted. The phrase “no means no” often sighted in cases of assault can also be applied here. Just because an act was meant in kindness doesn’t mean that it is not ableist.

So, we have demonstrated the problem, now we must identify a solution. Asking someone if they need help is never an issue. In fact, when travelling by train, I often rely on members of the public if my rail assistance doesn’t turn up. Offering someone help opens up a chance for connection, which brings with it the opportunity for a positive – and even learning – experience for both parties. However, when help is refused, it is essential that you give those with a disability the same dignity that you would to anyone else, and accept that they are not in need of help, even if this goes against your instincts. As a blind person, I often need to go slower than others, and sometimes need to walk into things to identify them. This doesn’t mean that I am in danger, or necessarily in need of help, it is just how I collect the information that you are instantly receiving with your eyes; my way of navigating the world looks different to yours, but it is no less valid. One of my favourite experiences of train travel came when I was, again, alighting the train. The lady behind me said: “There’s a big step, but I’m sure you know that”, and then proceeded to chat to me about other things as we got off the train. This was a good way of her clarifying the situation and ensuring my safety, whilst also maintaining respect and dignity for me. An enormous part of advocating for disability is accepting that, if we say we don’t need help, our no means no.

References

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