How to talk about ableism, without losing friends? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have an invisible disability and I'm really getting into disabilities activism. Even in liberal circles ablism is still pretty accepted and this upsets me. However, when I try to educate people around me, it sometimes goes awry. I had one friend get upset when I called her out for using the word "retard." Another got upset when I pointed out that her Facebook post of inspirational people with disabilities (that just showed people with disabilities doing normal things) was a little offensive and tried to tell her about "inspiration porn." I get that using the word "retard" is normal as is "inspiration porn." I just don't think it should be.

I know my friends are caring, socially conscious people. I expect people to be a little upset, but ultimately I would also expect them respect the fact that it's really not OK to objectify people with disabilities in the way that inspiration porn and the use of words like "retard" do. What I want to know is how do I point out that people are expressing a harmful social bias, without having them get so upset that they write me off as an over sensitive concern troll?

Sincerely,

Nothing about us without us

Answer

Dear Nothing about us without us,

Ableism, or bias, discrimination, and social prejudice against individuals with disabilities, is a widespread concern that affects many. Insufficient knowledge about disabilities causes some people to consider disabilities to be flaws that need to be corrected or overcome. These are the ideas and attitudes that lead to ableism. As you mention, even the most culturally sensitive and socially conscious people slip up in their use of terminology, and correcting ableist language is important. However, addressing the issue can leave well-meaning people feeling accused and singled out. Therefore, when your friends use ableist language, rather than framing the discussion as a confrontation, try to consider it an educational opportunity. Some people consider confrontation an negative term, but in reality you are addressing the situation as it occurs. Rearrange the letters of "confrontation? and you get "on front action." Your efforts are around taking action while the issue is in front of you. Using this idea, you and your friends have the opportunity to engage one another in a calm, respectful manner that
doesn’t interfere with your friendship.

Perhaps the most common mistake people make when referring to individuals with disabilities is using language that implies that an individual’s disability is central to his or her identity. It’s crucial to remind people that individuals with disabilities are just that: individuals. Speaking about or treating individuals with disabilities differently from people without disabilities is one of the most pervasive yet easily corrected forms of ableism. Instead of using terms like ?victim of paraplegia? or ?sufferer of deafness,? encourage your friends to use more positive ?people-first? language, such as ?a person with paraplegia? or ?an individual with hearing impairment.? This type of language more accurately reflects the multidimensionality and humanity of individuals with disabilities and reduces victimizing attitudes against those who consider their disabilities a genuinely enriching component of their identity.

Another common misconception about individuals with disabilities is that they require special accommodations in every situation and therefore need to be ?babied.? For example, a person demonstrating excessive concern for a wheelchair-bound individual moving through a crowd may have perfectly good intentions when instructing others to clear the way. However, this action can be interpreted as ableist in that it encourages unnecessary special treatment of the wheelchair-bound individual, causing annoyance or even humiliation. A more sensitive way of offering support may be to ask the individual if s/he needs assistance. If s/he says ?no,? respect his or her choice and allow him or her to proceed without your help. Don’t assume that you know what is best for a person who has a disability.

On the flipside, some people are so afraid of saying the wrong thing to individuals with disabilities that they ignore them altogether. Avoidant behavior does not go unnoticed by individuals with disabilities and can be equally as frustrating as expressions of excessive concern. Instead of ignoring people with disabilities out of fear or uncertainty, engage them by relaxing and treating them as you would anyone else. Don’t be afraid to ask questions if you’re not sure what to do. Asking questions is almost always better than guessing or doing nothing.

It’s wonderful that you recognize that your friends’ uses of ableist or potentially offensive words or terms is most likely not coming from a place of malice, but from a lack of information and cultural bias. During your conversation about ableist language, try to separate what your friend said from who s/he is. Don’t attribute what was said to your friend’s character; instead, acknowledge that your friend is a caring and socially conscious person who simply used language that may be interpreted as ableist.

Most importantly, remember to emphasize to your friend that not all individuals with disabilities consider their disability central to their identity. One of the best ways to fight ableism is to treat individuals with disabilities as people, rather than as embodiments of disability.

Alice!

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