

WTF is Ableism?

WTF is Ableism??

I was scrolling on Instagram and saw an ad for a new store selling crystals. My friend's birthday was coming up, so I decided to go there and buy them something. The weather was nice that day, and my pain level was pretty low, so I decided to go to this store. I got my chihuahua, Godzooky, locked up the house, and went to the van. I deployed the lift. I waited for it to come down and rolled onto it backward. After the lift reached the entrance to the van, I rolled back in the van and slid into the locking mechanism. I transferred into the seat and rotated it to face the steering wheel.

I started the van, pulled the hand control towards me to accelerate the van, and I was on my way to the store. I headed into downtown West Asheville. All the parking is parallel parking, and I have all the accessible parking spots memorized on this street. I was so relieved to see one was open, and I parked. I deployed the lift, rolled onto it, and lowered it to the ground. After I stowed the lift away, I rolled down the sidewalk, and when I got to the store, there was a 2-foot step keeping me from entering. Some businesses create what I like to call secret passages. The only people that see them are the ones who need them. Like me, a person in a wheelchair. This store had no secret passage, and when I asked the salesperson, "Is there an accessible entrance?" she gave me a blank stare. A stare that I have seen millions of times before. It was the stare of ignorance. This ignorance led to this person grabbing my arm with the foolish notion that they would be able to pull my 200-pound body and my 300-pound wheelchair up this step.

Ableism. According to the dictionary, it is “discrimination or social prejudice against disabled people.” I am a full-time wheelchair user. So, this discrimination is something I am subjected to on the daily. On this day, I could leave my house, get in my van, drive it, park, and get to the store. Ableism is why I couldn't get in the store and shop. Ableism is why this person thought it was ok for them to grab my arm without asking permission to pull me into an inaccessible store. At that moment, I was infuriated. I think to myself, I am a Southeast Asian brown woman, and if I did not have access to this store because of that, there would be riots in the streets, but not having access because I use a wheelchair, all there is silence. A silence that reminds us that even though disabled people are the largest minority in the world, we are the most forgotten as well. It was not my Disability that prevented me from getting into that store. It was the inaccessibility that caused me to be excluded. So yes, I think Ableism is horrible, but after I deal with feeling angry and getting through my anger as I calm down, I wonder, was there ever a time that humans lived without Ableism, discrimination, or prejudice against people with disabilities?

As we explore the beginnings of humanity, it is easy to realize that physicality gave humans their value. If you could walk and use your hands, fingers, or arms to hunt, build shelter, or gather, that would be the best to survive in a world where humans are disabled compared to other species. We know that there were people born both with disabilities and those who acquired disabilities then and still now. A hierarchy of disabilities, or Ableism amongst disabled people themselves, was created due to the necessity of physicality. A person who was blind, deaf, or nonverbal had more value than someone who could not get up, walk, or use their hands and fingers. Remember, this was a time when we did not know why people were disabled, and still, a level of Ableism that existed.

However, let's say you couldn't get up or walk, but you could make bowls with your hands, and then you would be the person who made bowls for your tribe. Despite not knowing the how and why people were born or acquired disabilities, it seems that the concept of Ableism became more ingrained in us as we gained the knowledge of why people were disabled. When we were ignorant, we still found a way to include disabled people in our tribal communities.

As we moved out of the "tribal" way of living, we began to create more ideas about human rights and who should have them. The Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian document from 1760 BC, has some of the earliest evidence of rules and punishments for people who violated women's, men's, children's, and slaves' rights. We were still practicing what we now call Ableism, but at the same time, we were beginning to understand that it was wrong to mistreat other people just because they were different; we had not even started to think about how disabled people should have the same rights as nondisabled people. Again, due to the necessity of physicality and the lack of knowledge of why people were disabled, we continued to create a society that adopted ableist ideas out of pure ignorance.

This ignorance grew, and humanity continued to ingrain ableist ideas into our thinking. While Ableism is defined by today's standards as bigotry against disabled people, in the past, it was Ableism that justified our bigotry of gender, race, and sexual preference. When European colonization began to spread worldwide, the Ableism that was set in place already for women started to be put in place for racism, too. An example of this is how we enforced European beauty standards. The Europeans were not only creating the means for themselves but also for other cultures that were not their own. Lighter skin and the most proportional bodies were considered beautiful, and as the world embraced these ideas, Ableism, racism,

and colorism continued to be more ingrained into our mindsets.

Humanity continued to progress as we entered the 19th century. Towards the end of the century, we began passing ableist laws like the “Ugly Laws.” If you were diseased, maimed, disfigured, mutilated, or considered unsightly or disgusting, society defined you as being “ugly,” you could be arrested or fined. These laws were not wholly reversed until 1990, well into the 20th century, when the American Disabilities Act was passed.

As we entered the 20th century, the world began to look completely different. We started creating huge buildings, asphalt streets, and concrete sidewalks. We made a world that was utterly inaccessible to disabled people. The first modern wheelchairs were invented in the 1930s, and physically disabled people started to become more visible to everyone than before. Perhaps this is what led to Ableism violating the human rights of disabled people in so many different ways.

Medical procedures were performed that were essentially torture in the name of “curing” people who had mental illnesses or cognitive disabilities. Ideas of eugenics were rampant, and we believed we could improve the genetic quality of humans by refusing to operate on children with congenital disabilities and letting them die, sterilizing disabled people so they did not give birth to humans with imperfect genetics, and institutionalizing them without an evaluation. These practices were becoming normal to us.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the rise of the cruel practice of institutional corrections of Disability. In the latter part of this century, disabled people began to demand rights. We finally started to move away from the ableist ideas that had been ingrained in us for so long. We began to see progress in including disabled people in

our communities. While historically, the “first” curb cuts are known to be in Berkeley in 1972, it was in 1940 that the disabled veterans who returned from WWII from Kalamazoo, Michigan, demanded that curb cuts be installed as part of a project to increase the employment of disabled veterans. The National Federation of the Blind was formed. The first cross-disability national organization to end job discrimination, The American Federation of the Physically Handicapped, began.

As decade by decade passed in the 20th century, we saw more and more inclusion of disabled people. The 70s brought us one of the most important acts for human rights. The 504 sit-in. This was the longest sit-in in American history to date. The sit-in occurred in the Health, Education, and Welfare building in San Francisco. It included disabled and nondisabled people to force the Carter administration to pass the 504 Rehabilitation Act into law. A law that said no federal-funded program could discriminate against disabled people.

They succeeded, and as Kitty Cone, One of the activists who took part in the 504 sit-in, said, this was “the public birth of disability rights movement... For the first time, Disability was looked at as an issue of civil rights rather than an issue of charity and rehabilitation at best, pity at worst “. The success of the 504 Sit-In was when the ablest ideas we had continued to tell ourselves were true started to break. Ableism did not disappear, but disabled people were finally beginning to realize they had human rights, too! This eventually led to disabled people gathering together to fight for the American Disabilities Act, the first federal law to give disabled people their rights. The Capitol Crawl was a protest where disabled people crawled up inaccessible steps that led to the Capitol building—leaving their wheelchairs, walkers, and canes behind, finally forced Congress to pass it in 1990.

Has Ableism been completely eradicated? No! We are nowhere near that mindset yet. It has existed since the beginning of life, but unlike rights for BIPOC, LGBTQ, gender equality, and poverty, the rights of disabled people are still very young. Over time, as science, technology, and our knowledge grows, the idea of how we treat the disabled people in our communities has gotten better, but not enough. I cannot explain why. I can only see what has existed through the evidence that history has left for us.

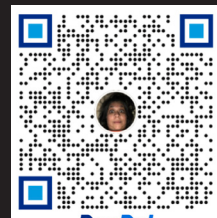
As disabled people, it is entirely normal to be angry and frustrated by the violation of our rights as humans. However, we must give ourselves time to process this anger and frustration we feel, and we also need to realize that humans are imperfect animals. Any person can be the most kind in one moment and then do something that could be considered horrific in another. If someone is not disabled, they do not realize the obstacles we must overcome to run a mundane daily errand like going to the grocery store. And the only way they can know is when we let them know. It is up to disabled people to speak up when our rights are being violated, and because Disability is part of the human experience, explain to our allies that when they experience Disability, their rights could be violated in the same exact way. If that doesn't happen, then we will never be recognized as being human, and nondisabled people will remain blissful in their ignorance.

DIYabled



If you like this kind of content please consider donating to DIYabled

DIYabled.com
IG DIYabled
Facebook DIYabled



OR

www.Patreon.com/DIYabled