

# Understanding Ableism

## What it is and Why it Matters



# Agenda: Understanding Ableism

- Introductions
- First voice input and language
- What are disabilities and disability in Nova Scotia.
- What is ableism and the impacts
- Real-life examples of ableism and solutions to prevent it
- More learning and resources

# Introductions

- Name and role
- Share anything else you are comfortable. For example, pronouns, your experience with disability, a visual introduction of yourself.



# First Voice Input and Language

- People with disabilities were involved and gave input into this resource.
- Language used is from the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act.
- Language is always changing and evolving.
- Person-first language and identity-first language.

# Definition: Nova Scotia Accessibility Act

**Disability:** “a physical, mental, intellectual, learning or sensory impairment, including an episodic disability that, **in interaction with a barrier**, hinders an individual’s full and effective participation in society.”



## Disabilities can be...

- physical (pain, flexibility or mobility)
- sensory (hearing or seeing)
- cognitive (learning, developmental, neurodivergence)
- neurological (multiple sclerosis or a brain injury)
- mental-health related (anxiety or depression)
- chronic health conditions (diabetes or crohn's)

\*Some disabilities can be permanent, episodic or both.

# Disability in Nova Scotia

We have the highest rate in Canada **at 37.9%** or **2 in 5 Nova Scotians** report living with at least one disability.

- Some disabilities are visible, and some are not.
- Disability can affect anyone, at any age.
- A person's race, culture, gender, age, income, and other identities affect how they experience the world living with a disability.
- Disability can impact a person's daily life, including their physical and emotional health.

## Ableism can be...

- Unfair treatment because someone has a disability.
- Intentional or unintentional discrimination of people with disabilities.
- Actions or barriers that affect the everyday lives of people with disabilities.
- Harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of disability.



# Impacts of ableism: excludes people with disabilities from activities and opportunities

- leads to unequal treatment.
- benefits those without disabilities.
- views disability as something to “fix”.
- makes incorrect assumptions about what people can or cannot do.
- prevents disabled people from sharing their unique contributions and experiences.



## Ableism:

- Can limit opportunities
- Is all around us
- Is in the words we use
- Comes from a lack of awareness
- Is deeply rooted
- Often goes unnoticed
- Treats disability as a problem
- Silences disabled people

# Examples of Ableism



# Ableism can limit opportunities

It can prevent access to services, activities, and choices for people with disabilities.

- For example, a funding program might only accept paper applications.
- This can make it difficult for people with vision and mobility disabilities.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the program could

- Offer different ways to apply, so people can use accessible technology tools.
- Provide help completing the application for those who need it.



# Ableism is all around us

Organizations and events can be ableist without realizing it.

- For example, an art exhibit includes only self-guided audio tours.
- This means that Deaf and hard of hearing people miss important details and cannot access the same information as everyone else.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the art exhibit could

- Share information in various formats to make sure everyone can access the content.
- This could include signage, digital information, or videos in American Sign Language.



# Ableism is in the words we use

Certain words or language can make people with disabilities feel unwelcome or disrespected.

- For example, school staff call the new accessible parking "handicapped spots".
- This may offend people with disabilities since the word "handicap" is often used to explain a disadvantage. It can assume there is something wrong with those who use this parking.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the school could

- Educate staff on why language can be harmful and to notice the words they choose.
- Have posters on inclusive language within the school.
- Bring in a speaker from the disability community to share their experiences.



# Ableism comes from a lack of awareness

Many people do not understand what living with a disability is like. As a result, the needs of people with disabilities can be forgotten.

- For example, the local municipality invites a speaker to make a public presentation. There is no ramp to the stage, and the speaker, who uses a wheelchair, must present from the floor.
- This creates difficulty for both the speaker and the audience.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the municipality could

- Plan for and ask about the accessibility needs of both the speaker and audience in advance.
- Share information from speakers in various ways, such as closed captions, American Sign Language, or images with described audio.



## Ableism is deeply rooted

Not considering people with disabilities is part of our history. We can find it throughout society, affecting our thoughts and the ways we do things.

- For example, a recreation club is planning public meetings to get feedback on a new community trail. These meetings are planned on weekday afternoons in spaces that are not accessible.
- This set up makes it difficult for some people to attend and contribute their ideas.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the recreation club could

- Offer more ways to give feedback, including online meetings, focus groups, or surveys.
- Hold in-person meetings in accessible locations at various times of the day and week. This should include information on accessible transportation options.



# Ableism often goes unnoticed

It can make life harder for people with disabilities to go about their everyday life in schools, jobs, and public spaces.

- For example, a health care centre has self-check in stations for appointments that have many steps through a touch screen.
- These stations can be hard for people to use who have low vision, a cognitive disability, or those who can't use their hands.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the health care centre could

- Make sure the stations provide information in various formats, including other ways to check in for appointments.
- This could include large font, audio cues, and assistance from staff if necessary.
- Have user testing of the stations before they are offered to the public.



# **Ableism is when disabilities are treated as a problem**

News, social media, movies, and jokes can portray disabilities in a negative way.

- For example, a film festival promotes a movie where the main character, who has a mental illness, is portrayed as the villain.
- This story can be harmful and reinforce negative or untrue stereotypes about mental health that do not reflect lived experiences.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the film festival could

- Encourage and promote the real-life stories of people with disabilities through their film choices.
- Involve people with disabilities in decision-making. This could include screening films, mentoring, and through creative programs.



# Ableism silences disabled people

This happens when people assume that someone with a disability cannot communicate or always needs help.

- In staff meeting a person with a speech disability starts to answer a question. Their coworker interrupts and tries to finish their sentence, thinking they are being helpful.
- As a result, the disabled staff member does not have a chance to express themselves and are left out of the discussion.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

## Instead, the office could

- Ensure that everyone is given the time and space to communicate for themselves in staff meetings.
- Remind all staff they should not assume others need help, unless they ask for it.



# Reflection: Any other examples of ableism?



# We Can Prevent Ableism

Ableism comes from a lack of understanding and action.

Everyone can:

- learn about disabilities and ask what people need.
- respond with respect when ableism happens.
- be open to feedback and change.
- make our communities and spaces more accessible for all.



# Taking Action Against Ableism

What is one thing you will do or change?



# Learn More at [accessible.novascotia.ca](https://accessible.novascotia.ca)

Videos, resources and data including:

- Introduction to Disability
- Introduction to Accessibility Barriers and Solutions
- Engaging with Persons with Disabilities
- Canadian Survey on Disability, Nova Scotia Data
- Posters, Social Media Images, etc.
- Plain Language Resource Guide
- Accessibility Plans of public sector organizations in Nova Scotia

