

How to Know When You're Experiencing Ableism At Work...And What to Do About It

Many autistics find work to be an incredibly challenging space. According to the Autism Society of America, more than 66% of young adults on the Autism spectrum are unemployed and are not engaged in higher education 2 years after exiting high school. While there are many complex reasons for the high unemployment rate of autistic individuals, one element is certainly ableism at work and inaccessible expectations in the workplace.

So what is ableism? Ableism is beliefs, actions, and systems that favor non-disabled people over disabled people. It doesn't have to be intentional: in fact most of the time ableist behaviors are well-intentioned, or subconscious. In the workplace, ableism most often appears in expectations that exclude disabled individuals, or make it difficult to impossible for them to complete their work.

Common Examples of Ableism

- Demanding eye contact.
- Work spaces that are overwhelming: loud, bright, smelly, etc.
- Not allowing employees to leave for medical appointments.
- Not providing captions on videos or video calls
- Not allowing people to stim.
- Including unnecessary physical requirements in a job requirement, like lifting or pushing.
- Not allowing employees to sit while on the job.
- Only giving verbal instructions, with no written options.
- Application processes that focus on the interview and someone's ability to speak about themselves, rather than their ability to perform the job.

Microaggressions

What are microaggressions?

The definition of microaggression is "a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority." When it comes to autism, microaggressions are often times when someone doesn't take your needs seriously, says something misinformed about autism, or acts as if you're overreacting. Microaggressions are small examples of ableism. At times, it may seem like they're not a big deal, but over time they add up.

Some Examples

1 People telling you that you can't have autism, or dismissing your autism. Often this comes in the form of a "compliment" like "you're too articulate to be autistic."

2 People avoid you, call you weird, or act like you're "too much."

3 People telling you something is obvious or easy even if you're struggling, or not being willing to review something in more detail/more slowly/in writing.

4 People keeping you from growth opportunities because you don't socialize as they expect, they don't provide you with accommodations, or they don't understand your work style.

5 People interpreting your behavior as aggressive, rude, or mean when you simply don't have neurotypical facial expressions or intonation.

6 People telling you you are overreacting, especially to sensory inputs or social challenges.

7 People asking you to make eye contact, not fidget, or otherwise behave in a neurotypical way.

8 People staring, rolling their eyes, or otherwise making exasperated or frustrated facial expressions at you when you are visibly autistic.

9 People acting like you are an inconvenience when you ask for something.

In general, if you feel ashamed, embarrassed, confused, or unwelcome because of your autism, you are likely experiencing ableism.

01 What Can You Do?

Once you've identified that you're experiencing ableism in the workplace, it can be challenging to know what to do next. There are many different approaches you can take: it will depend on how comfortable you feel in your workplace, who you trust to support you, and how much power you have at work. Here are some of your options:

SPEAK TO YOUR MANAGER OR HR

Disability is a protected class in the United States, which means that if you are experiencing a hostile work environment because of disability, you are legally protected. It is generally a good idea to speak to someone at work before looking at legal action: it's less stressful, expensive, and time-consuming. If you feel comfortable with your direct manager, they can help you address ableism in the workplace and may be a good ally. Human Resources should have experience with disability and can also be a good resource for improving things company-wide. See the next page for more details.

SUGGEST A TRAINING

If many people at your company or organization make ignorant or ableist comments, you may need to push for more education. You can speak with your manager or HR and ask them to look into training. AuSM provides trainings to employers about autism and ableism.

ASK FOR ACCOMMODATIONS

If you're encountering a specific issue that is making work challenging for you, you may be able to ask for accommodations to make it easier. For example, if you are struggling to socialize with coworkers, you may be able to adjust your hours in office to be during a time when fewer people are there.

LEGAL ACTION

If you try other tactics and find that your coworkers or employer are still acting in ableist ways, you may want to take legal action. See the next page for more details.

CALL OUT ABLEIST COMMENTS AND BEHAVIOR

If you hear or notice people saying ableist things or acting in ableist ways, you can point it out for what it is. If you don't feel comfortable responding in the moment, you can find someone later and discuss it with them.

HELPFUL SCRIPTS

- "Actually, most people in the autism community prefer 'autistic person' instead of 'person with autism.' If you're interested in why, I have some good articles I could share with you."
- "A lot of people have health conditions you can't see. It can be really hurtful to assume someone is faking being sick."
- "There's nothing wrong with being disabled. We can talk about it."
- "I don't see why it's inspiring for someone who's disabled to do things that are normal for anyone else. It's kind of infantilizing."
- "Have we thought about accessibility at this event?"

02 Who You Can Ask

It's incredibly common for folks to feel as if they don't know how to handle ableism on their own. You can and should ask for help if you think you need it. Here are some people who can support you, plus some ideas of what they might be helpful with.

LEGAL HELP

- Each state has a disability law center that has resources to help you if you're being discriminated against. Google your state to find it.
- You can also Google a lawyer who specializes in disability in your area. Some may focus more on guardianship, finances, or schools. Look for someone with a background in employment.
- Moving to legal help should not be your first move. It's time-consuming and expensive. Try some other options first, but if you think you are being discriminated against, know that you have the right to legal help.

Some Scripts

- For HR: "I'm finding myself struggling with some of the expectations due to a disability. Could you tell me more about our policy for accommodations?"
- For a manager: "I find it really challenging to work in the office when it's very busy. Would it be possible for me to adjust my working hours to a quieter time?"

IN YOUR COMPANY

- Human Resources: HR is the most likely to have experience supporting employees with disabilities. They'll know the policies in your company. They also can help you if you want to advocate for changes in policies, or recommend company-wide trainings.
- Your direct supervisor or manager: if you have a good relationship with your manager or supervisor, they can be a fantastic resource in navigating ableism. They may be able to offer you informal accommodations or modifications, help call out ableism when they see it, or talk to colleagues who are causing you problems.
- A trusted colleague: you don't have to do this alone! If there is someone else in your workplace who "gets it," take some time to talk to them. Ask if they've noticed what you have. Ask for their support in calling out ableism. You may also be able to speak with HR together. Having another person with you can make it feel much easier.

OTHER SUPPORT

- Your therapist: if you see a mental health professional, you can ask them for feedback on your perceptions of ableism in the workplace. They can help you determine if you are experiencing ableism, brainstorm how to move forward, and give you scripts for speaking with management.
- Family members or trusted friends: someone close to you can be a good sounding board. They may be able to help you decide the best person to speak to at work, talk through what you'll say, or simply act as a person who can listen while you're frustrated.

03 Resources for Employers

Sometimes employers want to learn about ableism from a source that feels "official." You can share resources from trusted organizations with them. Here are some options.

- Inclusion and Ableism: A Guide for Employers from the Autism Society of Minnesota
- Employers Have the Power to Make Workplaces More Accessible from Bloomberg Law
- Job Accommodation Network for Employers
- Ableism in the workplace: how employers can combat discrimination from The Job Network
- Disability Inclusion Resource Guide from The Kresge Foundation

If you're not sure how to open a conversation with your employer, here are some scripts you can use.

- "I've noticed some people in the office seem unfamiliar with ableism and have said negative and hurtful things. I was wondering if you could help me set the tone for anti-ableism? I have some resources you could read that might give you ideas on how to move forward.
- "I think my work is being impacted by the way some of my coworkers are acting. When I ask for help, they tell me it's easy. Sometimes I need things repeated more than other people might, but once I learn something I'll know it deeply. Can you help me get more support?"
- "I know our office is committed to diversity and inclusion, but I'm worried we're overlooking one element that's really important: disability. I have some resources I could send you if you're interested in how we can start incorporating disability into our inclusion conversations."