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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 ableism 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,

It's good to know 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 or a cultural bias. It's great that you want to educate them and share why this language can be offensive. That being said, it's worth mentioning that it's not your responsibility nor your obligation to teach them; it's ultimately up to your friends to being open to listening and learning. There are some different approaches you can take when trying to facilitate these conversations with others, so keep on reading!

Ableism, which is defined as bias, discrimination, and social prejudice against individuals with disabilities, is a widespread concern that affects many. Insufficient knowledge about this topic

causes some people to consider disabilities to be flaws that need to be corrected or overcome, leading to ideas and attitudes that result in ableism. Further, ableism goes beyond language, privileging those that are able-bodied and able-minded, which can impact how a person navigates the world. This can be with something as simple as having ramps to increase accessibility for those who use wheelchairs to having closed captions on videos. As you mention, even the most culturally sensitive and socially conscious people slip up in their use of terminology. Correcting ableist language is a key step to addressing the issue. However, depending on your approach, it can leave well-meaning people feeling accused and singled out. Therefore, when your friends use this type of language, rather than framing the discussion as a confrontation, try to consider it an educational opportunity. Using this idea, if they're interested in pursuing the conversation, you and your friends may have the opportunity to engage one another in a calm, respectful manner that doesn't interfere with your friendship. Some people you may be calling out, your friends included, may not have been confronted before, or in other circles, this language may be commonplace. Confrontation doesn't need to be negative and if you choose to bring it up with your friends, you have two options; you can correct them immediately or choose to talk to them later. While the first option may not provide as much context, it can still be constructive, especially if later combined with further conversation.

If you decide to talk further with your friend(s), you may find it helpful to pull this person aside to have a more in-depth conversation. Feedback is a gift, and part of sharing feedback is being able to effectively frame it to convey your message and also be intentional about it. Although it may be challenging, sharing that you'd like to have this conversation out of respect for your relationship with that person and that you want to let them know how this type of language affects you. You can then explain why the use of the word or images constitutes a social injustice. You may also want to explain the power of person-centered language and how putting the person before the condition or disability ensures that the person is the focus, rather than whatever circumstance they're managing. After informing your friend about your reasons for speaking up, you may want to let them know that as this is a topic you care about and out of respect for both yourself and for them, you'll continue to speak up when you hear this language so they know what to expect from you in the future. You may also want to ask them if they understand where you're coming from, which could encourage a deeper discussion. When closing the conversation, you may want to offer other words, phrases, images, or stories that could be used to get their original point across, and better yet, offer resources that they can check out on their own to learn more. Emphasize that it all comes down to the fact that everybody deserves to be treated equally, and as caring, socially conscious people, you're trying to help them understand the problematic uses of these words and phrases.

If you feel like speaking up about the r-word [2], ableist language, or "inspiration porn" to those who aren't your peers, but are authority figures or strangers, you may consider a slightly different approach. When it comes to these two groups, it can be helpful to remember the other r-word: respect. For authority figures, first and foremost, try to have the conversation in private. After pulling this person aside, explain to them why their statement or wording was offensive and how it could be considered social injustice (not dissimilar to the information you'd share with a friend). It's wise to tailor your approach for your audience — try not to come off as disrespectful or rude, and understand that each person is entitled to their opinion, whether or not you agree. For strangers, your safety is the priority, so first judge if it's safe to even speak up. If you judge that it's safe and you'll be spending a prolonged amount of time with this stranger, go ahead and

engage them, remembering to be respectful, educational, and constructive.

Engaging others in these conversations may feel challenging or emotionally draining. Be sure to take the time to take care of yourself when you engage in these discussions, and remember that you only need to talk to others about other people as much as you want to or feel comfortable doing. It can be tough to put yourself out there to educate others on the effects of their everyday language, so kudos to you for trying to increase knowledge and awareness of those around you. Best of luck as you continue to refine your approach and engage others in this work.

Alice!

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