Common Misunderstandings

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This video explores some common ableist assumptions. Ableism is rarely an explicit act of violence. Disabled people often experience it countless times throughout the day, rarely through deliberate malice. In fact, positive intentions are one of the most common sources of ableism.

Aversive ableism: Aversive ableism is discrimination that happens despite good intentions or claims that one is progressive (Friedman, 2018). Aversive ableism is less obvious. It is hidden in subtle assumptions or microaggressions that the person doing them may not even be aware of. Avoiding interaction with disabled people despite considering oneself to be unbiased is a common form of aversive ableism. This avoidance can happen in hiring practices, friendship circles, shared spaces, and conversations.

Surrogating: Surrogating is a fancy way of saying, 'talking to somebody else about a disabled person in the disabled person's presence.' When asking a question or telling a person something, address them directly. Going through an intermediary is paternalistic and infantilizing.

Infantilism: Infantilism treats disabled adults as if they are children without the capacity to make informed decisions and assume adult roles and responsibilities.

Presumed incompetence: Physical disability and neurodivergence are often assumed to indicate incompetence.

Inspiration porn: The objectification of disabled people as sources of inspiration implies that nothing is expected of them, and that uneventful daily living is a triumph worth celebrating.

Intrusive 'helpfulness': Intervening in a disabled person's task should never happen without consent. Providing unsolicited assistance is not only intrusive, but often dangerous. For example, grabbing someone to help them get up or down stairs can offset their balance.

Misattribution: Impairment or neurodivergence can be misattributed as deliberate and problematic behavior. For example, behavior influenced by ADHD can be punished as deliberate disruption. Chronic fatigue or acute depression can be labeled as laziness.

For more reading, please see our discussion on disability specifically within an exercise and fitness context.