

# Solutions

DISABILITY



## “What’s Wrong With You?”

*How people with disabilities contend with forced intimacy.* By Karen Stollznow, Ph.D.

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HAT’S WRONG WITH YOU?” ASKED THE man standing behind us, with a nod to my colleague Dean’s wheelchair. Chatting as we waited in line at a coffee shop, the stranger thought it was appropriate to interrupt us to ask about my friend’s physical disability.

Dean gave a little sigh. Although he felt a mixture of anger and sadness, he was used to these questions by now.

“I have a movement disorder,” was his guarded and well-rehearsed response.

“What’s wrong with you?” is the kind of prying question that Dean hears almost daily. As a person in a wheelchair, strangers frequently initiate conversation, expecting him to share private information about his health and his body. In their attempts to be conversational, people ask personal questions, try to guess his disability, make assumptions about his lifestyle, joke about his condition, and speculate as to how he acquired his disability. Dean gave me permission to tell his story so that nondisabled people can understand that this type of language can be harmful or offensive.

Ableism is social prejudice against people with disabilities that characterizes them as inferior to nondisabled people. Ableist language takes the form of overt insults; outdated, stigmatizing terms; and stereotypes and negative attitudes toward people with disabilities. This prejudice can manifest as invasive questions. Many people assume they have a right to ask: “What happened to you?” or “Were you born that way?” Seemingly innocuous inquiries like these imply that people with disabilities are somehow abnormal, deficient, or broken. These questions may be interpreted as impolite at best and dehumanizing at worst.

### Forced Intimacy

There is a tendency for nondisabled people to believe they are entitled to ask questions about the bodies of people with disabilities and to expect them to reveal personal information about themselves for the benefit, education,



or curiosity of others. Disability justice activist and author Mia Mingus refers to this phenomenon as “forced intimacy,” which she defines as the “common, daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world.” In this way, people with disabilities are often made to feel as though their bodies are public property.

In most cases, people who ask sensitive questions do not mean to be offensive. As they see it, they are curious, showing interest, and trying to be friendly. But constantly facing intimate questions can take a heavy toll. Whether intentional or not, forced intimacy is exhausting and embarrassing for people with disabilities. Dean sometimes uses humor to cope with incessant questioning and put anxious people at ease. When asked why he is in a wheelchair, he might quip, “I asked a guy why he was in a wheelchair.”

In response to the question, “What’s wrong with you?” sometimes Dean replies with the candid, “I have a disability.” But when he feels imposed upon, he might meet the abrasive query with, “Nothing. What’s wrong with you?” This is only in situations when he does not feel vulnerable, because his sense of safety dictates how he deals with the questioning; according to the U.S. Department of Justice, the rate of violent victimization of people with disabilities was 2.5 times higher than the rate for people without disabilities.

### Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are readily apparent to others. Many people have hidden disabilities, including epilepsy, celiac disease, rheumatoid arthritis, brain injuries, or learning difficulties like dyslexia. Outsiders might wonder

why a driver has a disabled parking placard if she doesn’t appear disabled. Microaggressions such as, “But you look so normal” or “Are you really disabled?” can be hurtful.

The lack of a visual cue, such as a wheelchair or a cane, can also raise suspicions when people with hidden disabilities seek accommodations. As a result, some people are expected to prove their disabilities. They might even be accused of faking it. The U.K. newspaper *The Evening Standard* reported

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one such incident. In September 2017, war veteran Andy Grant was boarding a London train, but when he was asked to produce his disability card, he discovered that he had lost his wallet. An employee asked, “How do we know you are even disabled?” “Because I got blown up in Afghanistan,” Grant replied, as he lifted up his trouser leg, revealing a prosthetic limb. His right leg had been amputated after an explosion.

To satisfy institutional demands, people with disabilities are often

expected to “strip down” in public or asked to “show all their cards.” This kind of forced intimacy obliges them to share personal information to gain accommodations and have their access needs met, but it can feel humiliating and violating.

### Disability Etiquette

Disability etiquette requires that we respect the privacy of people with disabilities and keep invasive questions to ourselves. Quite simply, their personal information is none of our business, unless they choose to share it. We should protect people’s confidentiality and avoid discussing their disabilities without their consent. Furthermore, people with disabilities are not obligated to educate nondisabled people. There are many resources available for those who genuinely want to better understand disability. To be disability allies, we must believe people when they disclose a disability and not accuse them of faking their condition. We should also listen to people when they request an accommodation rather than assuming we know what they need.

Most people have good intentions and don’t mean to be offensive, but even well-meaning comments and questions can take an emotional toll. People with disabilities don’t want to be treated as though there were something wrong with them; they want to be treated as equals. ■

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