

# Language shapes reality.



Are you using the right words to build an inclusive culture?

The **ABIDE** Dictionary is a concise, no-nonsense glossary that demystifies accessibility, neurodiversity, and equity terminology.

From core frameworks and acronyms to outdated terms to avoid, this handbook equips you to foster spaces that are genuinely accessible, inclusive, and human-centered.



Because inclusion starts with what we say.



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# The

# ABIDE

# Dictionary

A Modern Reference for Inclusive Leadership and Design  
by Britne Jenke, CPACC, SPHR



# The **ABIDE** Dictionary

A Modern Reference for  
Inclusive Leadership and Design

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## The ABIDE Dictionary

**ABIDE:** An acronym standing for **Accessibility, Belonging, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity**. It emphasizes an active, holistic approach to organizational and cultural transformation, placing **accessibility** first.

**Able-Bodied:** A term often used to describe someone who does not have a **disability**. It should be used with caution because it implies a false binary (that a person is either completely able or completely **disabled**) and often creates an unearned baseline of **normalcy**; using phrases like **non-disabled** is often more accurate.

**Able-Bodied Privilege:** Unearned societal advantages, conveniences, and assumptions of default **access** that are

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automatically granted to people who do not have **disabilities**.

**Ableism:** Discrimination and social prejudice against people with **disabilities**, often rooted in the belief that typical abilities are superior (e.g., valuing productivity or **neurotypicality** over human worth).

**ACA:** Accessible Canada Act, a federal Canadian law enacted to identify, remove, and prevent **accessibility barriers** in areas under federal jurisdiction across Canada.

**Access:** The actual ability or right to approach, enter, or use a space, resource, program, or opportunity without architectural, digital, financial, or social hurdles.

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**Access Fatigue:** The physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion experienced by **marginalized** individuals—particularly people with **disabilities** or **chronic illnesses**—from constantly having to advocate for, request, or navigate basic **accessibility**.

**Accessibility:** The design of products, devices, services, vehicles, or environments to be usable by people with **disabilities**. It removes **barriers** so everyone can perceive, navigate, and participate.

**Accommodation:** A **reasonable adjustment** made to a process, environment, or job to enable a person with a **disability** to have equal opportunity and **access**.

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**ADA:** Americans with Disabilities Act. A landmark 1990 U.S. civil rights law that prohibits **discrimination** against individuals with **disabilities** in all areas of public life.

**Adaptation:** A modification made to an environment, curriculum, tool, or task to help an individual participate more effectively and comfortably, **accommodating** specific **access** needs or functional differences.

**ADHD:** Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in executive functioning, attention regulation, impulse control, and energy levels, often accompanied by **hyperfocus** and **divergent** thinking.

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**Alexithymia:** A neurocognitive trait characterized by difficulty identifying, understanding, and describing one's own emotions. It is frequently experienced by **autistic** individuals and those with certain **neurodivergences**, though it is distinct from a lack of empathy.

**Ally / Allyship:** An ally is a person who works to end oppression and marginalization through supportive and inclusive behavior toward a group other than their own. Allyship is the continuous, active practice of this support.

**AODA:** Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, a provincial law in Ontario, Canada, that sets mandatory **accessibility** standards and timelines for public and private organizations.

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**Assistive Technology (AT):** Any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system—whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized—that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with **disabilities**.

**ASL:** American Sign Language, a complete, natural visual-gestural language used predominantly by **Deaf** and **hard-of-hearing** individuals in the United States and English-speaking parts of Canada, possessing its own distinct grammar, syntax, and cultural nuances independent of spoken English.

**Audism:** A form of **ableism** directed specifically against **deaf** and **hard-of-hearing** individuals, often assuming that

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hearing or speaking is superior or that using **sign language** is a deficit.

**AuDHD:** A term used by the **neurodivergent** community to describe individuals who are both **autistic** and have **ADHD**, experiencing the overlapping traits, intersections, and unique **accommodations** required for both.

**Autistic:** A **neurodivergent** identity and processing style characterized by differences in communication, sensory processing, social interaction, and pattern recognition; often preferred in identity-first language (*autistic person* rather than *person with autism*).

**Barrier:** Any obstacle, condition, or practice—whether physical, digital,

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architectural, attitudinal, or systemic—that hinders or prevents a person from fully and equally participating in society, accessing environments, or utilizing services.

**Belonging:** The feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, validation, and true **inclusion**; moving beyond just being "invited to the table" to feeling valued for one's authentic self.

**Bias:** A disproportionate weight in favor of or against an idea, thing, or group, usually in a way that is closed-minded, prejudicial, or unfair, operating either consciously or unconsciously to influence judgment and behavior.

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**Blind:** A term describing individuals with complete or significant vision loss. Like **deafness**, preferences vary; some prefer **identity-first language** ("blind person"), while others use "person who is blind" or "person with low vision."

**Braille:** A tactile writing system used by people who are **blind** or have **low vision**, consisting of raised dots read by touch using the fingertips.

**BSL:** British Sign Language, a visual-gestural language utilizing hand shapes, facial expressions, and body language, used primarily by **Deaf** and **hard-of-hearing** individuals across the United Kingdom and recognized as an official language in its own right.

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**Chronic Illness:** A human health condition or disease that is persistent or otherwise long-lasting in its effects (e.g., diabetes, lupus, long COVID).

**Code Switching:** The practice of shifting between different languages, dialects, cultural behaviors, or communication styles to fit into dominant cultural norms and minimize **discrimination** or **bias**.

**Compliance:** The act of meeting established minimum rules, regulations, laws, or technical standards (such as **accessibility** guidelines); while necessary as a baseline, compliance alone often falls short of achieving true **inclusion** or **equity**.

**Crip:** A term originally used as a slur against people with **disabilities** that

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has been reclaimed by the **disability** community (particularly within **disability** studies and activism) as an empowering, political identity and prefix (e.g., **crip theory, crip time**).

**Crip Theory:** An academic and activist framework that builds upon queer theory and **disability** studies, challenging normative assumptions of the body, mind, and health while celebrating **disability** and **crip** experiences as valuable cultural and political standpoints.

**Crip Time:** A flexible, nonlinear framework for understanding time and productivity within the **disability** community, acknowledging that bodies and minds operate at different rhythms

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and require rest that defies rigid schedules.

**Cultural Competence:** The ongoing process of self-reflection and lifelong learning regarding other cultures and lived experiences, shifting away from a fixed "competency" toward an attitude of humility, openness, and accountability.

**DDA:** Disability Discrimination Act, legislation used in several international jurisdictions (such as Australia and the UK historically) making it unlawful to **discriminate** against people with **disabilities** in public life.

**Deaf** (with a capital "D"): A cultural and linguistic identity. Capital-D "Deaf" refers to individuals who are **deaf** or **hard of hearing** and are part of Deaf culture,

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often sharing a common language (such as **ASL** or **BSL**) and community norms.

**deaf** (with a lowercase "d"): A physiological or audiological description referring strictly to the medical condition of hearing loss or hearing **impairment**, regardless of cultural affiliation or use of **sign language**.

**DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.** A foundational framework used by organizations to foster fair representation and treatment of all people.

**Differently Abled:** A euphemism often created by non-disabled people to avoid saying the word "**disabled**." Many within the **disability** community reject it because it sanitizes **disability**, frames it

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as a polite buzzword, and distances people from the reality of systemic **barriers**.

**Disability:** A physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment that, in interaction with various **barriers**, may hinder a person's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis.

**Disabled:** In many legal contexts (such as the **ADA**), a person with a **disability** is defined as someone who has a physical or mental **impairment** that substantially limits one's ability to perform one or more major life activities (such as walking, working, learning, caring for oneself, or communicating).

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**Discrimination:** The unjust or prejudicial treatment of individuals or groups based on their actual or perceived identity, characteristics, or status (such as race, gender, **disability**, or age), resulting in the denial of equal rights, **access**, or opportunities.

**Divergent:** Pertaining to cognitive, neurological, or behavioral styles that differ from dominant societal norms, emphasizing unique patterns of thinking, problem-solving, and perceiving the world.

**Diversity:** The presence of differences within a given setting. This includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, and cognitive styles.

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**Dominant Societal Norm:** The established cultural, behavioral, physical, and cognitive expectations, standards, and default settings dictated by the majority or ruling group in a society, often **marginalizing** anyone who deviates from them.

**Dyscalculia:** A specific learning **disability** affecting a person's ability to understand numbers, learn math facts, and perform calculations, often involving difficulties with spatial-numerical relationships.

**Dysgraphia:** A neurological learning **disability** that affects written expression, handwriting, spelling, and fine motor skills associated with writing, often causing a disconnect between

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thoughts and the physical act of recording them.

**Dyslexia:** A neurodevelopmental learning difference that primarily affects reading accuracy, fluency, spelling, and phonological processing, completely independent of a person's overall intelligence.

**Dyspraxia:** A neurological condition that impacts motor skill development, coordination, spatial awareness, and balance, affecting both fine motor tasks (like writing or typing) and gross motor tasks.

**EAA:** European Accessibility Act, an EU directive requiring member states to enforce harmonized digital and physical **accessibility** requirements across

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essential commercial products and services.

**EN 301 549:** The European harmonized technical standard for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) **accessibility**, which outlines how digital products meet the requirements of laws like the **EAA**.

**Epistemic Injustice:** A form of systemic unfairness where someone's knowledge, credibility, or **lived experience** is unjustly doubted, dismissed, or ignored—frequently experienced by disabled, chronically ill, or marginalized individuals.

**Equality:** The practice of ensuring that every individual or group is given the exact same resources or opportunities,

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regardless of their starting point or specific needs.

**Equity:** The fair treatment, **access**, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while striving to identify and eliminate **barriers** that have prevented the full participation of some groups.

**ESA:** Emotional Support Animal, an animal whose presence provides therapeutic benefit, comfort, or emotional support to an individual with a **mental health** condition, psychiatric **disability**, or **chronic illness**. Unlike **service animals**, ESAs are not universally granted public **access** rights under laws like the **ADA**, but they are protected in housing under specific regulations.

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**Executive Dysfunction:** Difficulties with cognitive processes managed by the brain's frontal lobe—such as working memory, emotional control, task initiation, planning, and organization—commonly experienced by individuals with **ADHD**, **autism**, brain injuries, or **chronic illnesses**.

**Flare-Up:** A sudden worsening of symptoms associated with a **chronic illness**, autoimmune condition, or **disability**, often temporarily altering a person's energy levels or **access** needs.

**Gaslighting:** A form of psychological manipulation where a person or system makes someone doubt their perception, memory, or sanity; frequently experienced by **marginalized** or **chronically ill** individuals when their

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symptoms or **discrimination** are invalidated.

**Handicapped:** An archaic term; while still occasionally found in legacy infrastructure terms (like "handicapped parking"), it is widely considered outdated and offensive when applied to people.

**Hard of Hearing:** A term used to describe individuals with mild-to-moderate or severe hearing loss who may rely more on residual hearing, spoken language, assistive listening devices, or speechreading rather than, or in addition to, **sign language**.

**Hyperfocus:** An intense state of concentration and laser-like focus on a specific task, interest, or project, often

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experienced by **neurodivergent** individuals (particularly those with **ADHD** or **autism**), which can lead to incredible productivity but sometimes difficulty shifting attention.

**IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility.** A variation of DEI that explicitly places **inclusion** at the forefront and includes **accessibility**.

**Identity-First Language:** Phrasing that places the identifier before the person (e.g., **autistic person** or **disabled person**), often preferred by communities who view their identity as an inseparable part of who they are and a matter of cultural pride.

**Impairment:** A medical or functional term describing a physiological or

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structural deviation, loss, or limitation in body function or structure (e.g., visual impairment, cognitive impairment). In the **social model of disability**, an impairment is a physical or mental fact of a body, whereas a **disability** is created when society fails to **accommodate** it.

**Inclusion:** The practice or policy of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate.

**Intellectual Disability:** A neurodevelopmental condition characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (such as learning, reasoning, and problem-

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solving) and in adaptive behavior (everyday social and practical skills).

**Interactive Conversation:** A dynamic, two-way exchange of dialogue that relies on active engagement, real-time feedback, and **accessible** communication channels between participants.

**Intersectionality:** A term describing how overlapping social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, **disability**) interconnect to create interdependent systems of **discrimination** or disadvantage.

**Invisibility:** The systemic erasure or oversight of certain populations (such as people with non-apparent **disabilities** or **chronic illnesses**) where their needs

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and presence are routinely ignored by standard designs and policies.

**Invisible Disability:** A physical, mental, or neurological condition that is not immediately obvious to an outside observer (such as chronic pain, autoimmune diseases, **neurodivergence**, or **mental health** conditions). Also called a “non-apparent” **disability**.

**JEDI: Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.** Adds "Justice" to explicitly center systemic fairness and the dismantling of root barriers.

**Justice:** The systemic remediation of unfairness and systemic **oppression**; working to repair historical harms and

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redesign structures so power and resources are shared fairly.

**Lived Experience:** Knowledge, understanding, and expertise gained through direct, firsthand personal experience of a condition, circumstance, or systemic **barrier**, rather than solely through academic or professional study.

**Low Vision:** A visual acuity or field restriction that cannot be fully corrected by glasses, contact lenses, medicine, or surgery, but where an individual still retains some usable functional vision.

**Marginalized:** Describes individuals or groups who have been pushed to the edge of society or systematically disadvantaged, experiencing restricted **access** to power, resources,

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representation, and full social participation.

**Masking (Camouflaging):** The conscious or unconscious suppression of one's natural traits, behaviors, or **neurodivergent** responses (such as suppressing **stims** or forcing eye contact) in order to fit in, avoid social penalties, or meet **dominant cultural norms**.

**Medical Model of Disability:** A traditional framework that views **disability** as a personal tragedy, defect, or medical pathology located entirely within the individual's body, placing the burden on doctors to "cure" or fix the person rather than changing society.

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**Meltdown / Shutdown:** Intense involuntary neurological responses to acute sensory overload, cognitive fatigue, or emotional stress. A meltdown is an outward release of energy (e.g., crying, pacing, verbal outbursts), while a shutdown is an internal withdrawal or loss of energy and speech.

**Mental Health:** A state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community.

**Microaggression:** Brief, everyday subtle comments, behaviors, or environmental cues—often unintentional—that communicate hostile, derogatory, or

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negative slights toward **marginalized** groups.

**Mobility Device:** Equipment designed to assist individuals with physical **impairments** or limited stamina to move independently through their environment, including wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches, and scooters.

**Neurodivergent:** A term describing individuals whose neurological development and functioning **diverge** from dominant societal norms (**neurotypicality**); encompassing **autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia,** and more.

**Neurodiversity:** The concept that neurological differences—such as **autism, ADHD, dyslexia,** and

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**dyspraxia**—are natural variations of the human genome rather than deficits to be cured.

**Neuroinclusive:** An environment, culture, design, or practice that proactively anticipates, accommodates, and values **neurodivergent** individuals (such as those with **autism**, **ADHD**, **dyslexia**, and **dyspraxia**). Rather than placing the burden on the individual to conform to **neurotypical** norms, **neuroinclusion** removes systemic **barriers** and embraces **diverse** ways of thinking, communicating, sensing, and working.

**Neurotypical:** A term used to describe individuals whose neurological development, cognitive processing, and behavioral patterns align with dominant

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societal expectations and standards (i.e., not **neurodivergent**).

**Normal / Normalcy:** In the context of **disability** and **neurodivergence**, terms like "normal" or "neurotypical as normal" establish a harmful baseline that pathologizes human variation. Using terms like **typical**, **neurotypical**, or **dominant societal norm** is much more accurate and less exclusionary.

**Oppression:** The systemic, prolonged, and unjust exercise of authority, power, or societal control by a dominant group over a **marginalized** group, reinforced by cultural norms, institutional policies, and laws.

**Person-First Language:** Phrasing that places the person before the condition

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or disability (e.g., **person with a disability** or **person with epilepsy**), emphasizing their humanity first; often preferred in certain clinical or advocacy settings.

**Psychiatric Disability:** A mental health condition or psychological illness (such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, PTSD, or schizophrenia) that substantially limits one or more major life activities, functioning as a recognized type of **invisible** or **non-apparent disability**.

**Psychological Safety:** A shared belief that a team or workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, where individuals feel secure speaking up, asking for **accommodations**, or sharing ideas without fear of negative

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consequences to their self-image, status, or career.

### **Reasonable Adjustment:** A

modification or **adaptation** made to a workplace, educational setting, process, or environment to remove **barriers** and enable a person with a **disability** to participate on an equal basis (commonly referred to as a "reasonable accommodation" in the U.S.).

**Retarded:** A severe, deeply offensive slur historically used in clinical, educational, and everyday contexts to describe people with intellectual or developmental **disabilities**. It weaponizes medical terminology into an insult and carries heavy historical trauma; it should never be used.

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**Screen Reader:** A software application that enables users who are **blind** or have **low vision** to read the text displayed on a computer or mobile screen either with a speech synthesizer or by translating it into a **braille** display.

### **Section 504 (of the U.S.**

#### **Rehabilitation Act of 1973):** A

landmark civil rights law in the United States that prohibits **discrimination** against individuals with **disabilities** in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. It ensures equal **access** to education (often implemented via 504 plans in schools), employment, and public services, laying the vital groundwork that eventually led to the **ADA**.

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### **Section 508 (of the U.S.**

**Rehabilitation Act):** A federal U.S. law requiring all electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by federal agencies to be **accessible** to people with disabilities.

### **Sensory Processing Sensitivity /**

**Sensory Overload:** A neurological condition where the central nervous system registers sensory input (sounds, lights, textures, smells, crowds) more intensely or struggles to filter it out, leading to rapid exhaustion or physical distress.

**Service Animal:** A dog (or, in specific legal contexts, a miniature horse) individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an

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individual with a **disability**, including physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or mental **disability**. Service animals are granted specific public **access** rights under laws like the **ADA**.

**Sign Languages:** Complete, natural visual-gestural languages that use hand shapes, movement, facial expressions, and body grammar (such as **ASL** and **BSL**) to convey meaning independently of spoken languages.

**Social Model of Disability:** A framework established by **disabled** activists that distinguishes between a biological **impairment** and a **disability**. It asserts that people are **disabled** by environmental, attitudinal, and systemic **barriers** in society (like stairs instead of

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ramps or inaccessible software), not by their bodies.

**Special Needs / Special:** Paternalistic terms used to describe **accommodations**, education, or individuals with disabilities. Critics note that the needs of **disabled** people (like physical **access**, ramps, or clear communication) are not "special"—they are basic human needs for participation.

**Spoon Theory:** A metaphor to explain the limited daily energy reserves available to people with **chronic illnesses, invisible disabilities**, or **mental health** conditions, where every task "costs" a certain number of spoons.

**Stimming (Self-Stimulatory Behavior):** Repetitive movements, sounds, or

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actions (such as hand-flapping, rocking, pacing, or using fidget tools) that help individuals—particularly **autistic** and **neurodivergent** people—regulate their nervous system, express emotions, or manage sensory input.

**Suffers From / Afflicted With:** Drama-laden framing that casts a **disabled** or **chronically ill** person as a perpetual **victim** or tragic figure (e.g., *suffering from multiple sclerosis*). It strips the individual of agency; using neutral phrasing like *living with*, *has*, or *experiences* is preferred.

**Systemic Oppression:** The intentional or unintentional disadvantage of groups of people based on their identity, built into and reinforced by the laws, policies,

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institutional practices, and cultural norms of society.

### **Tactile Defensiveness / Sensory**

**Avoidance:** A neurological response where certain tactile inputs (such as clothing tags, specific food textures, or light touches) feel intensely uncomfortable, painful, or overwhelming.

**Tokenism:** The practice of making a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be **inclusive**—such as recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups—to give the appearance of **equality** without systemic change.

### **Transformational Inclusion:**

Organizational change that goes beyond surface-level **compliance** or optics,

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fundamentally shifting power dynamics, decision-making structures, and cultural norms to center **equity** and **belonging**.

**Unconscious Bias:** (Also known as **implicit bias**) Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner, operating outside of our conscious awareness.

**Universal Design:** The design and composition of buildings, products, and environments so that they are inherently usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for specialized adaptation.

**Usability:** The measure of how easily, efficiently, and satisfactorily a product, digital interface, or environment can be

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used by a specified user group to achieve specific goals.

**UX:** User Experience, an individual's overall perception, emotions, and responses resulting from the use or anticipated use of a product, system, or service, heavily driven by **accessibility** and ease of interaction.

**Victim:** Framing a person with a health condition or disability as a "victim" of their body or diagnosis. It pathologizes their lived experience and assumes their life is inherently tragic or miserable.

**WCAG:** Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Internationally recognized technical standards developed by the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) outlining how to make digital content

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more accessible to people with a wide range of **disabilities**.

**Wheelchair-Bound / Confined to a Wheelchair:** Outdated and factually incorrect framing that treats a mobility aid as a prison rather than a tool of liberation. For wheelchair users, **mobility devices** provide freedom, independence, and **access**; the preferred phrasing is *wheelchair user*.

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