

A GUIDE

# Creating Stigma-Free Classrooms

## An Intersectional Approach to Stigma

**Summary:** Stigmas have a devastating physical and mental impact on individuals with disabilities. Not only are your perceptions and expectations of students affected by stigmas, but so is your ability to communicate, support, and facilitate learning.

- **Try:** Educate yourself on the range of disabilities and common stigmas.
- **Try:** Use respectful, age appropriate, transparent communication.

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## Defining Stigma

The word stigma comes from the Greek word for “mark.” Merriam Webster defines the word as “a mark of shame or discredit”. Stigmas shape your perceptions of groups, individuals and lived experiences based on race, ethnicity, geography, status, body, age, gender and disabilities.

### Tip:

Just like identities, disabilities aren't always easily noticeable. Have an awareness, respect, and sensitivity to what may not be seen.

## The Impact of Stigma Matters







Understanding stigma and its impact on individuals and classrooms empowers you to be compassionate educators that preserve and protect the dignity and lived experience of students with disabilities.

### Stigma...

- ▶ Isolates individuals.
- ▶ Segregates learners.
- ▶ Infects policy-making.
- ▶ Emerges as structural and social discrimination.



## What You Can Do to Work Against Stigma

-  [Develop Your Knowledge & Know How](#)
-  [Be Mindful of Your Language](#)
-  [Plant Seeds of Confidence and Esteem by Trusting That Students are Able](#)
-  [Question what you have accepted to be true](#)
-  [Create Equality between all students](#)
-  [Consider your class introductions](#)

### Develop Your Knowledge & Know How

**Ableism** is a discriminatory practice based on the belief that non-disabled and neurotypical people are superior. This belief assumes people with disabilities are inferior and need “fixing”.

Instead focus on the social model of disability - which looks at the barriers currently built into our societal structures. **Barriers** are “Factors in a person’s environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability. These include aspects such as:

- a physical environment that is not accessible,
- limited, irrelevant, or nonexistent of relevant assistive technology (assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices),
- negative attitudes of people towards disability,
- implicit bias, stigma, and/ or discrimination directed to people with disabilities
- the creation and development of services, systems and policies that are either nonexistent or that hinder the involvement of all people with a health condition in all areas of life.” (World Health Organization, International classification of functioning, disability and health. Geneva:2001, WHO. p. 214)

### **Disability is Intersectional**

The largest minority group in the US are people with disabilities. Of that group, African-Americans and Indian/Alaska Natives have the highest rates of disability. Black, non-white and female students are grossly undiagnosed, and isolated when they are diagnosed.

Learn More:

- [Social Model of Disability](#)
- [The seven ways that stigma can affect people with disabilities](#)
- [Disability Barriers](#)

### **Be Mindful of Your Language**

Words Have Power. The language you use can have an affect on an individual’s perception of themselves or others.

Language is verbal and nonverbal. Body language and paralanguage often communicate more than what we are expressing with words.

The tone in your voice is equally important to the listener as the tone in your writing is to your reader. Your tone expresses your attitude and respect for the students observing you. Be mindful of your delivery.

[Learn more about Inclusive Language here.](#)

### **Be Conscious of any Verbal Innuendo**

*“As you talk about someone with a mental illness, you may pair certain words with a change in your tone of voice. For example, you may whisper the term ‘depression’ or ‘bipolar’. People pick up on these cues, which communicate depression stigma to the listener.”*

- Melissa Pinto, PhD, RN

## Be Intentional About Introductions

Consider how you introduce yourself and how you create opportunities for others to introduce themselves and self-identify.

Whether you identify as a person with a disability, non-disabled, or otherwise, consider including that as part of your introduction when you meet students or school partners, as is comfortable for you. Let students know you might make mistakes, that you want to know about them, and will take responsibility for making change within what’s in your control.

When you introduce yourself to a new group of students:

- Choose what identities you’re comfortable sharing and what to prioritize
- Consider how your introduction can open up communication and raise awareness about multiple identities and implicit bias. How can you normalize difference and destigmatize? What are the risks?
- Leave time for, and be prepared to answer, questions that may come up.

Plan an opportunity for students to introduce themselves, articulate, and share how they self-identify. Factor into your planning what you do and don’t know about the group of people, the classroom environment, and how much time you have with students. What level of risk seems right?

Some sample activity ideas include:

- Freewrite: What you need to know about me is...
  - This can be further worked to become an artist statement, poem, or other creative piece.
- “I am From...” or other similar prompts can be used across disciplines
- Invite students to choose and share about an artist or artwork they identify with and why.
- Invite students to choose one identity as inspiration for an artistic piece they’ll create individually or in groups, finding ways to represent what’s important to each of them.

[Learn more about identities and implicit bias here.](#)

## Be a Conscious Communicator in the Classroom.

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Make eye contact and directly speak with the student first, not the assisting companion.	Depend on the classroom teacher or the paraprofessional for translating communication with the student.
Ask students with speech impairments for the modes of communication they are most comfortable with.	Guess what a student is trying to express verbally or physically. Instead, ask for clarification.
Use respectful yet ordinary language and tone with students to help them feel included in the community.	Assume that a student cannot understand basic instructions unless you have clear indication.

## **Plant Seeds of Confidence and Esteem by Trusting That Students are Able**

### **Lead with Empathy**

Being willing to abandon antiquated ideas and preconceived notions opens you up to the newness of possibility. Developing a genuine appreciation for each unique student and their individual lives creates limitless opportunities for empathy.

### **The Seven Rights to the Body**

These seven rights to the body are a consensus of shared values gathered from eastern and indigenous philosophy, religious beliefs, and human rights organizations. You can use these rights as the pedagogical guide to create safe spaces for all learners and empower them to be advocates for themselves.

- ❖ The Right to be Present - to exist in any space.
- ❖ The Right to Feel.
- ❖ The Right to Act.
- ❖ The Right to Love and be Loved.
- ❖ The Right to Speak.
- ❖ The Right to See.
- ❖ The Right to Know.

## **Question what you have accepted to be true**

*"...people may assume someone with depression or another mental illness is unstable, lazy, untrustworthy, unintelligent, or incapable," when that's not the case" - Mary Pender Greene, LCSW-R*

## Check Your Assumptions

It is easy to enter a classroom and assign labels to student behaviors. Faultily attributing a child's performance to a lack of interest or general ineptness can be an impediment to trust in your instruction and their ability to learn. It can also unwittingly hurt your chance of developing positive relationships with students. In addition - Black, non-white and female students with disabilities receive disciplinary actions more than white students with these disabilities.

Read more about [Developing Positive Relationships](#).

## Embrace Ambiguity

It is okay not to be the authority on a subject. In the classroom, student-centered design is in the collaborative imagination. When we release the need to control the outcome, we make space for innovation.

## Take Time for Self-Reflection

- How do I currently talk about and/or around people with visible *and* invisible disabilities?
- What language practices dignify these communities?
- What language practices pathologize these communities?
- Have I depended on the classroom teacher or the paraprofessional for translating communication with the student, or handling a student I don't feel comfortable interacting with?
- How have I been denied my seven rights in my lived experience as an artist or individual?
- How have I witnessed students being denied their rights in the classroom?
- How have I denied students their rights to the body in facilitation or their artistry?
- If we knew the answer when we started, what could we possibly learn?
- How could we come up with creative solutions?
- Where would the people we're designing for guide us?

## Create Equality between all students

### Adjust Away from Assumptions Made About Students

Take a moment to check or notice assumptions in the language used around or about your students or any actions taken and make adjustments as necessary.

- **Instead of...** *"He cannot sit still and pay attention long enough to do anything."*
- **Try...** *"How can we make the activity more physically engaging for everyone?"*
  
- **Instead of...** *"She can't read out loud. She's too slow."*
- **Try...** *"Let's give her time and supports while she reads"*
  
- **Instead of...** *"I don't think he can be the lead. The audience may get uncomfortable seeing him and hearing him like that."*
- **Try...** *"Let's give him the lead. If he feels like he needs a buddy to do parts of the scene, we can split the role."*
  
- **Instead of...** *"You may not be able to do this activity, you can be our audience."*
- **Try...** *"Would you like to try this activity? If so, we'll support you"*
  
- **Instead of...** *"I don't know what is wrong with her. She is just so disruptive and shouldn't participate."*
- **Try...** *to avoid singling out students with these disabilities before entering the room. Design lesson plans that include moments for emotional literacy, journaling, and exploration as a first step. Introduce tools and spaces for self-regulation or support on the first day.*

## Work Towards Educational Equity

Our culture is filled with ableist representations and ideas that inform all of our lives. What assumptions do you make about:

- ...what a student is capable of?
- ...how a student speaks or communicates?
- ...how a student uses their body?
- ...what a "good student" looks like?
- ...what it means or looks like to try or work hard?
- ...whether someone is the "right fit" for an activity or role?
- ...how a student might feel if they try something and fail?

- ...what an audience will expect a performer to look/sound like?

How can you use your content, language, and the art you share to move away from assumptions and towards educational equity for your students?



## Artists in Conversation around Stigma

[Maysoon Zayid](#), *Comedian, Actress, Disability Advocate & Tap Dancer*

“‘I have cerebral palsy. I shake all the time,’ Maysoon Zayid announces at the beginning of this exhilarating, hilarious talk. (Really, it’s hilarious.) ‘I’m like Shakira meets Muhammad Ali.’ With grace and wit, the Arab-American comedian takes us on a whistle-stop tour of her adventures as an actress, stand-up comic, philanthropist and advocate for the disabled.” This talk was presented at an official TED conference. TEDWomen 2013.



[VIDEO] [“I Got 99 problems ... palsy is just one”](#) - (14:01)

[Adam Pearson](#), *Broadcast Journalist, Actor, Advocate, & Motivational Speaker*

“Adam will share important lessons he has learned while carving out a career for himself in the public eye, whilst overcoming the stigma attached to his disfigurements.” This talk was presented at an official TED conference. TEDxBrighton 2017.



[VIDEO] [Removing the Stigma of Disability](#) - (13:58)

[Lindsay Abromatis-Smith](#), *Artist, Writer, & Healer*



"I am most proud of the fact that I am still thriving despite my body becoming differently abled. I think my best work has come out of pushing against my limitations."

Lindsay Abromaitis-Smith has been making art for her entire life. Before being diagnosed with ALS in 2012, Lindsay worked as a puppetry artist, sculptor, and massage therapist. Though she no longer has the use of her arms and hands, she continues to express herself creatively by using her feet to paint.

"Living with ALS is the most difficult thing I have ever done. It has given me so many opportunities to slow down, figure out what is important to me, and shift my perspective of the world."

People are talking. [Learn more about artists with disabilities here.](#)

## Learn More:

Social Model of Disability:

- [What is the social model of disability? - Scope video](#)
- [Social Model of Disability](#)

[Disability Stigma and Your Patients | Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging With Physical Disabilities](#)

[Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities](#)

**Insights from the Field: Centering Disability Identity for Students of the Arts with Disabilities** with Sarah J. Hom, Nancy Rourke, and Marilee Talkington

[ARTICLE] ["Disability Stigma and Your Patients"](#)

[WEBSITE] ["Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities"](#)

[RESOURCE] ["Checking Assumptions About Students"](#)

[ARTICLE] ["What is the Difference Between Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities"](#)

[ARTICLE] ["Are You Guilty of Stigmatizing the Mentally Ill"](#)

[ARTICLE] ["9 Ways to Fight Mental Health Stigma"](#)

[WEBSITE] [National Alliance for Mental Illness](#)

[WEBSITE] [Disability Justice](#)

[RESOURCE] [Field Guide to Human-Centered Design](#)

[Disability Visibility Project – "Creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture"](#)