

Disabled Students UK (DSUK) Community Culture

“Our movements themselves have to be healing, or there’s no point to them”
– Cara Page, Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective

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1. A healing movement

"Most folks I know come to activist spaces longing to heal, but our movements are often filled with more ableism and burnout than they are with healing. "¹

- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in "Care work"

At Disabled Students UK we engage in prefigurative politics², meaning that we try to embody the society that we want to achieve in our organisational culture and structure. In particular we take inspiration from **Healing Justice**, a movement created by queer people of colour. We acknowledge that trauma and oppression impact those working within social justice movements.

Central to "healing justice" is the idea that **caring for the wellbeing of our contributors is not an add-on to our work as activists but rather part of our work** - both in the sense that we achieve more when we treat each other with care while doing activism work, and in the sense that the internal work of caring for ourselves and each other is transformative in itself and thus is a part of activism.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes: "Healing justice is not a spa vacation where we recover from organising and then throw ourselves back into the grind. To me, it means organising work to think of it as a place where building in many pauses, where building in healing, where building in space for grief and trauma to be held, makes the movement more flexible and longer lasting"

"Collective care means shifting our organisations to be ones where people feel fine if they get sick, cry, have needs, start late because the bus broke down, move slower, ones where there's food at meetings, people work from home – and these aren't things we apologise for. It's the way we do the work"

So how do we make Disabled Students UK a healing movement? By:

- Dismantling oppression
- Being intersectional

¹ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

<http://micemagazine.ca/issue-two/not-so-brief-personal-history-healing-justice-movement-2010%E2%80%932016>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prefigurative_politics

- Celebrating strengths
- Being caring
- Adapting to needs
- Respecting boundaries

1.1. Dismantling systems of oppression

“Perhaps, first of all, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly.... Communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh in *“The raft is not the shore”*

Much of our work is centred around dismantling an external system of oppression within the higher education sector. This is work that can be healing in itself. However, in order for our spaces to be healing for everyone we must also continually work to **dismantle systems of oppression within our own community**.

Internalised ableism is widespread within the disabled community, sometimes causing us to treat ourselves and others badly. We acknowledge that there can develop a **hierarchy** of disabilities within our communities, for instance hierarchies that place disabled people with a global learning impairment, visibly or invisibly disabled people or people with certain mental illnesses below others in the community. We work to counter this. This is a space where students with schizophrenia should feel as welcome as students who use a wheelchair.

People with different types of disabilities face **different types of prejudice**, for instance visibly disabled and invisibly disabled people. We should fight equally for those who face prejudice in the form of being told they don't seem disabled and those who are told they seem too disabled.

We acknowledge that **everyone is on their own journey of overcoming internalised ableism** and sometimes this journey will look different depending on their cultural and social environment.

Songs

- May the life I live speak for me <https://soundcloud.com/ifnotnow/may-the-life-i-lead-1>
- Something inside so strong <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otuwNwsqHmQ>

1.2. Being intersectional in our approach

“Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.”

- Audre Lorde in “*Sister Outsider*”

Too often our movements focus on only one form of oppression, but the fact is that most people in any movement face multiple types of oppression. In this movement we understand that oppression is systemic, internalised, intersectional and often implicit. We **lift multiply-marginalised perspectives and give priority to lived experience**. We acknowledge that multiply-marginalised people face different types of ableism and often have intersecting and compounded challenges within higher education.

We also acknowledge that our own community **contains various forms of oppression beyond ableism**: sexism, homophobia, fatphobia, biphobia, transphobia, antisemitism, classism and (perhaps especially) racism. Some people are surprised to find such views within our community, but we are of the belief that everyone has such oppressive attitudes to some degree and disabled people are no exception. Counter to some ableist views - disabled people are not saints.

In this movement we work together to move away from those oppressive attitudes. We don't attack each other but we do “call each other in” (see [resources](#)) and importantly, we require people to be able to work on themselves if they are called in. If you think that someone in the community needs to be called in please contact someone from the leadership team. Do not send unsolicited DMs. We try to be honest and transparent about the learning process but at the same time avoid embarrassing people (shame is a terrible teacher) or breaking confidentiality.

We all get things wrong, that doesn't mean anyone is evil, we all need to be able to work on ourselves in this space. We try to be gentle in our teaching. At the same time we hold a firm position that if someone is unwilling to do this self-work, having acted in a way that harms other contributors, they will be excluded so that we can keep this as safe a space as possible.

Example: A disabled international student questions whether a particular action is really ableist. Instead of arguing for a single view of ableism we acknowledge that this person may face not just the barriers faced by disabled students and those faced by international students

but also unique difficulties such as understanding the definition of disability in a different cultural context to their own. We try to learn from this rather than push a single view.

Songs

- [Count me in](#)
- [Courage, you do not walk alone](#)
- [We shall not be moved](#)

More Audre Lorde quotes

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives”

“Community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist”

“we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that’s not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.”

“We have few patterns for relating across differences as equals. And unclaimed, our differences are used against us in the service of separation and confusion, for we view them only in opposition to each other; dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior. And of course, so long as the existence of human differences means one must be inferior, the recognition of those differences will be fraught with guilt and danger.”

“And certainly there are very real differences between us, of race, sex, age, sexuality, class, vision. But it is not the differences between us that tear us apart, destroying the commonalities we share. Rather, it is our refusal to examine the distortions which arise from their misnaming, and from the illegitimate usage of those differences which can be made when we do not claim them nor define them for ourselves.”

1.3. Celebrating Strengths

Our movement emphasises our power as disabled students by **spreading disabled peoples' culture, wisdom and pride**. We emphasise disabled peoples' strengths by envisioning **solutions** to the issues we are raising. By **building a community which is healthier** than the communities that surround us we create not just a setting for disabled people to heal trauma but a vision for how the world might look and where we want to go.

We acknowledge the **oppressive circumstances** in which we find ourselves and we celebrate our incredible resilience in the face of such difficulties.

We find strength in our **shared motivation** - everyone in this space wants to make disabled students' education more accessible and cares about the wellbeing of all involved. We strive to see the best in each other, to lift each other up and to presume goodwill. Together we are powerful.

Within our teams we **assign tasks based on strengths**. For instance, one autistic person may be really good at hyperfocusing on research and struggle with socials, while another person, who has a chronic illness and ADHD, is great at moderating socials. A person with a mobility impairment may find a street protest inaccessible but have a lot of experience rallying people through social media.

What type of activism we choose to do is entirely dependent on the strengths of those who have time to do activism within our movement at the moment. This means that **our activities sometimes change from month to month** as people become more and less active depending on their (often variable) functioning levels.

Songs

- [We rise](#)
- [I am what I am](#)
- [You get proud by practicing](#)

1.4. Being Compassionate

"Caring for myself is not self indulgence, it is self preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"

- Audre Lorde

We believe self care and community care are political acts. As a movement we aim to create spaces and events where we can share wisdom, grieve, recognize others in ourselves, practice care and feel a part of a community.

We expect our contributors and volunteers to **treat each other with kindness**. On top of our impairments, disabled people have often experienced abuse, trauma and oppression. We all come to this space with baggage and we all deserve to be shown kindness.

Disabled people are an incredibly **diverse** group. We have different disabilities and different intersecting identities. We have an enormous amount to give each other. **Always try to be considerate of other people's perspectives, background, trauma, neurodivergence and mental health difficulties.**

Please consider that most people in this space do not have an extensive background in disability activist spaces. **Try to use language that is accessible to those that do not have a disability activism background**, e.g. write out acronyms and explain "inside jokes" or knowledge. Offer educational resources if you can. People who have not yet had access to disability activist spaces and thus may not know our norms are more likely to be multiply-marginalised. People from multiple marginalised groups are already likely to feel less welcome in our spaces.

Pay special attention to culture differences. More than 20% of all students in the UK are international and among the remaining (Home) students around 20 percent are either first or second generation Brits. Our community is for all disabled students. So let's make sure that we consider that **someone may have a different take** on what constitutes ableism for instance, because they come from a culture where ableism really does look different, and **there is something for us to learn** from this. We are going to interpret things in different ways depending on our background. Educate people about our norms with kindness and remain open to hearing about ways that we can improve and be more intersectionally inclusive. **We have much to learn from non-British cultures** when it comes to anti-ableist work.

There are many ways of being anti-ableist. Being part of this space means being civil to people with very **different approaches to activism**. We need both those activists who shout loudly about injustices and those who work to change the system from within.

We are not a party political organisation. We have contributors from all parties. While anyone is free to criticise specific policies or set of policies please do not make general statements about “all Tories”.

Part of being caring and intersectional is being open to other people using **different terminology** to us (there is a limit to this, for instance we do not allow the use of words like ‘retarded’ as an insult in this space):

1. Sometimes the terminology difference really is just a matter of different cultures, rather than one way of phrasing things being inherently better than another.
2. Other times misunderstandings happen due to **different neurotypes**.
3. Finally, sometimes the terminology reflects a degree of **internalised ableism** which we can **work through together, rather than exclude people** for.

Example: someone joins our community who uses the term Asperger's to describe themselves. Other autistic contributors feel uncomfortable about this due to the difficult history of the term.

A negative response: “Asperger's is an aspie supremacist term, you shouldn't use it.”

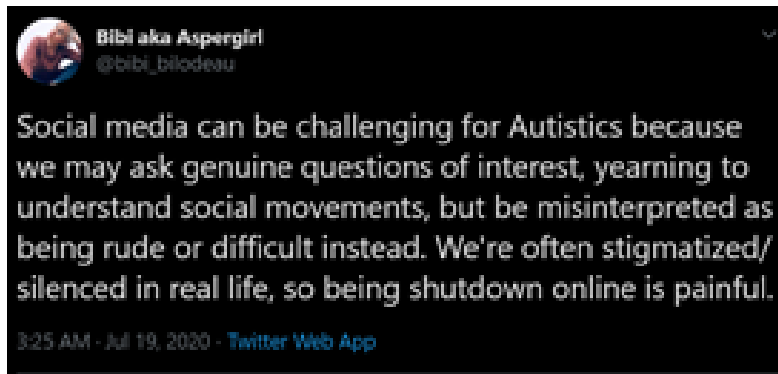
A constructive response: “I prefer not to use the term Asperger's myself for these reasons - here's a resource which explains it more fully.... I understand that there may be good reasons why this term is useful in certain settings. In this community we tend to use Autistic instead, but you are of course welcome to refer to yourself in whatever way that you feel is most appropriate. ”

Songs

- [Healing song](#)
- [Lean on me](#)

Resources

- [Crip emotional intelligence](#)



1.5. Adapting to needs

"Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all"

- Audre Lorde

Our activism strives to be accessible to different peoples' needs. We expect our contributors and volunteers to **make accommodations for each other**. This is not always easy, because sometimes our access needs conflict. In these situations we try to resolve things as well as possible, with **the understanding that it is unlikely to be perfect**. It is important that each person understands that working in a group means sometimes another person's needs will take precedence over yours and vice versa. This is not always a form of ableism.

Disabled students often have very limited time and energy. We work to create ways for those with limited time to participate and we are kind when those who have committed to doing work are unable to meet deadlines, because we've all been there.

Example: An online meeting is set up where the participants include a person with ADHD who needs to move around a lot in order to be able to concentrate and a deaf person who needs to lipread and therefore see the face of the person speaking. These two needs are not always compatible.

A negative response: One or both of the participants feel like their needs are being devalued because there is a suggestion of adapting to the other person's needs. One feels unwelcome and decides not to go to the meeting, the other sets an ultimatum - either their needs are respected or they will not attend.

A positive response: Both participants realise that there is a need to compromise and they end up having a written discussion to find a solution that involves both parties making sacrifices but both parties eventually being able to make good use of the meeting.

Songs

- [How the light gets in](#)

1.6. Having boundaries

As a movement we make no claim to be “fully accessible”, to be able to address all students' disability related problems or to understand all struggles. Because **we are limited**. We cannot talk about striving to be caring, accessible, inclusive and intersectional without also acknowledging this.

We have limitations around:

- accessibility
- emotional labour
- being forgiving
- representing every group which deserves representation
- etc.

Too many disabled people internalise the ableist notion that we have to be everything to everyone, without any limitations. Of course, this is simply not possible. Within the disability community those who are (or those have been socialised to be) more feminine in particular are very prone to burnout because of this.

We expect our contributors and volunteers to **respect each others' boundaries**, but also to learn about and clearly **communicate their own**. That way we can best work with each others' differences and not end up in a situation where we take on work that we are unable to do.

We don't shame each other for not knowing the right words. We don't “punch up” at our leaders when they fail to make an event perfectly accessible. **We “call each other in”** when there's a problem and we try to work through it together.

Songs

- [Light is returning](#)
- [This is me](#)

Resources

- Very interesting post about both respecting your own boundaries and the needs of others, especially in the context of autistic emotional labour:
<http://www.ada-hoffmann.com/2018/01/30/autism-and-emotional-labour/>
- Protect your Heart, femme leadership and hyper-accountability by Leah Lakshmi Piepzina-Samarasinha

1.7. On lashing out

Our movement should continuously work to address internalised ableism, accessibility and be lifting up and listening to the most marginalised. This is continuous work. At the same time it is work that will be limited because we are people and we have limits.

Many contributors and volunteers in our movement have trauma related to disability and can develop very specific ideas of how things should be done within the movement. If these standards are not met this can become very triggering for them. For instance they might become triggered if a certain ableist word is used, a certain need is not accommodated or a certain focus within the movement is not adopted.

Each person in the movement must take responsibility for their own reaction and how they are bringing forward critique of others and of the movement.

Being triggered can make it very hard to handle disagreement on such issues calmly because we can feel there is one right way of doing things and doing anything else is deeply painful for us. Especially as we have high hopes that we have finally found a space where we can be free from the oppression and trauma that we have faced in other spaces.

In order to be able to respect others' boundaries and treat everyone with kindness a certain level of detachment is necessary so that we can **remove ourselves** from a situation that is triggering for us rather than lashing out. Our pain never gives us the right to act abusively towards others.

Our movement makes space for talking about your mental health within for instance the complaints collective. And there is always space to say "I'm triggered and need to leave this conversation right now".

When we are organising we **cannot simultaneously function as a therapy support group**. There are limits to the kind of support we can offer to work through each person's trauma. We do not have the resources to be a substitute for qualified counselling. We ask everyone to take **responsibility for their needs and limitations** and to be honest with themselves and others about what these are.

If you have specific triggers and would like trigger warnings on posts etc please speak to someone in the leadership group. We will try to make accommodations as far as possible, **while still respecting our own limitations**.

We will not tolerate abusive behaviour, including against the leadership team. We will not tolerate purposeful disruptions. This is not tone policing, it is not respectability politics, it is a way of making our spaces more accessible and protecting the mental health of a group of people who are already deeply vulnerable to mental health problems.

Example: A contributor feels that there is too little focus on Further Education students within the movement, but they have no time to work on addressing the issue themselves. The leadership team is currently barely keeping up with their own responsibilities without burning out and so they do not currently feel able to commit to further work.

A negative way of addressing the issue: Repeatedly bringing up the problem in different contexts, blaming the leadership and derailing other discussions.

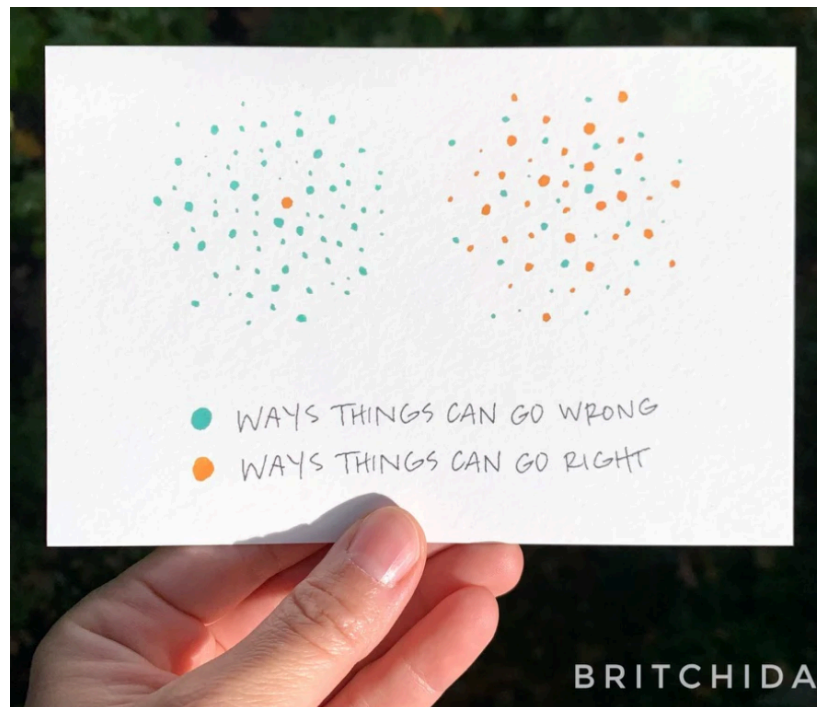
A constructive way of addressing the issue: Asking for a one-on-one meeting with someone in the leadership team to be allowed sufficient time to fully present their concerns. Acknowledging the limitations of the team. Suggesting ways in which the issue could be addressed and either contributing to the project themselves or suggesting how we might be able to find people who can.

Song:

- [I'm gonna walk it with you](#)

Resources

- <https://twitter.com/IBJIYONGI/status/1376198399989579776?s=20>
- When you are the target of ableism, it leads not just to internalised ableism, but to hate expressed towards others in your group: "Eye to Eye" - Audre Lorde.
Complement with "The uses of Anger" - Audre Lorde
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8DN6fEfj2k>



1.8 Safeguarding

DSUK has the following [safeguarding policy](#).

2. Communication Code of Conduct

As a DSUK contributor/volunteer I commit to:

- Respect how people self-identify
- Not use slurs or purposefully misgender people
- Assume good faith
- Remember that we communicate differently - other contributors may have another first language, be neurodivergent, have trauma and/or mental health difficulties.
- Call people in gently - no personal attacks
- Not send unsolicited DMs to other contributors
- Be kind and understand that each person is on their own journey and that we may vary widely in culture, perspective and background.
- Contact the leadership team if I notice someone acting in a way where they may need to be “called in”
- Going through a process of reflection when “called in”
- Make accommodations for other peoples’ needs while respecting my own boundaries
- Try to use inclusive language and not assume prior knowledge
- Respect boundaries set on behalf of group spaces by the leadership team
- Reflect on my own ableist and other oppressive attitudes
- Centre the voices of those with lived experience
- Respect people’s stated boundaries (boundaries that break these commitments not included)
- Confidentiality: not discuss sensitive information from inside the space outside the space without permission from the people involved
 - Sensitive information includes personal information/experiences and anything else that people state they would not like to be shared outside the space
- Not post spam or advertise your services

If you disagree with the boundaries drawn, please take this up with the leadership team in a separate discussion, not during a discussion about something else, so as to avoid derailing the group discussion space.

3. Social media rules

1. Respect how people self-identify

Do not use slurs or misgender people. As a community we respect the diverse identities of all our contributors and seek to provide a safe space for all

2. Do not ask questions on behalf of family/partners

If the group is not accessible to the person in question please email us at contact@disabledstudents.co.uk. We might be able to help with the question, refer you on or make the group more accessible.

3. Assume good faith

4. Remember that we communicate differently

Other contributors may have another first language, be neurodivergent, have trauma and/or mental health difficulties

5. Do not send unsolicited DM's to other contributors

6. Be kind and understanding

Each person is on their own journey and we may vary widely in culture, perspective and background

7. Try to be inclusive in your communication

Try to use inclusive language and not assume prior knowledge

8. Respect peoples' stated boundaries

9. Respect confidentiality

Do not discuss sensitive information from inside the space outside the space without permission from the people involved

10. No hate speech or bullying

Make sure that everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind isn't allowed and degrading comments about things such as race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

4. Consequences

We ask that everyone follows these guiding principles and concrete commitments to maintain a safe space for all. We understand that mistakes will happen. It is what you do with those mistakes that matters. Anyone in violation of the code of conduct without taking appropriate

steps to amend the issue will be removed from the group.

At DSUK we try to first give a warning when a contributor or volunteer violates our code of conduct, before excluding them if they violate it again. We also tend to give very specific feedback on what we believe the person has done to cause harm - this to enable them to grow.

Our first priority is that people feel safe in this space and the leadership team reserves the right to make these decisions on a case by case basis. We take our safeguarding responsibilities seriously and have found that occasionally it will not be possible to communicate the details of the conduct violation to all parties without putting someone at risk - for instance when we believe there is a high risk of retaliation.

As our community continues to grow, we may revise the code of conduct where necessary.

5. Leadership

In addition to this general code, Managers and Directors commit to:

- Consider our personal privileges in our organisational decisions.
- Consider the ways in which we can shift power to be more representative
- Create ways for people to easily call us in
- Pay attention to how marginalised people may need different forms of support compared to others

This is a continuous and anticipatory work for the leadership and not something we consider only when called in. Like all other contributors our leaders are human beings. As a team we have boundaries in terms of the way in which we will receive criticism. If a certain person is delivering feedback in a way that does not recognize our humanity we will address the feedback, but will not necessarily engage with the person. Please prioritise kindness when interacting with moderators and leaders, as well as fellow community contributors.

If a complaint is brought forward around a specific leader, the complaint will be handled by the other leaders.

6. [Good practice and resources link](#)