

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20

**Title**

**Disability, the Communication of Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour, and  
Ableism: A Call for Inclusive Messages**

**Authors**

Brett Smith (Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University)

Kamran Mallick (Chief Executive, Disability Rights UK)

Charlie Foster OBE (University of Bristol. Centre for Exercise Nutrition and Health  
Sciences)

Javier Monforte (Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University)

Corresponding author

Professor Brett Smith

Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences

Durham University

42 Old Elvet

Durham

DH1 3HN

UK

21 **Competing interests:** Kamran Mallick reports as the Chief Executive of Disability Rights  
22 UK. Disability Rights UK is the leading charity of its kind in the UK. We are run by and  
23 for people with lived experience of disability or health conditions.

24 **Contributorship:** All authors contributed to the development and writing of the letter

25 **Funding info:** None to declare

26

27        **Disability, the Communication of Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour, and**  
28                                    **Ableism: A Call for Inclusive Messages**

29    This editorial is a call for action to make physical activity and sedentary behaviour  
30    messages inclusive. It focuses on disability. Numerous definitions of disability and ways of  
31    identifying as disabled exist across the globe. For example, some people, cultures,  
32    organisations, and governments prefer for certain reasons to use the term ‘disabled people’,  
33    whilst others prefer ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘people with an impairment’ [1].  
34    Respecting difference in terminology used around the world [1], we align with the social  
35    model and thus use the term ‘disabled people’ throughout this editorial. Disability refers to  
36    people who have long term physical (e.g. spinal cord injury), sensory (e.g. visual  
37    impairment), cognitive (e.g. learning difficulties), and/or mental impairments (e.g.  
38    depression) which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective  
39    participation in society on an equal basis with others [2].

40            Despite the benefits of physical activity, many disabled people live insufficiently  
41    active lifestyles. They are also more likely to be inactive when compared with nondisabled  
42    people [2]. Recent UK physical activity guidelines for disabled people recommended doing  
43    strength activities on 2 or more days a week and at least 150 min of moderate-intensity  
44    aerobic physical activity each week for substantial health gains [2-4]. It was also stressed in  
45    the UK guidelines that some physical activity is better than nothing as small amounts bring  
46    health benefits and the 150 min message alone can be daunting, especially for disabled  
47    adults who are mostly inactive [1-4]. The new World Health Organisation global guidelines  
48    for physical activity and disability [5] echoed the UK guidelines, providing support for its  
49    recommendations.

50 To maximise the impact of national and global physical activity guidelines, and  
51 reduce participation inequalities, inclusive and effective communication is vital [1].  
52 Communicating physical activity recommendations and how to reduce sedentary time often  
53 includes simple but compelling messages. When it comes to tackling sedentariness,  
54 messages like these have and might be used: “Stand up, sit less”, “Sit less, move more”,  
55 “Move more. Sit less. Sleep better.”, “Chairs are killer’s”, “Time to take a stand against  
56 inactivity”, “Get Britain standing”, “On your Feet Britain”, “Now is the time to get up and  
57 get moving!”, “Breaking up with your Chair”, and “Swap sitting for moving” [6, 7].  
58 However, such messages *are* ableist.

59

## 60 **What is ableism?**

61 Our physical environments and social conventions like communication are often  
62 designed with a nondisabled person in mind as they are assumed to be the “typical” and  
63 “normal” human being. Ableism is a form of prejudice and discrimination in which  
64 nondisabled people are viewed as “normal” and superior to disabled people. The cited  
65 messages are infused with ableism because they favour certain individuals (e.g., those that  
66 can stand or easily avoid sitting), reinforce an ideal standard for mental health, intellect,  
67 and health whilst stigmatising, alienating, or excluding others (e.g., wheelchair users, those  
68 in chronic pain, or with mental health conditions and intellectual and developmental  
69 disabilities that find sitting or lying beneficial for their wellbeing). A message like “Sit less,  
70 move more” *is* a form of prejudice and discrimination. If we use such messages we are,  
71 even if unintentionally, stigmatizing and harming disabled people.

72 We write this editorial as a call for action. Messages calling individuals to sit less  
73 and/or stand more must be dropped and replaced by alternative, more inclusive language,

74 such as “Don’t be still for too long”, “Be active your way”, “Enjoy moving your body  
75 more”, “Unplug and play”, or “Remember to move your body often.”

76           Readers might respond to this call for action to drop messages like “Sit less, move  
77 more” by insisting that “*I don’t mean to be ableist when I use them. It’s no big deal; it’s*  
78 *just language.*” We appreciate that the intended goal of such messages is to reduce  
79 sedentary time and promote health, not ableism. However, language acts in the world with  
80 an impact on people; it perpetuates taken-for-granted beliefs and values; and it creates,  
81 reveals, and reproduces forms of prejudice and discrimination. Language is where people  
82 live, and ableist language is not liveable for disabled people. Imagine living in terms that  
83 exclude you and assume a lesser status for you. Language paints a picture of our world and  
84 the people in it, acting on them. Imagine painting a picture that sends a public health  
85 message that excludes an entire group of people, that acts on them by saying consciously or  
86 unconsciously - you are not part of our health policy. What does that also suggest to  
87 nondisabled people and, given unconscious biases, how might it play out in everyday life?  
88 Could it be that disabled people are (unintentionally) considered inferior and not worth  
89 caring about?

90

### 91           **Language matters**

92           If you doubt the capacity of language to oppress and discriminate then consider the  
93 damaging impacts of racist, homophobic, ageist, or sexist language in society. It is  
94 necessary for language to evolve as society does, such as moving away from racial  
95 stereotypes in advertising or re-claiming former homophobic slurs such as ‘queer’ for  
96 empowered self-identification. Just as language has adapted in an attempt to stop

97 perpetuating racism, homo/transphobia, and sexism, we must now also change our language  
98 to stop perpetuating ableism.

99           Some readers may also or alternatively respond to the call for action to drop  
100 messages like “Sit less, move more” by insisting that “*We have used these messages for*  
101 *some time now and public health messages need to be consistent. We also cannot change*  
102 *messages as we now have a mantra across the physical activity world we are familiar*  
103 *with.*” It might be argued that the messages under the spotlight cannot be given up because  
104 consistency is important in public health. Should this be the case if consistency means  
105 reinforcing and naturalising ableism? If you witnessed someone using terms in messaging  
106 that were once widespread in society but now are deemed sexist, racist, classist or promote  
107 fatphobia would you accept a defence that their use was justified in order to keep up with  
108 historically consistent messages? If the answer is ‘No’ why then would you accept terms in  
109 messaging that are infused with ableism? As part of tackling health inequalities, and  
110 bringing intersectionality into our work, we must include disability much more in physical  
111 activity and sport work, and work against ableism.

112

### 113           **A call for more inclusive messaging**

114           Physical activity promotion messaging must be more inclusive. As part of our call  
115 for action for inclusive messages, we call on others to speak out and challenge ableist  
116 messages like “Stand up/Sit less and move more”. Let the messenger gently know that their  
117 messages are ableist, even if unintentionally so. Describe the reasons why and offer suitable  
118 alternatives, such as “Move more”. We also call on organisations, research groups,

119 individuals and public health agencies to change their messages if they promote ableism.  
120 We recommend they work with disabled people to co-produce public health messaging.  
121 This process can make a big difference.

122

123 Signed and endorsed by:

124 Association for Applied Sport Psychology, British Association of Sport and Exercise  
125 Sciences, British Psychological Society Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology, The  
126 Disabled Colleagues Network from Bristol City Council, Disability Positive, Disability  
127 North, Disability Rights UK, European Disability Golf Association, European Federation  
128 of Adapted Physical Activity, European Network for Young Specialists in Sport  
129 Psychology, International Federation of Adapted Physical Activity, International Society of  
130 Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, International Society of Sport Psychology,  
131 Mixed Ability Sport, North American Federation of Adapted Physical Activity, North  
132 American Society for the Psychology of Physical Activity and Sport, North American  
133 Society for the Sociology of Sport, Para Dance UK, Sense, The Canadian Disability  
134 Participation Project, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
135 (UNESCO) Chair ‘Transforming the Lives of People with Disabilities, their Families and  
136 Communities, Through Physical Education, Sport, Recreation and Fitness’, Welsh  
137 Association of ME and CFS Support, Wheels for Wellbeing, and WomenSport  
138 International.

139

140 REFERENCES

- 141 1. Smith B, & Wightman L. (2019). Promoting physical activity to disabled people:  
142 Messengers, messages, guidelines and communication formats. *Dis and Rehab* Epub  
143 ahead of print [22/10/2019] doi:10.1080/09638288.2019.1679896
- 144 2. Public Health England. Physical activity for general health benefits in disabled adults:  
145 Summary of a rapid evidence review for the UK Chief Medical Officers' update of the  
146 physical activity guidelines. London; 2018.
- 147 3. Physical activity guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' report; Department of Health  
148 and Social Care: London, UK; 2019.
- 149 4. Smith B, Kirby N, Skinner B. *et al.* Infographic: Physical activity for disabled  
150 adults. *Br J Sports Med* 2019; 53: 335-336.
- 151 5. Carty C., van der Ploeg HP, Biddle SJH. *et al.* The first global physical activity and  
152 sedentary behavior guidelines for people living with disability. *J of Phy Activity and*  
153 *Health* 2021; 18: 86-93
- 154 6. Wedig IJ, Duelge TA, Elmer SJ. *Br J Sports Med* Epub ahead of print: [15/11/2020].  
155 doi:10.1136/bjsports-2020-103282
- 156 7. Faught J, Walters A, Latimer-Cheung AE *et al.* Optimal messaging of the Canadian 24-  
157 Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults aged 18–64 years and Adults aged 65 years and  
158 older. *Appl. Physiol. Nutr. Metab* 2020; 45: 125–150.