



## ETHICS CONNECTION

# ACKNOWLEDGING OUR IMPLICIT BIAS

## TO MOVE FORWARD WITH COMPASSION

BY KRISTIN KLINEFELTER, MS, RDN, LDN

**I RECENTLY HAD THE HONOR AND PRIVILEGE** to serve as a juror in a criminal trial. Going into the process, I was a bit nervous, but also felt like I would be an excellent juror, as I tend to look at many situations with an objective eye. I felt that I could consider all of the evidence and participate in making a decision using the facts, leaving all emotions and bias out of my decision. However, throughout the trial I found myself relating to certain witnesses and professionals more than others. I could put myself or my family in the chairs of those on the stand and had a hard time staying unbiased.

When it came time for deliberations, the instructions of the judge completely helped me refocus on the objective task at hand. She stated: "We all have experiences and education that lead us to bias. We may not consciously decide to think about or treat people that are not like us differently, but we do. This is called implicit, or unconscious, bias. I encourage you to stick to the evidence in this case. It is okay to acknowledge our bias, but then move past it, going back to what you heard and saw in this trial, comparing it with the details of the charges to make your decision."

Her words put me at ease because it normalized my feelings of bias. We all have implicit bias. *Implicit bias is a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors.* The key is that we acknowledge it, and move forward to treating others with kindness and compassion. Let us explore ways we can do this to recruit and retain a diverse

workforce, while acting without bias, creating a positive environment for all.

### ASSESS AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR BIAS

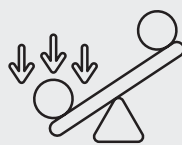
Humans have implicit bias towards how we view others, as well as how we see ourselves. Healthcare providers see inaccurate self-reporting from patients on health behaviors such as smoking, exercise, nutrition, alcohol consumption, and stress management. One study found that one reason for misreporting alcohol consumption is that a person may not be aware of what constitutes a "standard serving" of alcohol (Gilligan, 2019). However, inaccurate self-reporting may also be due to knowledge that our behaviors are not healthy and we associate shame or embarrassment with our actions. A 2019 survey by Canadian Medical Association Journal found that 47 percent of patients lie to their doctors about health behaviors, including diet and exercise habits. They mostly lied out of embarrassment. Other times, we have unconscious, or implicit, bias and actually believe (or want to believe) what we report.

Possible implicit bias in food service may include inconsistencies in scheduling, training, and job assignments. For example, someone might assign a 62-year-old woman who is a grandmother as the lead breakfast host versus a 16-year-old male student. The manager might have a bias towards favoring a "grandma-figure" as a warm, nurturing person and think the teenager doesn't have the necessary skills or



ability to connect with clients. Other more serious actions created by bias might include end-of-life decisions, honoring food preferences, or employee disciplinary action and grievance decisions.

Harvard has a program called Project Implicit, a project that collects data from assessments on social attitudes and health. The social assessment examines our ideas, beliefs, and opinions about different topics. The 15-minute online Implicit Association Test involves reading a recent social topic or law and answering questions about it. In the interest of full disclosure, I share with you that my results show I have a strong automatic association of Women with Family and Men with Career, even though I am a woman who has had a career throughout my 18 years of being a parent. Could this finding impact how I interact with students, patients, and



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colleagues? Quite possibly it could. I should acknowledge these associations and work on checking my actions or words that imply bias when working with others.

#### **CHOOSE UNBIASED WORDS AND ACTIONS**

Once we are aware of our implicit biases, we should move forward with empathetic and compassionate words and actions. This may take practice. Almost daily, I tell myself that my patients are not robots. When I say this, I mean that they are individuals who have unique preferences and needs. Sure, as a medical nutrition therapist, I would love to “program” exactly what that person needs to eat daily and see outcomes favoring their health. However, people are not robots, and we make decisions, in this case, about what to eat and drink several times each day. We need to remember the human element when assessing

health and conducting diet education. We should not assume we know anything about their culture, traditions, and daily life. We need to ask questions in an open, unbiased manner.

I use this example about nutrition therapy, but we can consider this approach when hiring and retaining our employees or working with our contractors. How can we, in daily practice, speak and act in an unbiased manner? Some questions to ask yourself or guide your actions may be:

- Am I aware of anything in this person's life that may make it challenging for them to put full attention into their job today?
- If that were me, what would I need from my employer today?
- What struggles does this person have that make this job difficult? When you are aware of struggles a person is having with their job duties, ask: "How can I help you understand this job task?" or "How can I support you as you learn this part of your job?" For example, an employee may have dyslexia and prefer that the dishwasher instructions are demonstrated and posted with photos versus in writing.
- Are there words or actions within the department that show bias towards an individual or group? Examples might be language on posters, restroom location and set-up, or uniforms that are not gender neutral or conflict with a person's identity.
- Am I completely approachable for individuals to share their concerns about harassment or bullying? You may be the person to put an end to this, which can be an enormous responsibility. If someone in your department is bullying

or harassing an individual because they are different from them, how can you address this in an objective, effective manner to end it immediately? As always, HR is helpful with this topic.

- If I were in this position, does this job location and physical set-up allow me to live out my daily values and personal tasks? Put yourself in the shoes of each person, and see physical needs they may have. For example, if an employee practices the Muslim religion, is there a location in your facility that they can go to for prayer time? What about a nursing mom? Is there a private location for her to pump a few times each day?

### DRAW ON PAST EXPERIENCES

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- When was the last time that I experienced bias? Who showed me compassion in that situation? Draw on past experiences to help you be empathetic and compassionate to everyone with whom you work.

During the height of the pandemic, when healthcare and foodservice employees were completely exhausted, we noticed the little things that made us feel connected to our employees, patients, and colleagues. One doctor I work with wore a t-shirt every day that had a quote about kindness. One shirt said: "*Humankind. Be Both.*" This

is a simple standard for which to act daily. Even if we have biases, we can acknowledge them and remember to act with respect and kindness towards all humans.

When we normalize our unconscious bias, it allows us to be open to understanding why we might feel that way. The key is that we are open to learning and growing, to show compassion towards ourselves and those around us. **E**



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Kristin Klinefelter is a registered dietitian working in a variety of capacities. In health care, education, and community work, she enjoys interacting with all humans and appreciates the differences each person brings to professional and personal experiences.



## ARTICLE REFERENCES

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Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT)—Project Implicit. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/index.jsp>

## CE QUESTIONS | ETHICS CONNECTION



This **Level II** article assumes that the reader has a thorough knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to facilitate application of knowledge into practice by drawing connections among ideas and using information in new situations.

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Reading *Acknowledging Our Implicit Bias to Move Forward With Compassion* and successfully completing these questions online in the ANFP Marketplace has been approved for 1 hour of Ethics continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. To earn 1 Ethics CE hour, visit [www.ANFPonline.org/market](http://www.ANFPonline.org/market) and select **Edge CE Articles** within the Publications section. Purchase the article and complete the quiz.

1. What is a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors?
  - A. Conscious bias
  - B. Implicit bias
  - C. Discrimination
2. According to this article, why do some people lie to their medical provider?
  - A. They don't trust them
  - B. They don't think their behaviors are any of their provider's business
  - C. They are embarrassed by their behaviors
3. What is one tool listed in this article that you can use to assess and acknowledge your implicit bias?
  - A. Harvard Implicit Association Test
  - B. A lie detector test
  - C. Your HR employee files
4. Everyone has implicit bias.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. What is an example of actions based on implicit bias?
  - A. Hiring a diverse workforce
  - B. Firing a person who violated a department policy
  - C. Offering a promotion to a person because they do not have children
6. What is one benefit of acknowledging our implicit bias?
  - A. We will never get sued for discrimination
  - B. Our employees, patients, and colleagues will benefit from working with an empathetic, compassionate person
  - C. We will not have to spend time on disciplinary action or grievance paperwork
7. After we acknowledge our implicit biases, what is the next step?
  - A. Offer training on diversity
  - B. Check our thoughts and actions to work towards empathy and compassion for all people with whom we work
  - C. Feel guilty because it isn't normal to have implicit bias



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