



SECTION 3:

Creating a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment

PLEASE NOTE:

This section corresponds with the “Creating a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment” PowerPoint presentation available online at www.aafp.org/implicit-bias.

Training sessions focused on bias, stereotypes, racism, and privilege pose some risks for both learners and facilitators because individuals are asked to disclose and confront attitudes and beliefs that they feel are socially unacceptable, especially among health care professionals. These risks are magnified for faculty who may feel that their personal identity inhibits their ability to provide effective training. To create a safe and welcoming environment for learners, faculty conducting implicit bias training must be secure in their level of expertise. Regardless of their identity, faculty should be seen by learners as approachable, nonthreatening, open minded, inspiring, knowledgeable, and encouraging. When uncomfortable situations arise and powerful emotions such as defensiveness, shame, and fear emerge, a facilitator who openly addresses the discomfort and proactively avoids reinforcing these feelings will help enrich the learning experience.

Facilitators may experience pressure to role model skills, demonstrate strong content knowledge, and navigate unforeseen challenges during training with ease. Faculty are chosen based on their background, identity, and past personal experience discussing implicit bias. However, it is important to set the expectation that everyone, including facilitators, can learn more about this topic. Learners should be empowered to participate actively in the training session. While faculty can create the learning experience, the entire group is responsible for conducting critical reflection and guiding the discourse.

Learner Activity: Identity Signs

Developed by The Safe Zone Project, the Identity Signs activity encourages participants to reflect on their own social identities and gives them an opportunity to learn from each other. This level of understanding and connection among learners helps to foster the safe, inclusive environment necessary to proceed to the more challenging elements of implicit bias training.

The Safe Zone Project offers the Identity Signs activity and other free online resources at <https://thesafezoneproject.com/>.

Setup

- 1) Print out an identity sign for each of the following:
 - Sexual Orientation
 - Race
 - Gender Identity
 - Class
 - Biological Sex
 - National Origin
 - Immigration Status
- 2) Hang up the identity signs around the room or place the signs on tables as tents.
- 3) Ensure the room is set up in such a way that participants can easily move around the room to stand under the different signs or near the tabletop signs.



Goals and Learning Outcomes

- To create a space for participants to talk about their experiences and their identities in a more personal way than they might otherwise
- To provide an opportunity for participants to learn directly from each other
- To highlight that people with similar identities can experience different levels of salience and self-awareness, and can be differently impacted by their intersecting identities
- To talk about how we experience our identities on a day-to-day basis
- To highlight how everyone may experience pain, ostracism, or discrimination, yet feel it within the context of different identities

Process Steps

1) Frame the activity for learners:

- **If you hang identity signs around the room:**

Say, “We are going to be doing an activity now that requires us to move around the room. I’m going to read a statement and then you’re going to answer that statement by placing yourself under one of the signs that I’ve hung up around the room. The statements relate to your experience of these identities. We’ll then have a chance to talk in small groups and reflect as a large group. This activity is a way to explore the parts of your identity that give you privilege and those that don’t. There are likely some that you have never had to think about before.”

- **If you place identity signs on tables as tents:**

Say, “We are going to be doing an activity now that requires us to move around the room. I’m going to read a statement and then you’re going to answer that statement by placing yourself by one of the signs that are on the tables. The statements relate to your experience of these identities. We’ll then have a chance to talk in small groups and reflect as a large group. This activity is a way to explore the parts of your identity that give you privilege and those that don’t. There are likely some that you have never had to think about before.”

2) State the ground rules for this activity:

- What you share within the context of the group is confidential, honored, and respected.
- Use “I” statements to avoid speaking for another person or for an entire group.
- Focus on your own experiences and avoid critiquing others’ experiences.

- Be honest and willing to share. If you tend to be quiet in groups, challenge yourself to share.

- Resist the desire to interrupt.

- Be mindful of time.

3) Invite participants to stand up and prepare to move around the room. Let learners know that if anyone has any mobility concerns or needs to sit down when they get to a new place in the room, they are welcome to grab a seat nearby and do that.

4) Read the first statement and allow time for participants to move around to their different signs.

5) Invite learners to notice where others in the group are standing.

6) At this point, you have a choice between Option 1, which fosters more conversation, and Option 2, which moves more quickly:

a. **Option 1:** Invite learners to connect in pairs or small groups with others who moved to the same identity sign and discuss what came up for them when they were thinking through the statement. After two to four minutes, ask if anyone would like to share the thought process behind their choice with the large group.

b. **Option 2:** Invite learners to share the thought process behind their choice with the large group.

7) Read the next statement, repeating the process from Step 4.

8) After you’ve finished reading all the statements that you want the group to work through, invite learners back to their seats.

9) Using the provided questions, reflect on the activity as a large group.



Statements

- 1) The part of my identity that I am most aware of on a daily basis is _____.
- 2) The part of my identity that I am the least aware of on a daily basis is _____.
- 3) The part of my identity that I wish I knew more about is _____.
- 4) The part of my identity that provides me the most privilege is _____.
- 5) The part of my identity that I believe is the most misunderstood by others is _____.
- 6) The part of my identity that I feel is difficult to discuss with others who identify differently is _____.
- 7) The part of my identity that makes me feel discriminated against is _____.

Reflection Questions

- How did it feel to do this activity?
- What did you find surprising?
- What do you want to explore further?

Wrap-up

To conclude this activity, it is helpful to summarize some of the major points that were brought up in the group discussion and to thank everyone for their honesty/vulnerability in what they were willing to name or share during the activity itself. Even if some people don't share verbally, moving under/near the identity signs may bring up a lot of emotion or may take a lot of courage; therefore, it is good to highlight your appreciation of the group's participation.

Intersectionality Theory

Individuals who do not consider themselves members of a minority group should not feel discouraged from taking the lead on providing implicit bias training, nor should individuals who are members of a minority group feel obligated to serve as facilitators. Individuals' contributions to this shared learning experience must not be reduced to the value of a single identity (e.g., race, gender, orientation). Every person's identity is comprised of multiple parts that intersect, are inseparable, and are shaped by the person's interactions with others and with societal structures. This is a central premise of intersectionality theory, a framework that aims to identify how systems impact marginalized populations based on socially constructed categories, such as class, race, and gender.

In primary care, intersectionality theory can be applied in clinical and health service research to explore how patients' multiple complex social positions impact their health.⁹ As one researcher notes, "Relational identifications are always overlapping, intersecting, and variant in ways that make it impossible to view each variable as separate 'pure' causalities...of receiving and accessing primary health care."⁹ Health care professionals participating in implicit bias training should engage in activities aimed at understanding social categories and the ways in which people in these social categories relate to and interact with one another. This engagement will enable participants to transform their understanding of both the power dynamics that shape care delivery and the health inequities their patients experience.

FACILITATOR TIP

More information on intersectionality theory is available in The Promise of Intersectionality Theory in Primary Care by Zowie Davy [Qual Prim Care. 2011;19(5):279-281].