

# Overcoming Implicit Bias

## The LOVE Approach to Client Care

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Implicit bias is the unconscious collection of stereotypes and attitudes that we develop toward people, which can affect our client/patient relationships and care decisions.

You can overcome implicit bias by first discovering your blind spots and then actively working to dismiss stereotypes and attitudes that affect your interactions as a nurse.



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## Introduction

Even without intentionally stereotyping, we all have a lens through which we view the world, and this can sometimes create those unintentional biases. But if these biases are not consciously known to us, how can we avoid the effect they might have on client/patient care and decisions we make in nursing? Understanding what prompts responses to our clients/patients and why that might be different with clients/patients can improve care.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University states that implicit bias is involuntary, can refer to positive or negative attitudes and stereotypes, and can affect actions without an individual knowing it.<sup>i</sup>

A primary risk of implicit bias in nursing is that it can inadvertently create healthcare disparities. These are a type of health difference that's closely linked with social, economic, and/or environmental disadvantage and adversely affects different groups.<sup>ii</sup> However, Pregnancy Help Clinics throughout the world can serve to avoid this as we strive to serve women without preconceived perceptions and provide equal treatment to all who enter our doors.

Your body language, focused attention, or level of care can be directly impacted by your feelings toward the client/patient. Understanding what may trigger your reactions to people and what makes you act differently can improve the way you provide care.

According to the California Board of Nursing: "Implicit bias means the attitudes or internalized stereotypes that affect nurses' perceptions, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner, that exist and often contribute to unequal treatment of people based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, and other characteristics that contribute to health disparities."<sup>iii</sup> In other words, implicit bias is a prejudice that is present but not necessarily consciously held or recognized.

Clients/patients in Pregnancy Help Clinics come from diverse backgrounds with unique needs, struggles, lifestyles, and identities. However, we have a unique opportunity to be a beacon of hope and truth, offering a sanctuary where the families can process information as they make challenging health decisions.

## The LOVE Approach to Client/Patient Care

Every client/patient deserves respectful healthcare which includes treatment with dignity, empathy, and compassion.<sup>iv</sup> Pregnancy Help Clinics lead the charge in honest, compassionate care that transcends age, race, income, nationality, religious affiliation, disability, or any other arbitrary circumstances. [Our Commitment of Care and Competence](#) of ethical practices is the core standard for affiliation for all major life-affirming pregnancy help affiliate groups. *The LOVE Approach Training Manual* gives guidance for medical professionals about how to connect with all clients/patients – no matter the circumstances. “With love” describes the best method to approach a client/patient and build the relationship.

It’s critical that nurses caring for clients/patients are not judgmental in word or in body language or appear as self-righteous or superior, as these lessen hope for building a relationship. If we are going to sow seeds with love, we must understand what love is. We must start by being willing to do some self-examination to see the effect of our human nature on living out love as our behavior. This can be evaluated in the four steps of LOVE.

### “L” stands for **Listen and Learn**.

The focus of the visit in a Pregnancy Help Clinic is assisting with the needs of the client/patient. The first step is learning more about her and her circumstances. Sometimes a woman might not know how to formulate or ask questions or explain her situation in detail. It’s important that you focus on her and her situation, give her your total attention, and ask good questions to draw out her story so you can better understand and assist her, develop trust, and form the relationship without jumping in to give her advice or solve her problem.

### “O” stands for **Open Options**.

Only after learning about her and forming the relationship should the nurse begin to help the client/patient examine options in a factual, loving, and caring way and non-judgmental way. What are the choices that the client/patient has? What are the pros and cons of those choices? How workable, realistic, and good are they for the client/patient?

### “V” stands for **Vision and Value**.

In this step, the nurse introduces a new and healthier vision for the client/patient. The nurse sees paths that the client/patient may have never considered or thought possible. The nurse gives her a new or reawakened vision for that in her life. The nurse also helps the client/patient see her value, that she is worthy of that vision.

### “E” stands for **Extend and Empower**.

At the end of the interview with the client/patient, the nurse helps the client/patient lay out a plan and offers to extend, through appropriate follow-up at your center and referrals, a plan for empowerment and continuing the relationship that has been developing. These steps can give the client/patient the kind of support she needs to work out her best options.

## Suggested Strategies

Here are some questions to ask yourself regarding implicit bias:

### **Do you have triggers?**

It's important to know what prompts negative associations or judgments. The [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#) is a helpful tool to assess attitudes and beliefs that some may be unwilling or unable to report.

### **Do you have emotional control?**

Developing emotional regulation skills can counter implicit bias. By maintaining a positive outlook during client/patient encounters, [The Joint Commission](#) states that nurses are more likely to “view patients in terms of their individual attributes” and express greater empathy and inclusivity. This is where the L step will assist you with the ability to do that, as you listen to her and learn all about her.

### **Do you have others you can talk with?**

To remove the stigma, nurses should have open and honest discussions about bias. Educational seminars, one-on-one sessions or a quick anecdote shared during a pre-shift huddle may prompt nurses to consider a different perspective.

### **Do you partner with your clients/patients?**

Instead of a hierarchical approach to the nurse-patient relationship, treat clients/patients as equals. Using the LOVE approach, particularly the O step, this tactic overcomes biases and promotes communication and collaboration toward a common goal.<sup>v</sup>

### **Do you have self-awareness?**

Knowing that bias exists and can negatively affect client/patient care is a step in the right direction. We need to admit that bias can be a part of our interactions with others and without this acknowledgement, we can't change it.

### **Are you able to use empathy in client/patient care?**

Using the LOVE Approach, try to see things from the client's/patient's perspective by considering the personal and social issues that are affecting her. Making an effort to hear and understand where she's been and why will help you provide better care (the L step). You can develop empathy by making a conscious effort to understand the client's/patient's situation. Try to imagine walking in her footsteps.

### **Do you advocate for your clients/patients?**

When you understand your client/patient and her situation, you are in a better position to advocate for her. (This is why the O step follows the L). Avoid using what you think you know when communicating needs and identifying best treatment options for her. You really need to know where she's coming from, so you can help her get where she needs to be.<sup>vi</sup> You are able to use what you learned in the L step.

**Here are some keys to provide culturally sensitive care in your clinic:**

1. Awareness

Provision 1 of the American Nurses Association's Code of Ethics for Nurses reads, "The nurse practices with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and unique attributes of every person." Those who work in Pregnancy Help Clinics generally have a strong value for all life and are naturally able to meet this challenge. Training in the V step energizes this value. Our clients/patients often have diverse backgrounds and needs. The effectiveness of the care that medical professionals provide is dependent on the awareness of and sensitivity to these needs.

2. Avoid Making Assumptions

Respect is one of the most critical aspects when developing cultural sensitivity and awareness. It's important that nurses avoid making assumptions about a culture, belief or custom.

If you are unsure about something, simply ask. Most people are happy to educate a healthcare provider who is willing to listen and understand their differences. Make sure your body language communicates openness and an intent to truly hear what the client/patient is expressing.

3. Learn About Other Cultures

As a healthcare professional, part of your responsibility to your client/patient is to learn what you can about them. Often, this is reduced to their medical history, and their current symptoms. Healthcare only reaches its full potential when the whole client/patient is considered, including their family, their day-to-day life, and their culture.

4. Overcome Language Barriers

Communication is challenging if there is a language barrier. Language barriers exacerbate all other challenges nurses face when providing care for culturally diverse clients/patients. To effectively communicate with a client/patient to ask them about their health history or to educate them about a procedure, the language barrier must be broken in some way. When possible, seek the assistance of a reliable translator or explore translation technology.

Remember to be patient. Your client/patient is at a distinct disadvantage if they do not know the language of the healthcare provider.

Body language and eye contact become much more important if using a translator, so be sure to display open and kind body language and look the client/patient in the eyes when speaking to them and their family members. The LOVE Approach provides exercises to sharpen these skills.

5. Educate Clients/Patients About Medical Practices

Regardless of background or language, every client/patient must give informed consent for any medical procedures. If they are unfamiliar with a medical procedure, nurses often have the job of explaining in detail why the procedure is needed and what to expect during and after the procedure.

6. Practice Active Listening and Effective Communication

Cultural competence can help medical professionals establish better rapport with client/patients. Improved levels of communication can be a critical factor in assessing client/patient needs and developing appropriate treatments and interventions. Active listening in the healthcare community is imperative, especially when individuals of different racial or cultural backgrounds are involved. It's important that clients/patients feel heard and validated,

particularly when they are in vulnerable situations.<sup>vii</sup>

Take the time to understand your client/patient and their needs by asking them thoughtful, respectful questions about what they said in your own words, so they can also have confidence that you have understood them. The LOVE Approach teaches us to ask open-ended questions for this purpose.

## Conclusion

According to a recent study published in BMC Medical Ethics, implicit bias occurs in healthcare as frequently as in the general population. This potentially has effects on clinical judgment and quality of care. In recent years and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a renewed urgency to achieve healthcare equity.<sup>viii</sup>

In healthcare, those preconceived biases can be potentially harmful to client/patient care. Therefore, nurses must be self-aware and diligent in identifying subconscious bias and work to overcome those.

The good news is that with organizational support, skills training, and cognitive resources, healthcare providers who are motivated to uncover biases can successfully prevent this from affecting the quality of care they provide to their clients/patients.<sup>ix</sup>

## Endnotes

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