Understanding Bias and Disability

Implicit biases are *unconscious* assumptions and stereotypes that influence actions.
Explicit biases are *conscious* beliefs, attitudes, and preferences that affect behavior.

Although both forms of bias can contribute to discrimination, research suggests that while explicit bias in the U.S. has declined over time, **implicit bias remains a persistent concern** (Vela et al., 2022).

Examples of Implicit Bias About Disability:

- Assuming disability means inability
- Misjudging autistic or neurodivergent behaviors
- Expecting "normal" communication styles
- Viewing accommodations as unfair or inconvenient
- Limiting opportunities because of stereotypes

(ABA Commission on Disability Rights, 2026).



How to Reduce Bias:

REFLECT

Recognize and identify biases. Consider how your beliefs and assumptions may influence your words and actions without realizing it. Despite most people not recognizing their own disability bias, implicit bias remains widespread (VanPuymbrouck et al., 2020).

LEARN

Listen to the experiences of people with disabilities. Seek opportunities to learn from different perspectives and better understand the impact of ableism and bias.

RESPOND

Challenge stereotypes and practice inclusive behavior. Use respectful language, support accessibility, and speak up when harmful bias or exclusion occurs.

Key Takeaway

Bias can influence how we think, speak, and act—often without realizing it. Recognizing our assumptions and intentionally practicing inclusion can help create more respectful and accessible communities.

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MENTAL HEALTH
& INTELLECTUAL/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Learn more:

Take Project Implicit's Implicit Association Test (IAT) to explore unconscious biases related to disability, race, gender, and other identities.

References:

ABA Commission on Disability Rights. (2026). *Implicit biases and people with disabilities.* American Bar Association. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/disabilityrights/resources/implicit_bias/

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