

# Uniting through Diversity



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Why has diversity become such a dirty word? Why does it trigger so many negative emotions? Is it because we have failed as a society to truly understand the fundamental principles of diversity? Have we allowed social media to formulate our thoughts and actions fashioning a limited view of the constructs of diversity? Perhaps society is experiencing diversity fatigue; mentally and emotionally exhausted from engaging in dialog about diversity, inclusion and equity initiatives.

This past year, we found ourselves thrust into a global pandemic. We experienced political discourse and social unrest. These matters have become the subject of many difficult conversations within our profession, our institutions, and our organizations, often leading to hurt relationships and other negative outcomes. These same issues are still front and center in 2021, with no end in sight. As members of the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA), how do we move forward together? I would offer by embracing the concepts of diversity of thought, diversity of action, and diversity of culture.

It is impossible to address all facets of diversity in this limited space. Despite access to information, the cultural landscape of the world we live in is continually shifting requiring us to be fluid in our understanding of how cultural dynamics influence the context of diversity and necessitating the need for us to proceed bravely out of our comfort zone to gain a fresh perspective the dynamics of diversity.

The journey to truly understanding the premise of diversity begins with disassociating the word to simply mean race or an underrepresented population and expanding the meaning to encompass the dimensions of geographical regions, ethnicity,

gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, thoughts and actions. Essentially, understanding that diversity means being aware, accepting, and respecting the uniqueness in each individual. It also means recognizing and being sensitive to the experiences of historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups without being condescending or disingenuous, since these experiences are very real for many individuals.

Working towards an improved understanding of diversity requires self-reflection and introspection, understanding your own history, experiences, and opinions and being aware and honest about your own personal biases and prejudices. It is important to recognize that we have all consciously and subconsciously created biases, stereotypes and prejudices. Because diversity is often associated with terms like discrimination, racism, and prejudice, people often think this type of self-awareness involves thinking of themselves as racist or prejudice. However, this type of honest self-awareness allows a person to gain insight on how their own perceptions shape their viewpoints and interactions with other people.

Being honest with yourself allows you to create space to accept and respect individuals for who they are. You must work to acknowledge that you have personal biases and prejudices in order to work to change them. Failure to acknowledge one's own internal biases will prevent you from getting anything out of your own personal journey towards understanding diversity. When you are able to recognize your own individual biases and prejudices you can begin to manipulate them to learn how to effectively engage with others and develop diverse listening tools to develop an understanding of diversity beyond your own perspective.

Diversity is paramount in our professional association because it is essential to the success of our work as a profession. It is not about simply checking off a box. In any professional organization, members are called to think and work together, not alike. Diversity goes beyond the affirmation of equality—simply recognizing differences and responding to them. It means realizing the full potential of people, and in turn the organization, by acknowledging and appreciating the potential promise of each person's unique perspective and unique way of thinking. By acknowledging our individual ideas, perspectives and life experiences, we gain an enhanced capacity for problem-solving and creative thinking.

ADHA has made a commitment to diversity inclusion and equity (DEI). These critical concepts have been recognized within the ADHA strategic plan as a core value of the organization. That means that our work as an organization will move forward with the infusion of these core values. As the Diversity, Equality and Access Committee Chair, and an ADHA member, I, along with our committee members, now have the opportunity to help shape the tangible actions of ADHA so that all members and potential members see, hear and feel ADHA's commitment to DEI.

In the spirit of togetherness, I would like to share with you the African principle of Ubuntu, which means there is a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. In practice, Ubuntu means our commonalities are more important than any individual arguments and divisions within it. We should embrace this principle as we work together in supporting ADHA's mission and core ideology of uniting, empowering and supporting the dental hygiene profession.

In order to move forward, and get to a place of healing, we must push through diversity fatigue and realize there is power in recognizing and appreciating the uniqueness of all people.

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