

ISSA'S GUIDE TO

Diversity and Inclusion in Fitness



INTERNATIONAL
SPORTS SCIENCES
ASSOCIATION

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ISSA's Commitment to Diversity

The International Sports Sciences Association is wholly committed to diversity as an employer, as a contributing member to the Phoenix community and the country, and as a trusted resource for each and every student and fitness professional we encounter. Recent events have spotlighted the need for diversity and inclusion education and the gaps that exist, especially in the fitness industry. We believe that honest, informative, and non-partial information is the key to learning when it comes to diversity and awareness. We are proud to present this eBook to the world.

About the Author



HI THERE!

I'm Chrissy King.

I'm a writer, speaker, fitness and strength coach, and a powerlifter with a passion for intersectional feminism and creating a diverse and inclusive fitness industry.

I spent the majority of my twenties focused on shrinking — my body, my voice, and my entire life in general. I obsessed over my weight and truly believed that my happiness lived on the other side of fat loss.

Strength training, powerlifting specifically, was one of the things that changed this narrative for me. It's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about sharing my love of lifting with others because I know how much it did for me.

I finally realized the my body is not an object for consumption. I am not an ornament or decoration for the world, and I don't have to conform to cultural standards of beauty.

Lifting helped me stop obsessing over the scale and learn to appreciate my body. I stopped playing small, and I stepped into the magical power that all women have. I learned to #TakeUpSpace.

Now, I empower women to stop shrinking, develop strength in all areas of their lives, start taking up space and use their energy to create their specific magic in the world.

Diversity and Inclusion in Fitness



While diversity and inclusion have become buzzwords within the fitness and wellness industry, mainstream fitness is still very white and very thin. Look around to see if you can notice the lack of representation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in the industry. This includes representation at all levels ranging from representation of BIPOC on the covers of fitness magazines to the lineup on fitness panels or the speakers presenting at industry conferences.

Fitness and wellness go far beyond exercise and nutrition. After all, mental, emotional, and spiritual health are equally important to a person's wellbeing. All these aspects of wellness have a direct impact on physical health. We can't adequately take a holistic approach to wellness without addressing issues like racism and the lack of representation and how it affects wellbeing and prevents some people from feeling safe in their bodies and in fitness spaces.

Embracing the Conversation

As fitness professionals, if we are sincerely interested in serving all clients and helping them pursue wellness, we must take an industry-wide intersectional approach and embrace conversations about racism and how it affects our clients. And we need to acknowledge and have a working understanding of gender, sexual orientation, ability status, body diversity, and more, and how those identities, especially when they intersect, affect people's lives in and out of the gym. This requires taking time to acknowledge and examine our own internalized biases and beliefs and will likely lead to some discomfort—but discomfort is not a bad thing. In fact, leaning into uncomfortable feelings gives way to growth and evolution.

5 Reasons to Cultivate Diversity

Whether you realize it or not, cultivating a diverse and inclusive wellness industry is wildly important and a crucial component in creating multifaceted experiences. It's impossible to take a holistic approach to wellness without considering the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, age, and body shape and size, among others.

But aside from that, diversity and inclusion have so many benefits and allow us to broaden our perspective of the world.

1. Fitness Is for Everyone.

Contrary to what we see portrayed in fitness magazines and throughout social media, fitness is for everyone. Fitness isn't for a particular size, gender, shape, age, or ethnicity. You don't need to look a certain way to have a 'fit' body, nor do you need to possess any particular physical characteristics to engage in physical activity of any form.

With the average American woman wearing a size 14 or above, having the 'face of fitness' be mostly young, thin, lean, cisgender individuals with just the right amount of muscle mass is a gross misrepresentation of the general

population. It perpetuates the false idea that being ‘fit’ or healthy is synonymous with being a certain size. It also further alienates people from feeling welcomed in fitness spaces. Every ‘body’ is worthy and deserves to feel represented, welcome, and seen as valuable.

2. Representation Matters

Representation is vital because what people see shapes their perception of reality and what they deem to be possible for themselves and for people who look like them. It’s also important for people from dominant groups to see what’s possible for people who don’t look like them.

It’s important to see women working out in hijabs. We need to see Black and brown women represented. It’s vital that we see people who are transgender or nonbinary represented in wellness spaces. We need to see larger bodies on the covers of fitness magazines because, unfortunately, so many people still don’t understand that size is not an indication of health.

Diversity is not a box you check, and representation is not the end goal. It’s actually just the first step. But it’s still a very important step nonetheless. Because, without it, important stories remain absent from mainstream wellness.

3. It Creates Welcoming Spaces

Have you ever walked into a space and not felt welcomed? For members of marginalized communities, this is an all too common experience. If we aren’t considering overlapping identities such as gender, sexuality, or race, it’s easy to lack the awareness of how we are creating less than welcoming spaces, both in-person and online. Being a minority or member of a marginalized group in a non-diverse setting or industry can feel extremely isolating.

This concept is particularly challenging for white people to understand because whiteness is the default in American culture. As such, it affords people the privilege of rarely feeling ‘othered’ or unwelcomed. Diversity and inclusion foster a sense of belonging for people. It helps individuals feel included and seen, and more importantly, welcomed.

4. Diversity and Inclusion Gives Us Opportunities to Learn and Grow

If everyone in your social and professional circles looks just like you, you run the risk of groupthink. Even worse, you are missing out on important growth opportunities. Being around people who are different from yourself, who can offer a different perspective, one you may have never considered, allows you to expand your knowledge and self-awareness.

A big part of that process requires that you be quiet and listen. You may not experience everything someone else experiences, but you can do your best to understand, empathize, and hold space for other people. Most importantly, you can be open to learning more and accepting feedback without centering yourself in the conversation. This certainly does not mean we have permission to require others to share their experiences or demand their emotional labor. We can learn a lot by closing our mouths and opening our ears.

5. Fosters Creativity and Provides a Richer Experience

Variety is the spice of life and creating diverse and inclusive spaces fosters creativity and colorful experiences. Many of your deepest learning experiences have likely transpired when you were exposed to different views, ideas, and perspectives. That doesn't happen when we stay in our safe and comfortable corners of the world, surrounded only by people who look and think the same as we do.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” –Audre Lorde

Our differences are the very thing that makes this world a beautiful and interesting place. Let's celebrate and embrace our differences.

Prioritizing diversity and inclusion matters in every facet of life, but even more so in the wellness space, because health and wellness are important for truly everyone. The benefits of wellness, whether it be movement, nutrition, or mindset, extend to every single human being. Those benefits allow individuals to feel energized, whole, empowered, and nourished in their bodies. Everyone deserves access to wellness in environments that feel welcoming and comfortable, and where they feel seen, respected, affirmed, and celebrated. If these environments aren't inclusive, people will feel unwelcome, and it may have lasting impacts on their personal relationship with wellness—in addition to simply feeling it's inaccessible at that moment.

Fitness is for everyone. Let's work together to bring as many people as we can into this conversation because we have the opportunity to shift the landscape of the fitness industry. Transformation occurs when we create a culture of accountability. We are all responsible.

Microaggressions and the Damage They Cause



When I was growing up, I frequently heard comments such as “you’re so articulate” or “you’re not like other Black people”. I remember hearing these phrases and feeling slightly uncomfortable with them but also not having the framework or language to decipher what didn’t feel good about these interactions.

However, as I grew older, I came to realize there was a name for these interactions. They are called microaggressions, a term coined by Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe insults and dismissals which he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflicting on African Americans. By definition, microaggression is a term for the daily, casual, and often unintentionally harmful and hurtful comments that marginalized people experience from people in positions of privilege.

Understanding Microaggressions

If this is the first time you are becoming familiar with the term microaggressions and how they might show up, here is a list of common microaggressions:

- “I don’t see color.”
- “You’re so articulate.”
- “Can I touch your hair?”
- “You don’t sound Black.”
- “What are you?”
- “I’m not racist. I have a _____ friend.”
- “You’re not like other gay people.”
- Overall use of terms such as “I got gyped”, “that’s so gay”, “that’s so lame”, or “Indian giver”, just to name a few examples.

While your initial response to reading some of the microaggressions listed above may be perhaps people are being too sensitive, the reality is that all the comments are rooted in stereotypes that are quite harmful to people. Although they may seem harmless in nature or perhaps even funny at times, as shown in the video below, they are very sinister in nature and are really a form of insult.

Although you likely have a good understanding of the harmful nature of microaggressions at this point, let’s break down one of most common microaggressions: **“I don’t see color.”**

What you think you are saying: “I treat everyone the same regardless of their race or ethnicity. I see the inherent dignity and worth of all people.”

What you are actually saying: I don’t see your unique race or ethnicity. In fact, I’m erasing your identity in order to make us all the same. Because if we are all the same, I can’t treat you differently based on your race.

What to say instead: I recognize that we are all different. There's a myriad of races and ethnicities. I see that we may be different and I treat you with the same dignity and respect as everyone else, especially those who are the most like myself.

In this example, the person making the statement likely has good intentions, but in reality, they are failing to acknowledge a very important part of a person's identity. It is dismissive and it fails to understand or see their unique experience in the world. Going beyond that, denying race also downplays the need to discuss racism in the U.S. and globally because if we fail to acknowledge that we are all different, then we may not see the need to discuss how to be anti-racist in our lives.

Although these may not seem to be terrible offenses, casual microaggressions are a form of racism and, when faced with these daily, can be quite mentally and emotionally taxing. Oftentimes, when on the receiving end of such comments, individuals choose not to bring up or correct the offense because it doesn't feel safe or simply because when it occurs quite frequently. It can be overwhelming and a damper on their mental health to continually explain why something is offensive.

However, as it pertains to creating safe and inclusive spaces, we must be mindful of casual microaggressions just as much as more overt forms of racism. Both can cause harm to people.

3 Tips for Addressing Microaggressions

Here are three tips to address microaggressions and situations that may arise as a result of microaggressions:

1. Unlearn Our Own Implicit Biases

Most often, microaggressions, whether intentional or unconscious, are a result of our implicit bias. Implicit bias, also referred to as unconscious bias, in its most simple definition, is when we aren't conscious of the stereotypes and assumptions we are keeping about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and more. Implicit bias doesn't make us good or bad people. It simply makes us human.

However, the reality is that we all hold unchecked stereotypes and assumptions about people different from ourselves. When we don't take the time to unlearn those things and recognize how we might be making broad judgements about entire groups of people, we can easily fall into the trap of engaging in microaggressions and unintentionally causing harm to people.

If you haven't even begun to consider what implicit biases you may be working through, the Harvard Implicit Bias tests are a great place to start the process.

2. Interrupt and Educate

Once you begin to understand the harmful nature of microaggressions and the myriad of ways they show up—in a fitness space, on social media, in everyday life, etc.—it becomes the responsibility of us all to interrupt when we witness microaggressions occurring. Depending on the situation, it may not always be possible to interrupt in the moment. However, it's imperative that we take initiative to educate those we witness engaging in microaggressions.

If our goal is to create fitness spaces that feel safe and welcoming for everyone, it's the responsibility of us all to ensure that individuals are not caused harm or made uncomfortable in our spaces. That requires having potentially difficult conversations with our clients or peers when we witness them dishing out microaggressions. We can do this with kindness and compassion, recognizing that there may not be any ill intent. However, the conversation still needs to be had. Education for those around us is a huge part of making the fitness industry more welcoming and accessible to all bodies.

3. Don't Get Defensive

If you ever find yourself on the receiving end of feedback regarding microaggressions, the best possible thing you can do is listen and learn. Although getting negative feedback can be challenging, it's best not to get defensive. Remember, someone letting you know that you caused harm to them, whether it was intentional or not, doesn't mean you are a bad person. It simply means that you have some learning to do, and it's an opportunity for you to educate yourself and correct your behavior going forward.

We all make mistakes. It's part of the process. However, people most often remember how we respond to making mistakes, not the mistake itself. If we choose to avoid getting defensive and taking the role of victim and instead opt to listen, apologize, and commit to doing better in the future, we create an environment for mutual growth and understanding.

Tokenism in Fitness



Over the past couple of years, but even more so within the past few months, companies have been awakening to the need for a focus on increased diversity and inclusion within their organizations and industries. It seems as if everyone is realizing that perhaps that they haven't been as intentional about diversity as they would have liked.

The Rush to Action

Even on social media, in the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, there was a call to “highlight black voices.” While the intention was likely good, what ended up happening to many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) fitness professionals, is that that we found our inboxes and DMs flooded with requests from individuals with whom we had never interacted requesting appearances on podcasts, as guest speakers, or other opportunities looking to increase the diversity of individuals or companies.

For those on the receiving end of these requests, it felt a lot like they were being tokenized to meet the needs of others. Tokenism is defined as “the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce.”

Representation, while super important, is only meaningful when it comes from a genuine place. So, while the intention may have been good, it felt inauthentic because the goal was to quickly create the appearance of more diversity or to quickly bandage the problem by performing token gestures without doing the necessary work to create meaningful true diversity and inclusion. Tokenism treats the work of diversity and inclusion like a checklist. It's not enough just to make a minimal or symbolic effort to create the appearance of more diversity. It takes deep commitment to change and likely many difficult discussions and hard decisions along the way.

As discussed in an article from Medium.com, *Beyond Tokenism*, tokenism is a misguided attempt at diversity. It's what happens when we make quick-fix attempts instead of taking the time to slow down and ask some difficult questions such as:

- Why don't we have more diversity within our company and the fitness industry?
- Why aren't we elevating the work of BIPOC on a regular basis?
- Why don't we have POC or members of diverse backgrounds on our panels and at our conferences?
- In what other ways have we fallen short in terms of diversity and inclusion and why?
- Why hasn't this been a priority for us?

So, here's the real question: How do you do the work of diversity and inclusion without erring towards tokenism and making BIPOC or members of the LGBTQIA+ community uncomfortable?

3 Ways to Avoid Tokenism

Here are three actionable steps you can put into practice today.

1. Be Honest

In order to avoid tokenism, it's completely necessary to take a step back and be honest about where your business and the fitness industry currently stand in terms of diversity. What does the diversity of your workplace

staff look like at all levels - from entry-level to C-suite. When you can honestly discuss the current status of your organization, you can assess how much work you may need to actually do in order to achieve true diversity, the first step on the journey to inclusion and changing the status quo.

If you don't like what you see, then you must own up to it and decide how and why you ended up where you currently are. Sometimes, these are hard realizations to face, but they are completely necessary. Commit to making diversity and inclusion a core part of your practice and set actionable steps towards doing that, whether it be education via books and webinars or hiring a consultant to help you jumpstart the process.

2. Don't Treat Diversity Like A Box You Check

It's obvious when a company or individual is making an attempt to appear diverse or check off the diversity box by including one BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ person in their campaign or speak at an event. It feels cheap and artificial.

Don't tokenize people to check your diversity box. Do the work required to actually be inclusive and recognize that true change takes time. It doesn't happen overnight, particularly if you are just beginning the journey of creating a more inclusive space. If you catch yourself reaching out to someone because you don't have anyone with their minority background currently working with you, take a moment to pause and question your motivations. More importantly, think about how the person on the receiving end of your request may feel.

3. Expand Your Social and Professional Circles

If the majority of the people in your social and professional circles look and act like you, try to diversify your life. Expand your circles to include people of varying race, sexual orientation, body size, and more. Without the power of a diverse circle, you can fall into the trap of groupthink, wherein everyone you know holds similar belief systems. In addition, you can fail to see the harmful effects of tokenism and racism if those in your circle don't have the lived experience of dealing with it.

Be Mindful

While you seek to widen your group, remember to be mindful of tokenism. Seek to develop genuine relationships with BIPOC, not as an attempt to check the diversity box but as an opportunity to learn and grow. Most importantly, don't enter these new relationships with expectations for anyone to explain racism or share their experience with you. Enter the relationship because you have a genuine interest in making new connections.

In the words of writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde:

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

Engage with individuals different from yourself with a genuine appreciation and celebration, without expecting anything other than human connection in return.

Performative Activism in Fitness



Performative activism, also referred to as performative allyship, is a pejorative term referring to activism done to increase one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause. It is often associated with surface-level activism.

Just a few months ago, following the murders of George Floyd, Aumaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and, among others and an increased resurgence in the BLM movement due to police brutality, folks were rushing to the pages of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) wellness professionals suddenly interested in anti-racism and to "amplify" Black voices. While this was a pivotal and important movement, many anticipated that the attention would be short lived and the interest was performative in nature.

Unfortunately, many folks were quick to get back to 'business as normal.' Speaking of this phenomenon, Ilya Parker, founder of Decolonizing Fitness, an online resource that teaches you how to free yourself from toxic fitness culture to create more inclusive and affirming practices, stated, "My comrades and I witnessed masses of people flood our social media pages, DMs, and websites a couple of months ago, eager to "support Black people." Many of these folks have since disappeared. This is why I will continue to say invest in our work in ways that are sustainable, with or without Black folks trending."

Performative Activism Defined

Performative activism often manifests as individuals taking shallow actions to appear as though they are engaging in taking initiative to correct a particular injustice. However, correcting injustice is never done by easy action that can be outwardly displayed. In fact, the work of anti-racism is a marathon, not a sprint, and it will always require difficult and challenging effort and sacrifice.

The work of anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy is not work that you pick up and put down as it's convenient for you. BIPOC don't have the ability to take off their skin to avoid discrimination or oppression when it's too exhausting. The work of creating a wellness and fitness industry that is anti-racist and diverse, inclusive, and equitable isn't business strategy. It takes real work and a commitment for actual change within the industry.

5 Steps to Avoid Performative Activism

Collectively, we can change the landscape of the fitness industry, but it requires that we show up authentically and with a commitment to engaging in the work long term. Here's how to make it happen.

1. Stay Engaged Year Round

While it is understandable that many of the recent events have drawn more attention to the need to have ongoing conversations about the state of race relations in the United States and globally, the reality is that none of these realities are new for Black and Brown people and racism is not a new phenomenon.

It's tempting to be outraged when the newest injustice gets national attention; however, we must remind ourselves that these are not new occurrences and they occur every single day, even if it isn't getting national attention. Racism occurs on a spectrum, ranging from very overt racism like the KKK to everyday racism such as microaggressions. That being said, we have to stay engaged in the work of anti-racism year-round, not just when it's getting a lot of media attention.

2. Commit to Actual Action Steps

Social media activism, which is one way to do activism work, requires a lot more than just posting a black square on social media in solidarity supporting Black life. The reality is that posting a black square on Instagram does little to change systemic racism. While bringing awareness to issues and sharing information via Instagram stories has its merits, real change takes a lot more action than that.

In an effort to ensure that we are not engaging in performative activism, it's important that we commit to actual action steps beyond just posting and sharing on social media. This could include activities such as donating to Black organizations committed to doing the work of anti-racism, calling your local and federal politicians to demand change, examining the ways in which we have been complicit in our own lives, and holding ourselves and those around us accountable.

3. Educate Yourself and Those Around You

Perhaps a lot of this information is new to you or maybe you're just beginning to broaden your understanding of racism and white supremacy and how it shows up in all areas of life, even the wellness industry. If you haven't been having these conversations or even considering the intersection of racism and wellness, this can all feel a bit overwhelming. But the wonderful thing is, there are so many ways you can begin to educate yourself independently.

In her book, *Me and White Supremacy*, author Layla Saad, encourages everyone to "create the change the world needs by creating change within yourself." As a wellness practitioner, to truly understand the implication of racism and health, you also need to examine the ways in which you're engaging in racism or being complicit within the system of white supremacy.

Additional books that will help you along your journey include *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi.

4. Do the Work Without Feeling The Need To Post About It

One of the best ways to ensure that you are not being performative in nature is to take action without feeling the need to post about it. You can make donations without posting about it. You can protest without posting about your participation, especially if you are a white person. You can continue on your journey to unlearn your own implicit bias without looking for praise or kudos from your peers.

The reason that we are engaging in this work is not to feel better about ourselves. We are doing it to create a better world for all of us. We are not doing it to ‘help’ marginalized communities. We are doing it for collective liberation. As such, the focus can’t be on centering our own actions.

5. Don’t Be the Expert

It’s a privilege to learn about racism instead of experiencing racism. If you are a member of the dominant group, be mindful of the privilege that you hold. As you are engaging in education regarding racism, be mindful that you don’t attempt to become the expert, particularly if you don’t have lived experience. It can be tempting to teach others, but instead of taking that approach, I encourage you to share resources, books, and webinars from BIPOC who have been doing anti-racism work well before the recent resurgence in anti-racism.

The work of dismantling racism and white supremacy belongs to everyone, and we all have our part to play, but avoid white exceptionalism, defined by Layla Saad as, “the belief that you, as a person holding white privilege, are exempt from the effects, benefits, and conditioning of white supremacy and therefore that the work of anti-racism does not really apply to you.” If you are a white person learning about anti-racism and striving to complete a more inclusive fitness space, be mindful to remember that the information applies to you just as much as anyone else and point to BIPOC as the experts.

Are you passionate about developing a more diverse and welcoming community in fitness? Are you sincerely interested in serving all clients and helping them pursue wellness? Start by making an impact the community around you! Sign up for ISSA’s [Certified Personal Trainer course](#). Learn the ins and outs of training so you can share that knowledge and build a healthy, inclusive fitness community.

Or, take it up a notch. Take on ISSA’s [Master Trainer Certification](#). Maximize your knowledge to maximize your reach. Be known as the trainer with a deep and balanced knowledge of fitness and nutrition. Reach more people as a content expert, presenter, or speaker. Take your training to the top to help individuals and groups meet their ultimate fitness goals.