

# GA4GH Code of Conduct

*GA4GH Document 2022-03-03*

## Abstract

The Global Alliance for Genomics and Health (GA4GH)'s Code of Conduct aims to define and promote high standards of professional practice. The goals of this code are to:

- Define both expected and unacceptable standards of behavior.
- Provide a benchmark for behavioral evaluation.
- Ensure transparency in community and group management.
- Ensure an environment where people can participate and collaborate without fear of harassment or discrimination.
- Contribute to the identity of the organization.

Expected behaviors are those that we expect all GA4GH participants to adhere to at all times. They represent a general purpose of respecting and valuing every member of the community. Unacceptable behaviours are those which are never, under any circumstances, allowed within GA4GH activities. If you find yourself in a situation in which someone is acting counter to an expected behavior or is displaying an unacceptable behavior, you are welcome to report your experience. You can do this by contacting specified members of GA4GH, who have participated in conflict resolution or other relevant training by contacting our GA4GH external GA4GH Ombudsperson.

## Status of This Document

This document was developed by members of the GA4GH Secretariat. It will be reviewed by the GA4GH Executive Committee and the GA4GH Inc. Board of Directors and then put out for open comment before being endorsed by the Steering Committee as the GA4GH Code of Conduct. This document will supersede the [Standards for Professional Conduct, developed in 2018](#).

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# 1. Introduction

The Global Alliance for Genomics and Health (GA4GH) is an international, nonprofit alliance which was formed in 2013 to accelerate the potential of research and medicine to advance human health. Bringing together 600+ leading organizations working in healthcare, research, patient advocacy, life science, and information technology. The GA4GH community is working together to create frameworks and standards to enable the responsible, voluntary, and secure sharing of genomic and health-related data. All of our work builds upon the [Framework for Responsible Sharing of Genomic and Health-Related Data](#), which takes a human rights approach to data sharing.

GA4GH is a growing and global community where participants choose to work together. In that process we experience differences in language, location, nationality, and experience. In such a diverse environment, misunderstandings and disagreements happen, which in most cases can be resolved informally. When the issue cannot be resolved informally, we will use this document instead.

GA4GH's Code of Conduct draws heavily on the W3C Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and aims to define expected behaviors and to promote high standards of professional practice. We hope this document will help ensure that GA4GH is a welcoming working environment where everyone can participate without fear of harassment and/or discrimination. It also provides a benchmark for self-evaluation and acts as a vehicle for better identity of the organization. In turn, this document will help ensure accountability, allow us to address unacceptable behavior and provide redress where incidents/unaccepted behaviors are observed and [reported](#).

The Code of Conduct is complemented by a set of Procedures and applies to any member of the GA4GH community – staff, members, invited experts, and participants in GA4GH meetings, GA4GH teleconferences, GA4GH mailing lists, code repositories, GA4GH conferences or GA4GH functions, etc. Note that this code complements rather than replaces legal rights and obligations pertaining to any particular situation.

[Education and training materials](#) are available from the [Positive Work Environment public homepage](#).

## 2. Statement of Intent

GA4GH is committed to maintaining a positive work environment. This commitment calls for a workplace where participants at all levels behave according to the rules of the following code. A foundational concept of this code is that **we all share responsibility for our work environment**.

## 3. Code

Each person you interact with is unique, and behavior must be assessed on an individual level. Ensuring that your behavior does not have a negative impact is your responsibility. GA4GH strictly prohibits discrimination, intimidation, harassment, and bullying of any kind and on any basis.

GA4GH expects all of its contributors to adhere to the expected behaviors and to avoid the unacceptable behaviors listed below. Failure to do so may be seen as a violation of the Code of Conduct. The following lists provide clear guidelines on which behaviors can be reported to specified members of GA4GH (who have undertaken conflict resolution/relevant training) and/or our external GA4GH ombudsperson and may potentially result in disciplinary action. Reporting outlines can be found on [Page 5](#).

### 3.1 Expected Behaviors

All participants in GA4GH should follow the following behaviors at all time:

- **Treat each other with respect, professionalism, fairness, and sensitivity** to our many differences and strengths, including in situations of high pressure and urgency.

- **Appreciate and accommodate our similarities and differences.** We come from many cultures and backgrounds, ways of life, and standards of behavior. Cultural differences can encompass everything from official religious observances to personal habits to clothing. Be respectful of people with different practices, attitudes, and beliefs. To help us achieve and maintain these high standards, each individual participant is expected to share responsibility for our work environment by adhering to the behavioral guidelines herein.
- **Have empathy when discussing sensitive issues.** Some participants may have experienced (or been subjected to) various forms of violence in their lives, which may cause distress when they are reminded of it. Avoid making jokes or callously mentioning sexual violence such as stalking or sexual assault; in cases when the need arises to discuss these issues and how they affect people do so with tact and empathy, taking into account the gravity of the situation. Also, make sure that participants are appropriately warned in advance so they can choose to step out of these discussions.
- **Treat everyone with respect.** We are a large community of people who are passionate about our work, sometimes holding strong opinions and beliefs. We are committed to dealing with each other with courtesy, respect, and dignity at all times. Misunderstandings and disagreements do happen. When conflicts arise, we are expected to resolve them while maintaining that courtesy, respect, and dignity, even when emotions are heightened.
- **Do not accept or engage in abusive behavior in any form,** whether it is verbal, physical, sexual, or implied.
- **Be honest.** Be truthful, sincere, forthright and, unless professional duties require confidentiality or special discretion, candid, straightforward, and frank.
- **Be inclusive and promote diversity.** Seek diverse perspectives. Diversity of views and of people powers innovation, even if it is not always comfortable. Encourage all voices. Help new perspectives be heard and listen actively. If you find yourself dominating a discussion, it is especially important to step back and encourage other voices to join in. Provide alternative ways to contribute—GA4GH is built on collaboration and every opportunity/interaction should be a way for all members to contribute to the organization.
- **Be aware of how much time is taken up by dominant members** of the group. If you notice that a single voice is dominating conversation, attempt to bring others into the discussion by asking their opinions or thoughts.
- **Be aware that displays of affection may complicate professional relationships.** For some cultures, overtly friendly disposition towards another participant involving body contact (e.g.: hugging, touching on the arm or shoulder, or kissing) is uncommon and may be perceived as an invasion of personal space, or as unwelcome advances.
- **Work to eliminate your own biases, prejudices, and discriminatory practices.**
- **Think of others' needs from their point of view.** Use preferred names, titles (including pronouns), and the appropriate tone of voice. Therefore, be formal and conservative in what you do and liberal in what you accept from others and acknowledge the contributions of your peers.
- **Accommodate participants' needs for physical distancing and other accommodations or precautions** due to health concerns such as immune deficiency, allergies, or chemical sensitivity.
- **Be sensitive to language differences.** English is the default language of the GA4GH. However, many of us are not native English speakers. Many participants speak English as a second (or third) language. People who communicate in non-native language often struggle to understand fast and/or quiet speech and may speak louder than they usually would when communicating in their native tongue. If someone struggles to express their thoughts, help ensure their ideas are adequately expressed, heard, and granted thorough consideration.
- **Respect confidentiality and privacy.** Sometimes, matters we discuss may fall under various confidentiality agreements and strict adherence to these agreements is expected. In addition, certain pieces of information disclosed in a group setting may be private in nature, or we may inadvertently learn confidential information accidentally disclosed by other participants. Please exercise good judgment, and make reasonable efforts to protect privacy and confidentiality of all participants.

## 3.2 Unacceptable Behavior

Unacceptable behaviors include, but are not limited to:

- Offensive comments related to gender, gender identity and gender expression, sexual orientation, disability (both visible and invisible), mental health, neurotype, physical appearance, body, age, race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, caste, nationality, language, or religion
- Unwelcome comments regarding a person's lifestyle choices and practices, including those related to food, health, parenting, drugs, and employment
- Misgendering someone by deliberately referring to a person using the wrong pronouns or by using someone's proper names or other terms that person has asked not to be used, also known as [deadnaming](#).
- Gratuitous or off-topic sexual images or behavior in spaces where they are not appropriate.
- Physical contact (eg., intentionally touching someone as you pass by them) and simulated physical contact (e.g., sending a text "hug" or "backrub") without consent or after a request to stop.
- Threats of violence.
- Incitement of violence towards any individual, including encouraging a person to commit suicide or to engage in self-harm.
- Intimidation or bullying, in any way shape or form.
- Stalking or physically following or invading someone's personal space.
- Deliberately exposing others to contagious disease.
- Harassing photography or recording, including logging online activity for harassment purposes.
- Sustained disruption of discussion.
- Unwelcome sexual attention.
- Plagiarism.
- Patterns of inappropriate social contact, such as requesting/assuming inappropriate levels of intimacy with others.
- Continued one-on-one communication after requests to cease.
- Deliberately outing a person's gender, sexual orientation, religion, or any other aspect of their identity without their consent.
- Publication of private communication without consent by the involved parties.
- Use of coded language (also known as "dog whistles") used to rally support for hate groups or to intimidate vulnerable groups.
- Microaggressions, which are small comments or questions, either intentional or unintentional, that marginalize people by communicating hostile, derogatory, or negative beliefs. Examples include:
  - Patronizing language or behavior:
    - Be aware that, regardless of the speaker's intentions, some phrases or constructions lead people to expect a patronizing statement to follow, and avoid such phrases. For example, beginning an interjection with "Well, actually..." can set this expectation and be taken as a sign of disrespect.
    - Assuming that particular people or groups need concepts defined or explained to them. It's great to be sensitive to the fact that people may not be familiar with technical terms you use every day, but assuming that people are uninformed can come across as patronizing.
    - Assuming that particular groups of people are technically unskilled (e.g., "So easy your grandmother could do it").
  - Repeatedly interrupting or talking over someone else.
  - Feigning surprise at someone's lack of knowledge or awareness about a topic.
  - The use of racially charged language to describe an individual or thing.
  - Referring to an individual in a way that demeans or challenges the validity of their racial identity.
  - Mocking someone's real or perceived accent or first language.

- Retaliating, or taking adverse action, against anyone who files a complaint that someone has violated this code of conduct.

### 3.2.1 Safety versus Comfort

This Code prioritizes the safety of individuals, particularly those in marginalized communities, over the comfort of others. For example:

- GA4GH will not recognize reverse “-isms”, such as "reverse racism," "reverse sexism," and "cisphobia”.
- GA4GH welcomes and encourages reasonable communication of boundaries, such as “leave me alone,” “go away,” or “I’m not discussing this with you”, even if those words feel harsh to the recipient.
- GA4GH will prioritize the content of an interaction rather than the tone of voice, which is subjective.
- GA4GH will not support racist, sexist, cissexist, or otherwise oppressive behavior or assumptions.

## 4. Reporting Violations and Supporting the Code

*If you are concerned about your immediate safety, contact local emergency services. For a face-to-face event you may need to contact venue staff for assistance contacting emergency services.*

In most instances, if you have an issue with someone’s behavior that falls within the bounds of this Code, please raise it. This can be done in one of the following ways, depending on your situation and your safety:

- In most cases, issues are best resolved at the source. Accordingly, raising the issue with the Work Stream or Subgroup Lead or Work Stream Manager of the relevant group, who have the most context, is usually the best first place to raise an issue.
- If the issue cannot be resolved within a workstream, the executive committee can be consulted for advice in handling the matter or designated staff of GA4GH who have received conflict resolution or other relevant training.
  - Where the issue cannot be resolved, or a decision cannot be made, these members may refer a decision to our external GA4GH ombudsperson.
- However, if you would prefer, you can raise issues directly with the external GA4GH Ombudsperson. All complaints will be anonymous to GA4GH secretariat and leads.
- An [online form](#) is available to help you make this report if you wish to use it.

All complaints will be taken seriously. While each case will be different, appropriate action will be decided and taken at each step. We will make contact with the person who has reported as violating the code, and may contact the reporter for further information, if they choose not to remain anonymous. Resolution may include, but is not limited to the following forms: an apology, a warning, or suspension or removal from the GA4GH community.

If you are responsible for a community within the GA4GH—such as in the role of a co-lead of a work stream or sub-group—and you witness harassment or any other behavior that goes against the Code of Conduct, you are encouraged to address the issue directly. If you need assistance, you may contact the external GA4GH, [secretariat](#), [executive leadership](#) or ombudsperson.

Work Stream and Subgroup Leads, meeting chairs, Work Stream Managers, and members of GA4GH Secretariat should take such immediate action as they deem necessary in order to stop unacceptable behavior. This action may take many forms, but examples may include:

### 4.1 Immediately

- Pointing out if someone is violating the Code of Conduct to give them the chance to withdraw or edit their statement
- Reminding participants that meetings and work operate under the Code of Conduct; you can point to this document, or to meeting minutes which also point to this document.

- Asking someone to leave a meeting or a conversation thread

#### 4.2 After the event

- Following up with affected participants, possibly in separate meetings
- Reaching out to the external GA4GH ombudsperson for assistance, if required.
- Further information and resources for Work Stream and Subgroup Leads will be made available via a to-be-determined training program

**Note** that the action must be directly related to stopping harm, and must be proportionate. People affected may request that the external GA4GH ombudsperson consider whether such actions are unacceptable under the terms of this Code. Local authorities may be contacted when it is possible that something illegal has taken place.

## 5. If You've Done Something Improper

As we engage in diverse communities we may accidentally cause offense, whether through using unknowingly offensive terminology or through missing social cues.

If you realize (or are told in the moment) that you have offended someone then take the appropriate steps:

1. **Acknowledge** that you've done something improper
2. **Apologize**. Don't try to explain yourself or minimize the issue
3. If possible, **edit** your message, restate your communication in a better way or withdraw your statement:

Alice: "Yeah I used the method and it was really crazy!" Eve: "Hey, could you not use that word? What about 'ridiculous' instead?" Alice: "oh sorry, sure." -> edits old message to say "Yeah I used the method and it was really confusing!"

This will allow conversation to quickly continue without any need of further action or escalating the situation.

*Publicly revising your statement helps define the culture for others*

If you don't understand what you did wrong, assume that the hurt party has good cause and accept it. The offended party does not need to provide an explanation. We cannot know everyone's background and should do our best to avoid harm. You are welcome to discuss it with specified members of GA4GH, or the external GA4GH ombudsperson later.

#### NOTES ON PROCESS FROM EXEC

[See process in ELXIR draft](#)

Most general things can be handled within existing structures by either Work Stream or Staff leadership, if contributor resolve using staff resources and WS leadership; if it's staff it's stays within employers working with senior management. Contributor disagreements -

- 1) Within WS environment, staff and WS leadership
- 2) Early decision - do we need an ad hoc committee or is it resolvable
  - a) Triage guidance - should be able to be decided by senior management (before exec)
- 3) More than a difference of opinion, breach of CoC - will go through early triaging
- 4) Serious reported breach, whistleblower type thing - investigated by management but process, share with Board, risk management committee / exec - will be advised of number of cases, but no details

# Appendix: Glossary

## ***Acceptable Behavior***

Within the GA4GH, this is behavior which abides by this Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.

## ***Cisgender/cis person***

A person whose gender identity matches the one they were assigned at birth.

## ***Cissexism***

The belief or assumption that cis people's gender identities, expressions, and embodiments are more natural and legitimate than those of trans people. The term is related to transphobia (see below).

## ***Consent***

Consent occurs when one person voluntarily agrees to the proposal or desires of another. It is a term of common speech, with specific definitions as used in such fields as the law, medicine, research, and sexual relationships.

## ***Deadnaming***

Using someone's name after they have changed it. Often a person's name is not their "legal" name, whatever that may mean.

If someone asks you to use a name for them you should use it. This includes:

- A trans person, who has changed their name when transitioning
- Someone who has changed their name through marriage
- Someone who has changed their name for any other reason

## ***Demeaning behavior***

Acting in a way that reduces another person's dignity, sense of self-worth, or respect within the GA4GH community.

## ***Discrimination***

The prejudicial treatment of an individual based on criteria such as: physical appearance, race, ethnic origin, genetic differences, national or social origin, name, religion, gender, sexual orientation, family or health situation, pregnancy, disability, age, education, wealth, domicile, political view, morals, employment, or union activity.

## ***Diversity***

Diversity—for the purposes of diversity and inclusion—is any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another, with a focus on age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, and national origin.

## ***Gender Expression***

A person's behavior, mannerisms, interests, and appearance that are associated with gender in a particular cultural context.

## ***Gender Identity***

The personal sense of one's own gender. Gender identity can correlate with assigned sex at birth or can differ from it.

## ***Harassment***

Any conduct, verbal or physical, that has the intent or effect of interfering with an individual, or that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

## ***Inclusivity***

The practice or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.

***Insulting behavior***

Treating another person with scorn or disrespect.

***Marginalized Communities***

Communities which are often overlooked, ignored, or denigrated to the detriment of the members of that community. People may often be part of multiple communities such as being queer and disabled.

***Mental Health***

A person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being.

***Microaggression***

Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group, particularly culturally marginalized group.

***Misgendering***

Addressing someone using gendered words to imply or state they are a different gender than the one they identify as.

Examples include refusing to use their correct pronouns such as he/him, she/her, they/them, or others.

***Neurotype***

A neurotype is the name given to one individual form of brain wiring. The so-called "normal" neurotype is referred to as Neurotypical (abbreviated NT) and is what we once thought of as being the most common, or "typical" form of wiring.

***Oversight Committee***

A group of trained individuals who assist in the resolution of conflicts or concerns. Oversight committee members are designated neutral parties who are appointed or employed by the GA4GH to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of participants within the GA4GH.

***Participant***

Includes the following persons:

- GA4GH Secretariat (core staff members)
- GA4GH Work Stream members (member representatives and invited experts)
- Steering Committee members (and their guests)
- Anyone from the public partaking in the GA4GH work environment (e.g. commenting on our specs, emailing us, attending our conferences or functions, etc.)

***Prejudice***

A set of discriminatory or derogatory attitudes based on assumptions deriving from perceptions about such things as race, culture, religion, skin color, age, sexual orientation, gender, disability, or gender expression.

***Racism***

The belief that groups of humans possess different behavioral traits corresponding to inherited attributes and can be divided based on the superiority of one race over another. It may also mean prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against other people because they are of a different race or ethnicity.

***Sexism***

Prejudice or discrimination based on sex or perceived sex, usually (but not always) against women or non-binary people.



Sexism is where these prejudices work to enhance existing power imbalances within communities to further marginalize groups.

***Workplace Bullying***

A tendency of individuals or groups to use persistent aggressive or unreasonable behavior (e.g. verbal or written abuse, offensive conduct, or any interference which undermines or impedes work) against a co-worker or any professional relation.

***Sexual harassment***

Uninvited and unwelcome verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature, especially by a person in authority toward a subordinate (such as an employee or student, or, in the case of GA4GH, anyone who is not a member of the leadership body)

***Sexual Orientation***

Relates to the gender(s) a person may be attracted to in relation to their own gender.

***Socio-economic status***

The combined effects relating to someone's wealth, social position/class and property ownership.

***Transphobia***

A range of negative attitudes, feelings, or actions toward transgender or transsexual people, or toward transsexuality. Transphobia can include fear, aversion, hatred, violence, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed toward people who do not conform to society's gender expectations.

***Unwelcome sexual advance***

includes visual displays of degrading sexual images, sexually suggestive conduct, offensive remarks of a sexual nature, requests for sexual favors, unwelcome physical contact, and sexual assault.

## Appendix: Summary Slide

The following slide should be displayed at the start of all GA4GH calls and in-person meetings. It should also be made readily available on asynchronous communications channels, such as Google Drive, Slack, and GitHub. A Google Slide version is available [here](#).

# GA4GH Code of Conduct



GA4GH is committed to maintaining a positive work environment. This commitment calls for a workplace where participants at all levels behave according to the rules of the following code. A foundational concept of this code is that **we all share responsibility for our work environment**. *To report violations to the code of conduct please contact any member of the GA4GH Secretariat or complete the form on our website. More details can be found at [www.ga4gh.org/code-of-conduct](http://www.ga4gh.org/code-of-conduct)*

### Expected Behaviors

- Treat each other with respect, professionalism, fairness, and sensitivity.
- Appreciate and accommodate similarities and differences.
- Have empathy when discussing sensitive issues.
- Do not accept or engage in any abusive behaviors.
- Be honest.
- Be inclusive and promote diversity.
- Be aware of how much time is taken up by dominant members of the group.
- Be aware that displays of affection may complicate professional relationships.
- Work to eliminate your own biases, prejudices, and discriminatory practices.
- Think of others' needs from their point of view.
- Accommodate participants' needs for physical distancing and other accommodations or precautions.
- Be sensitive to language differences.
- Respect confidentiality and privacy.

### Unacceptable Behaviors

- Offensive or unwelcome comments related to someone's identity, lifestyle,
- Misgendering or deadnaming someone
- Gratuitous or off-topic sexual images or behavior.
- Unwelcome physical contact, including sexual attention.
- Threats or incitement of violence.
- Intimidation or bullying.
- Stalking or physically following or invading someone's personal space.
- Deliberately exposing others to contagious disease.
- Harassing photography, recordings, or online activity.
- Sustained disruption of discussion.
- Plagiarism.
- Patterns of inappropriate social contact.
- Continued one-on-one communication after requests to cease.
- Deliberately outing any aspect of someone's identity without their consent.
- Publication of private communication without consent by the involved parties.
- Use of coded language to support hate groups or intimidate vulnerable groups.
- Microaggressions.
- Retaliating, or taking adverse action, against anyone who files a complaint that someone has violated this code of conduct.

## Appendix: Attribution

Large portions of the text for this policy were taken from the W3C Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct 2020

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