

Everyday Ethics for Nutrition Students



Any mention of “ethical discussions” might conjure images of far-fetched scenarios you will likely never encounter and so deem the exercise pointless. However, there is value in examining hypothetical situations. It provides you the opportunity to choose your actions carefully rather than reacting when faced with a real situation. This process also allows you to make more meaningful decisions by considering your values and biases. You get to define what makes the decision right in terms of whether or not you are doing the greatest good while doing the least harm.

People’s assumptions about your qualifications put you in a position of authority as a nutrition student. It is your ethical responsibility to respect boundaries, acknowledge limitations, and encourage educational dialogue instead of offering advice on what an individual should eat. Let’s examine the common assumptions about nutrition students to better understand our duty.

People will assume that you eat like you “should.” In this context, “should” does not necessarily mean in accordance to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics or any other statistically significant findings. People, including nutrition students, make food choices daily based on a variety of factors such as health goals, budget, time, social context, and sources they deem reputable. There are countless sources of nutrition information. People form their perceptions of food based on blog posts, online news articles, personal testimonials of friends, diet books, and websites just to name a few. Some people eat to lose weight, maintain weight given their active lifestyle, or to support health in the context of a medical diagnosis.

As a nutrition student, it is your responsibility to be up front and honest with people when you discuss your own food choices and the factors that you consider when making those choices. In this conversation you have the opportunity to educate people on the sources of nutrition information and how to determine the validity of the claims being made. It is important to consider the source of the information and the author’s credentials. If the recommendations are based on research, know who sponsored the research and if the article is promoting a product or service.

Similar to how you examine an author’s credentials, you probably expect people to examine yours to determine if you are qualified to provide nutrition advice. However, get ready to be judged based on your food choices. There is very real pressure on a nutrition student to model healthy eating behaviors, whether the pressure is intrinsic, extrinsic, or a combination of the two. So how are you to live your life and make daily food choices knowing that people make assumptions on your qualifications based on whether they see you eating cake or raw vegetables? Having a set “script” or response ready can help. Especially if you are someone who becomes speechless when caught off guard by comments like, “I thought you were studying nutrition. You shouldn’t be eating cake!” Understand that you don’t need to go on the defensive and get into the details of your diet

plan. You don't need to interpret the comment as a personal attack. Rather, take the comment as a sign of confusion. The person is trying to make sense of seemingly contradictory information. Cake isn't good for you. My nutrition student friend who knows what to eat is eating cake. An effective response is simple and explains that each person makes many food choices each day and that for you, the piece of cake fits into your diet. People incorrectly base your qualifications on your personal food choices and not necessarily your academic education or experiences. This leads to the next and most consequential assumption: that you are qualified to provide nutrition advice.

People not only will assume you eat like you "should," but they might also assume you judge them for what they eat. I would recommend handling this assumption by explaining the variables that must be examined when selecting what to eat. An adequate diet must be determined in the context of individual health goals, level and type of physical activity, risk factors for disease due to lifestyle and/or genetics, and health conditions such as diabetes.

People assume that as a nutrition student, you are qualified to give nutrition advice. Be very clear in conversations if you are giving your personal opinion or if you are relaying information that you learned in one of your classes. It is your personal opinion that everyone should be vegetarian. It is much different than explaining the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' position on vegetarian diets as healthy due to lower levels of saturated fat, but that it might be difficult to get enough vitamins B2, B12, D, iron, calcium, and zinc. The distinction may seem minor, but it is your responsibility to make sure people know if the conversation is based on your educational training or if it is based on personal opinions.

I've talked about assumptions other people make about nutrition students. I want to mention a common assumption that nutrition students make. You might assume that certain foods are healthy for everyone. How could vegetables, fruit, or green tea be dangerous? Let's use green tea as an example. Drinking green tea is healthy, right? There can't be health risks from something as healthy as green tea. If the person has chronic kidney disease and is on dialysis 3 times a week, the caffeine could cause added stress on the kidneys and the phosphorus content of green tea could increase the chances of heart failure and mortality. As you can see, for certain populations green tea is in fact dangerous and could do great harm. Do not assume you have the whole picture, or that there are foods safe for everyone. Know your limits. Respect boundaries. You do not know-family history, personal medical history, current health status or risk factors. Even if someone tells you they are healthy, medical conditions can be undiagnosed while still affecting someone's wellness.

With all these assumptions flying around, it's best to be clear and honest. You can have discussions about nutrition principles you've learned but do not give nutrition advice. Help people gain a better understanding of the benefits and risks of different diets while respecting boundaries. By conducting everyday conversations ethically, we can earn people's trust while building the reputation of the field.

In the comments section, please share if you've run into assumptions about being a nutrition student. What happened? How did you handle it?