



Microaggressions

- Understanding different forms of Microaggressions
- Practicing to address Microaggressions

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Microaggression

“Brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate **hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults** to an individual or group because of their actual or perceived marginalized status.”



Columbia Professor Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D.

Types of Microaggressions

Microassault

- Intentional offenses and insults. Slurs, renaming, misgendering. “I was just joking”

Microinsult

- Subtly demean identity. Often rude or insensitive. “Your people must be proud of you” “You are so articulate”

Microinvalidation

- Unintentional insults. Denying existence of systemic inequities. “Racism does not exist”

Activity - Consider the pros and cons/costs of responding to a microaggression

What are the pros and cons/cost of -

Letting it go

Responding immediately

Responding later



The cost of Microaggressions of letting it go

Mental Health

Absenteeism

Depression

Reduced
optimism

Maladaptive
coping strategies
(drinking, etc)



Pros and Costs of responding immediately

Pros

- Allows the transgression to be called out and its impact explained while the details of the incident are fresh in the minds of everyone involved.
- Immediacy is an important component of correcting bad behavior.

Cost

- But this approach can be risky.
- The perpetrator might get defensive, leaving the target feeling like they somehow “lost control,” did not show up as their best self, and will be labeled an overly sensitive whiner, a troublemaker, or the stereotypical.



Responding later

Pros – A more tempered response is to address the perpetrator privately at a later point to explain why the microaggression was offensive.

Costs – the RISK lies in the time lag

Costs - A follow-up conversation requires helping the person who committed the microaggression to first recall it and then to appreciate its impact.

Cost - The employee bringing it up might be deemed petty — like someone who has been harboring resentment or holding on to “little things” while the other party, having “meant no harm,” has moved on. Such accusations are a form of racial gaslighting, which can be very damaging.



Responding to the microaggressions

How you respond will depend on where you are sitting in the interaction.



Observer



Intended victim



Perpetrator



Responding to the microaggressions

If you are the observer or the intended victim of the microaggression consider the four D as you formulate your response

Four D's

Discern

Disarm

Defy

Decide

- *Consider the pros and costs of each response*



Discern

Determine
how much of
an investment
you want to
make in
addressing the
microaggression

- Consider -
 - *The importance of the issue and the relationship.*
- Express yourself in a way that honors your care for the other party and assert yourself in a way that acknowledges your concern about the issue.



Discern

Do not
feel
pressured
to
respond
to every
incident

- Microaggressions can make you doubt the legitimacy of your reactions
- Allow yourself to feel what you **FEEL**, whether it's -
 - ✓ anger,
 - ✓ disappointment,
 - ✓ frustration,
 - ✓ aggravation,
 - ✓ confusion,
 - ✓ embarrassment,
 - ✓ exhaustion, or something else.
- Any emotion is **legitimate** and should factor into your decision about whether, how, and when to respond.
- With more-active negative emotions such as anger, it's often best to address the incident later.



Discern

Respond in
a way that
makes you
feel
empowered
to do so
when you
decide you
should.

- *How you want to be perceived now and in the future.*
- There are consequences to speaking up and to remaining silent.
- Only you can determine which holds more weight for you in any specific situation.



Disarming a microaggression

Goal -to help the aggressor understand she or he is not under attack for their comment.

Ask for more clarification:

“Could you say more about what you mean by that?” “How have you come to think that?”

Separate intent from impact:

“I know you didn’t realize this, but when you _____ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because_____. Instead, you could _____ (different language or behavior.)”

Share your own process:

“I noticed that you _____ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned_____.”



Defy the microaggression

CHALLENGE THE STEREOTYPE

Ask probing questions

"How do you mean that?"

Impact –

This gives people a chance to check themselves as they unpack what happened.

And it gives you an opportunity to better gauge the perpetrator's intent.

What challenging the stereotype can look like

"Actually, in my experience _____."

What challenging the stereotype can look like

"I think that's a stereotype. I've learned that _____."

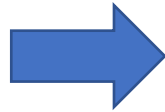
What sharing your own experience and offering an alternative perspective can look like -

"Another way to look at it is _____."



Defy the microaggression

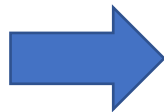
APPEAL TO VALUES AND PRINCIPLES



"I know you really care about _____. Acting in this way really undermines those intentions."

PROMOTE EMPATHY

Ask how they would feel if someone said something like that about their group, or their friend/partner/child.



"I know you don't like the stereotypes about _____ (their group), how do you think he feels when he hears those things about his group?"

"How would you feel if someone said that about/did that to your sister or girlfriend?"



Defy the microaggression

- **USE HUMOR**

- Exaggerate comment, use gentle sarcasm.
- “She plays like a girl?” You mean she plays like Serena Williams?” Or Mia Hamm?

- **POINT OUT WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON WITH THE OTHER PERSON**

- “I’m tired of hearing your Muslim jokes. Do you know he’s also studying _____.
- and likes to _____? You may want to talk with him about that. You actually have a lot in common.”



Defy the microaggression

- **W.I.I.F.T. (What's in it for them)**

- Explain why diversity or that individual/group can be helpful/valuable.
- “I know you're not comfortable with _____ but they can help us reach out to/better serve other groups on campus/in the community.”
- “In the real world, we are going to have to work with all sorts of people, so might as well learn how to do it here.”

- **REMIND THEM OF THE RULES OR POLICIES**

- “That behavior is against our code of conduct and could really get you in trouble.”



Decide

Before deciding on a response to microaggression ask yourself –

Do you simply want to be heard?

**Or are you more interested in
educating the other person and
letting them know they did
something wrong?**



Responding when YOU have
committed a microaggression



Responding when you have committed a microaggression

Someone has alerted you have said something offensive; this is a moment; this is your moment to pause and consider the best way to handle the situation.

Using your emotional intelligence, here are some steps to take:

Take a moment to pause.

- Being called out can put us on the defensive, so breathe deeply and remember that everyone makes mistakes.
- In most cases committing a microaggression **does not mean you are bad person**; it signals that you have a chance to treat a colleague with greater respect and to grow on your DEI journey.
- Taking a moment to pause, breathe, and reflect can help you avoid reacting with emotion and potentially saying something rash that could make the situation worse.



Responding when you have committed a microaggression

Ask for clarification.

- If you are unsure what you did to offend your colleague, **invite dialogue by asking for clarification.**

Say, **“Could you say more about what you mean by that?”**

Listen for understanding.

- **Listen to your colleague’s perspective, even when you disagree.** Far too often in uncomfortable conversations, we listen for the opportunity to speak and insert our own opinions instead of truly listening for understanding.
- To make sure you have understood your colleague’s point of view, you could restate or paraphrase what you heard:

“I think I heard you saying _____ [paraphrase their comments]. Is that correct?”



Responding when you have committed a microaggression

Acknowledge and apologize.

- Once you process that harm has been done, you must acknowledge the offense and sincerely apologize for your statement.
- This is a moment to be honest, whether you lacked the knowledge of a certain word's history or made a comment that was insensitive.
- You could say something like -
“I can now better understand how I was wrong in this situation. I will work to become more aware of _____ [the topic that you need to increase your cultural awareness of].”

Create space for follow-up.

- The majority of these tough conversations take more than one conversation to work through.
- Allow yourself and your colleagues the opportunity to follow up in the future to continue the conversation, especially when cooler heads can prevail.
- You may say something like -
“I would be happy to talk about this more in the future if you have any follow-up thoughts. I appreciate you taking the time to share your perspective with me.”



Wrap-Up

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What are you taking away?



Questions?



Thank you...



Resources

- **How to Respond to Microaggressions** <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/smarter-living/how-to-respond-to-microaggressions.html>
 - **A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions** [https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/ELAMICRO%20A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions. pdf](https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/ELAMICRO%20A%20Guide%20to%20Responding%20to%20Microaggressions.pdf)
 - **Dear Anti-Racist Allies: Here's How to Respond to Microaggressions** <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/05/health/racial-microaggressions-examples-responses-wellness/index.html>
 - **This Is the Right Way to Respond to Microaggressions at Work** - <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-respond-microaggressions-at-work>
- Allies and Microaggressions** - <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/04/13/how-be-ally-someone-experiencing-microaggressions-essay>
- **Everything You Need to Know About Microaggressions** - <https://www.oprahmag.com/life/relationships-love/a26294696/what-is-microaggression/>
 - **Microaggressions Are A Big Deal: How To Talk Them Out & When To Walk Away** <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away>
 - **Microresistance and Ally Development: Powerful Antidotes to Microaggressions** <https://www.unomaha.edu/faculty-support/teaching-excellence/microaggressions-handout.pdf>
 - **Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders** - <https://engineering.purdue.edu/Engr/People/faculty-retention-success/Files/Racial-Microaggressions.pdf>



References:

1. Nadal, K. L. (2014). A guide to responding to microaggressions. In *CUNY Forum* (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 71-76).
2. Goodman, D. (2011). *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Groups*. New York: Routledge. Excerpt available at www.dianegoodman.com
3. Washington, E (2022) Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions at Work. Harvard Business Review

