

Why Microaggressions are Important & How to Respond to Them

By Workplace Options

First of all, what are microaggressions? The following are some examples.

“*You speak English very well.*” (To a person who was born in the U.S.)

“*You’re so articulate.*” (To a Black person)

“*What are you?*” (To a person with brown skin color)

“*You must be good at math. Can you help me with this?*” (To an Asian-American)

“*You’re being too loud.*” (To a woman)

“*Can I speak with your boss?*” (To a female executive)

“*You don’t sound gay.*” (To an LGBT co-worker)

Giving a suspicious look or clutching your purse when a Black man walks by.

These statements and actions are examples of microaggressions. These are the everyday slights, put-downs, and insults that members of marginalized groups experience in their interactions with members of a dominant group. The people making the statements often have no idea that they’ve offended someone. They may even think they are being friendly. But the effect of microaggressions is to demean and dismiss, to make people feel that they are unwelcome and don’t belong.

When they occur at work, microaggressions are different from more open acts of harassment or discrimination, which are typically more direct and intense. These should be reported to the human resources (HR) department. But there is a fuzzy line between these acts and microaggressions. Repeated and intentional microaggressions are a form of harassment.

Why Microaggressions Matter

Looked at one at a time, microaggressions can seem trivial and insignificant. Why make a big deal of a careless comment? The answer lies in the difference between how they are perceived by the *offender* and how they are perceived by *the person on the receiving end*:

The person talking or acting in a way that demonstrates bias is often oblivious to the loaded nature of what they have said or done. They are betraying prejudice they may not even be aware of and applying stereotypes to a unique individual.

The person on the receiving end typically hears the message loud and clear, with alarm bells ringing. That’s because microaggressions reinforce racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic attitudes in our culture. It’s also because these passing comments and actions are so common. When experienced over and over again, in different variations, they can have a damaging cumulative effect, triggering symptoms of trauma. Psychologists have described them as “death by a thousand cuts.”

Microaggressions can damage work relationships by undermining trust and goodwill. They can hurt the morale and productivity of affected employees, and they can contribute to a toxic work environment.

Decide Whether to Respond to a Microaggression

Because they happen so often, it’s not practical to respond to *each and every* microaggression. You need to pick and choose your battles. They also happen quickly, and it can take fast thinking to come up with an appropriate response. But being thick-skinned about all

microaggressions and trying to let them all roll off your back isn't the answer, either.

If you're being hurt or angered by microaggressions, or if you observe another person being hurt by them, you need to decide whether and how to respond. An appropriate check on the behavior can make a person aware that they have offended someone when they might not otherwise realize it. Also, supportive words as an ally, appropriately timed and directed, can let the target of the microaggression know that the action was noticed and that they have your support.

Before responding, consider the situation and what you hope to accomplish:

- Will your physical safety be in jeopardy if you respond?
- Do you simply want to be heard? Or do you want to educate the other person to make them aware that something they have said or done has hurt you?
- How will speaking up affect your relationship with the person, especially if this is a family member, a co-worker, or your manager?
- If you *don't* respond, will that send a message that what has been said or done is acceptable?

That's a lot to think about before making a quick response, but it's likely you've been thinking about this for some time, especially if you've experienced a number of microaggressions at work.

If you are an observer, not the object of the microaggression, take your cues from the person you want to help. It can be offensive to speak for them if they'd prefer to speak for themselves. It might also put them at physical risk or possibly damage a work relationship if *you* speak up when *they* have chosen to let the incident slide.

On the other hand, saying nothing can give the impression that you support the offending behavior. One strategy is to *observe* what happens,

offer *support* if it seems to be wanted, and have a *conversation* afterward to find out how you can be helpful going forward.

Responding to Microaggressions

When You Are the Object of the Microaggression

Microaggressions typically happen quickly—so fast that you're often left wondering, "Did that really happen?" or "Did she really say that?" The best responses are in the moment, too, after a pause to collect yourself. You want to respond with a calm and diplomatic challenge—even with empathy and a smile if you are able. That can take planning and practice.

To get yourself ready for effective responses, keep one cardinal rule in mind: You want to criticize the microaggression, and not the microaggressor. Don't accuse the person of being racist, sexist, or homophobic. Instead, challenge what they have just said or done with a question or comment or by letting them know how it has made you feel. You want to draw attention to the bias behind the statement or action, but in a way that encourages reflection rather than provoking defensiveness or hostility.

Here are some examples of how you might do that, adapted from a more comprehensive list created by Dr. Diane Goodman, a social justice and diversity consultant. You may want to practice these responses ahead of time with a friend or family member, so they come to mind more easily when you need them:

Restate or paraphrase: "I think I heard you say _____ (paraphrase their comments). Is that correct?"

Ask for clarification: "Could you say more about what you mean by that?" "How have you come to think that?"

Focus on the impact, not the intent: "I'm sure you didn't mean it this way, but when you _____ (comment or behavior), it was



hurtful/offensive to me because _____.
If that ever comes up again, you might
_____ (different language or behavior).”

Share the impact on your feelings: “When you _____ (comment or behavior), I felt _____ (feeling), and I would like you to _____.”

Challenge the stereotype: “Actually, in my experience, _____.” Or “I think that’s a stereotype. I’ve learned that _____.”

You may not get the reaction you’re hoping for. The person may get defensive or they may want to laugh it off. Use your judgment as to whether this is an opportunity to have a deeper conversation. Whatever the outcome, accept it and move on. You are responding to a microaggression with a “microintervention,” not full-scale diversity training.

When You Are Called Out for Microaggression

Many microaggressions are made carelessly, without the intention of hurting someone. But it can be embarrassing to be caught exposing a bias or making a stereotyped generalization. If you are called out for a microaggression, try not to get defensive. Accept it as an opportunity to learn and see the world through another person’s eyes:

❖ **Listen to the person’s concerns.** Your statement or action was real, and so is the emotional reaction of the other person. Do your best to hear and understand that reaction. Don’t dismiss or make light of it.

❖ **Demonstrate that you have heard the other person.** Paraphrase the objection or ask questions to clarify it.

❖ **Apologize.** Do this once you are clear about what you’ve done that has caused an offense.

Don’t ask for forgiveness. That might be volunteered, but you might also need to *earn it* over time by showing more sensitive behavior.

❖ **Let it go and move on.** We all make mistakes. Accept this as a learning opportunity. Don’t make it a focus of your interactions with the other person.

When You Witness a Microaggression

If responding to a microaggression is tricky for the person who has been offended, it can be even trickier for an observer. You can play an important role as an ally and supporter, and you don’t want to give the impression that you condone the behavior by being a passive bystander.

But the timing of your response is important. If you are too quick or too direct in your response, you may be perceived as trying to take over the situation, which is another form of microaggression:

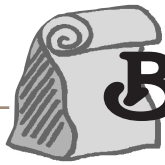
Use your judgment as to whether you need to say anything in the moment. Observe carefully how the person reacts. What you perceive as offensive may not be offensive at all to the person you are trying to help. Or the person may choose not to respond for reasons of their own.

Afterward, show yourself to be an ally in a private conversation with the person who was the object of the microaggression. Let them know that you noticed it and that it did not feel right to you. Ask how the person is doing. Then, ask how they might like you to be supportive in the future.

If you speak up, speak for yourself. You might say, “I find that language offensive and don’t want to hear it again in our workplace.” ■

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Take Care of Yourself FIRST



If you're feeling hurt, frustrated, or angry over microaggressions, take care of yourself first. It can be emotionally draining both to challenge microaggressions and to let them slide.

Focus on what you can control and accept what you can't. You *can't* control the biased thinking and behavior of other people, though you *can* choose to call attention to it on occasion. You can take care of yourself:

Make time to talk with friends and allies who understand what you are experiencing.

Microaggressions can make you feel like you don't belong. Friends and allies can remind you that you do. Talking things through with people who "get it" can help you cope. Good conversations give you strength, shore up your sense of self-worth, and help you come up with strategies for the future.

Take care of your physical health

Establish a routine with healthy sleep, exercise, and healthy eating habits. A

healthy body is the foundation for your emotional health.

Practice stress management.

Try meditation, deep breathing, or listening to calming music—whatever works for you. Take breaks to relax and counter the tension that can build up when you are feeling unwelcome and misunderstood.

Build pride in who you are.

Engage with others to build awareness of social injustice and work for change. Read about people like you who have succeeded in life and helped to make the world a better place. Seek out role models who make you proud to be who you are. Find a mentor who values you for who you are and can help lift you up. ■

Source: Morgan, H. (2020, June 24). Responding to microaggressions (C. Gregg-Meeker, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.