



*The Peace Center has been working throughout the tri-state region for close to forty years. We have implemented programming in hundreds of schools, organizations and workplaces, impacting more than 7,000 people annually. Our programs focus on creating physical, emotional, social and moral safety to transforming conflict, violence and racism, xenophobia, and address all intolerance.*

## **Microaggressions - Recognition and Response**

Microaggressions are incidents in which someone accidentally (or purposely) makes an offensive statement or asks an insensitive question. Microaggressions are defined as verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward members of oppressed or targeted groups including: people of color, women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBTQ+) persons, persons with disabilities, and religious minorities.

Because microaggressions are rooted in Implicit Bias as well as the assumptions and stereotypes so often aimed at BIPOC (*Black, Indigenous & People of Color*) communities, we also introduce this concept into our workshop. Bias and intolerance create a hostile environment for people who are marginalized. Often, however, the bias is unconscious, but it dictates policies and guidelines on how we operate, etc. When we come to better understand our own bias, we become much better at seeing them in others than in ourselves. Education can help those who wish to see their 'blind spots' and open opportunities to commit to improving the workplace environment and enhancing personal relationships.

As suggested by the name, microaggressions seem small; but compounded over time, they can have a deleterious impact on one's physical health, social and emotional well-being. Research suggests that subtle forms of interpersonal discrimination like microaggressions are *at least as* [harmful](#) as more-overt expressions of discrimination. In fact, the impact of such has been well researched and documented as occurring across individuals in many professions including the legal field. Note the following:

From a June 2015 American Bar Association Practice Points article entitled "Micro-aggressions from the Boardroom, Courtroom, to the Presidential Campaign."

With the current movement toward increasing diversity in the workplace, the existence of micro-aggressions may be largely unintentional, but the subtle byproduct of an integrated workforce where biases and prejudices may become internalized, and overt sexism is not politically correct. Micro-aggressions in the workplace come in many forms, including assaults, insults and invalidations, and exclusion. They exert influence on two levels: (1) by walling out the "different person" and (2) by making the person of difference less effective. For example, the seemingly benign behavior of ignoring a co-worker's comments, ignoring, or interrupting them in a staff meeting will have the effect of the "different" individual experiencing a feeling of being shut out of workplace culture or made to feel small and unimportant. Eventually, they silence themselves and stop contributing to the discussion, which results in management viewing them as incompetent or not a team player. This invalidation operates on one's self-confidence and self esteem.

It is also important for bystanders to micro-aggressive behavior to stand up for victims of micro-aggression when it is observed. Recognition and acknowledgement of the problem are keys to combating micro-aggression. Organizations must also create policies that allow the opportunity for victims of micro-aggressions to report such behavior openly without fear of retribution and to hold individuals accountable for their behavior.

### **Types of Microaggressions**

Columbia University professor Derald Wing Sue and colleagues first described three forms of microaggressions:

**Microassaults** are overt forms of discrimination in which actors deliberately behave in discriminatory ways, but do not intend to offend someone or may think that their actions are not noticed or harmful. These types of experiences are similar to the "old-fashioned" discrimination that existed in earlier times, but different in that people may not openly proclaim their biases. An example would include making a racial joke but denying one is prejudiced.

**Microinsults** are statements or behaviors in which individuals unintentionally or unconsciously communicate discriminatory messages to members of target groups. For example, a person might tell an Asian American that she or he "speaks good English" as a compliment. However, in reality, such a statement can be offensive to Asian Americans, implying that Asian persons do not speak clearly. Instances like these can be especially upsetting to Asian Americans who do not speak any other language besides English, or whose families have been in the US for several generations.

**Microinvalidations** are verbal statements that deny, negate, or undermine the realities of members of various target groups. For example, when a white person tells a person of color that racism does not exist, she or he is invalidating and denying the person of color's racial reality. Similarly, when

someone tells a woman that she is “being too sensitive,” or that an LGBT person “should stop complaining,” they invalidate the reality of discrimination in these people’s lives.

## **Common Microaggressions in the Workplace**

**'Is that your natural hair?'** Studies show that many women of color, especially black women, experience bias in the workplace related to the style and texture of their hair. For black women, the bias against natural hair results in **higher levels of anxiety** about their appearance. One in five black women feel socially pressured to straighten their hair for work, which is twice the rate for white women.

**'Looking past you'** Assuming that white individuals hold superior positions when in the company of one's peers.

**'Sorry, wrong person'** Confusing the names of individuals within the same ethnic minority group. Mistakes happen, but if you see this person often it is an indication of devaluing the relationship.

**'Mispronunciation of names'** Very common microaggression and often forgiven after a first or second offense. Continued practice indicates a devaluing of individuality.

**'Where are you really from?'** Asking someone about their ethnic heritage. This question presupposes that a person who looks “too ethnic” is inconsistent with being American.

**'You must be in the wrong room'** --this is the attorney meeting.' This assumes someone doesn't belong because they don't fit the preconceived image of a person in this profession.

**(Interrupting) 'Well, actually, I think...'** Men are nearly three times as likely to interrupt a woman than another man.

**'I don't see color'** This signals that the person doesn't acknowledge your Blackness or won't hold it against you

Referring to different targeted groups as **“you people”** is also a harmful microaggression.

Lesbians, gays, people with disabilities, blonde hair, or overweight, and religious groups are often the targets of jokes. These jokes can sometimes circulate through emails or in social settings.

These are only some examples of microaggressions in the workplace. Understanding what microaggressions are and how people communicate them can help others recognize them and correct their behavior.

### **Impact of microaggressions at work?**

A study appearing in the journal *Urban Education* reported that people who experience racial microaggressions have negative job satisfaction.

Offensive speech and microaggressions can affect productivity.

A hostile work environment may also undermine employees' safety.

People who experience microaggressions are at risk of mental and physical health issues, which can lead to absenteeism.

Undervalues individual contributions to organizations

Feelings of being undervalued from microaggressions may prevent people in targeted groups from:

- applying for jobs
- negotiating salaries
- striving for promotions

The impact of repeated microaggressions on individuals in targeted groups has been likened to receiving a thousand tiny cuts over a consistent period of time. This can put people at risk of physical and mental health problems, including:

- depression
- suicidal ideation
- drug and alcohol abuse

## **How to Respond**

The point of responding to microaggressions is to change people's actions and behaviors.

Generally, people can contemplate responding to microaggressions using a 3 step process:

1. **Did it really happen?** Begin by questioning whether the microaggression happened. Sometimes, a microaggression may be subtle, and a person needs to verify that they are a victim.
2. **To respond or not?** The individual needs to decide whether they should react. If the person's life is in danger, they must weigh the consequences of responding. If a microaggression occurs in the workplace, they may worry that a confrontation could affect their working relationships, especially with a superior. People may fear losing their job or getting into trouble if they say something.

If the microaggressor is a peer who has no control over your job, you can pull them to the side and kindly explain to them how their comment was offensive.

3. **How to respond?** Lastly, the person must decide how to respond if that is what they choose. People can respond to microaggressions in a passive-aggressive, proactive, or assertive way. Persons who are targeted must decide for themselves which response will work best for them. First and foremost, whatever response one chooses know that you are entitled to feel, angry, offended, etc. and express these feelings. Below are suggestions for how to respond:

- Ask for clarification - "Did I hear you say....?"
- Approach individual when you feel better prepared
- Direct confrontation in the moment
- Educate on message and harm created
- Seek support from trusted colleague
- Report to superior or HR

Ultimately, responding to microaggressions takes courage as it requires challenging the behaviors of others. Too often, the burden of responding to microaggressions and educating others often falls on the victims. This can cause further emotional harm to those experiencing microaggressions. It is critical that self-reflection and a willingness to be challenged by peers occurs, if creating a more equitable and responsive work space is the goal.