

Microaggressions

Recent racial justice events have brought topics like microaggressions into the forefront of media discussions and daily conversation. Topics like microaggressions can be difficult to discuss or even understand. However, it is important for all of us to be aware of how our words and our behavior affect those around us.

What are microaggressions?



Microaggressions are defined as the everyday verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.

What are some examples of microaggressions?

One of the biggest differences between microaggressions and overt discrimination is that people who commit microaggressions might not even be aware that their behavior is inappropriate. Here are some examples of common microaggressions to help you better understand and identify microaggressions in daily conversation.

What do
microaggressions
look like?

Saying, "You speak English really well" to a person who is non-white.

Telling someone that they "don't look like" his or her ethnicity.

Telling someone that he or she looks "exotic."

Crossing the street, clutching your bag when a black person or person of color approaches you.

Asking someone, "Where are you *actually* from?"

These comments and behaviors signal racial bias, even if it is not intended. Many people who commit microaggressions believe the intentions behind their words or actions are good. It is important to not react defensively, or immediately feel like a bad person if you have done or said something that is considered a microaggression. We are all human and make mistakes! Being aware of your biases and impact on people is a lifelong learning process.

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Why Microaggressions are Harmful



Biases, stereotypes and racism, even when unintentional, have real, harmful effects on the mental wellbeing of the victim of the discrimination.

Psychologists have studied the effects of being a victim of bias, and the findings are clear: perceiving or overtly experiencing discrimination can have damaging effects on work or academic performance.

One study conducted by Stanford University psychology professor Claude Steele, Ph.D. revealed that black people and women perform worse on academic tests when told stereotypes about race or gender prior to an exam. For example, women who heard stereotypes about women's poor math performance scored worse on math tests. Our words have a clear impact on those with whom we interact. While we might not personally understand exactly what it means to be a member of a marginalized group, we can certainly rely on our knowledge and our awareness of history and of the lived experiences of people of those groups in order to practice empathy.

The Neuroscience Behind Microaggressions

Microaggressions are learned biases that are reinforced by your environment. Our brain forms neural connections that are strengthened as we learn about the world around us. Biases can be unlearned, and we can weaken the unconscious neural connections in our brains by educating ourselves about microaggressions and rejecting the information that reinforce stereotypes.

Implicit bias training, also known as unconscious bias training, are programs that are designed to expose people to their implicit biases, provide tools to adjust automatic patterns of thinking, and ultimately eliminate discriminatory behaviors. Some studies have shown that implicit bias training can directly weaken the neural connections in our brain that reinforce biases.



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