

# Say What?—Understanding, Identifying, and Addressing Microaggressions

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## Lesson Goal

Participants will define “microaggressions” and apply the definition to everyday situations.

## Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Define the term “microaggression”
- Identify microaggressions in everyday situations
- Identify the importance of addressing microaggressions
- Learn how to avoid committing microaggressions
- Gain skills in addressing microaggressions

## Introduction

In recent years, the term “microaggression” has been popping up frequently in the popular media. It is a topic that sometimes comes up as part of discussions about race or gender inequalities, ageism, and the marginalization of various groups. But what exactly does the term mean and why is it important?

When people hear the term “aggression,” they often think

of hostile or violent behavior toward another person. This might conjure up images of physical violence such as hitting a person or destroying someone’s property. People might also think of verbal abuse such as name-calling and throwing insults to intentionally hurt others. In fact, aggression comes in many different forms. *Microaggressions* are brief and often unintended negative messages toward individuals based on their membership in a particular group (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity). Although oftentimes not intended to be hurtful, such statements can be insulting (aka “microinsults”) or make individuals feel that they are of less value than others (aka “microinvalidations”).

Before you proceed, here are some questions to think about:

- Have you experienced microaggressions in your life?
- If yes, what kinds?
- Where have you seen examples of microaggression? How about on TV or other platforms (e.g., reading about it on social media, etc.)?
- How are microaggressions different from other types of aggression?
- Why is it important to know about microaggressions?

## Why should we care about microaggressions?

If microaggressions are brief and subtle, why should we even care about them? Are we being overly sensitive and politically correct? Research shows that although seemingly minor, microaggressions can have serious cumulative effects on both the individual and the institutions to which they belong. In other words, over time the “small” effects can pile up and affect the person. They can also create a hostile environment at work, school, and other places.

Some examples of the cumulative effects of microaggressions:

- A woman of Asian descent born in the United States who is often asked where she is from and often complimented on her ability to speak English can eventually feel that she is an outsider in her own country of birth.
- A woman of color notices that each time she shops at the expensive grocery store in town at least one person clutches her purse closer to her body, making the woman of color feel more and more like she is unfairly treated and mistrusted.
- A teen identifying as transgender who often hears friends saying things like, “That’s so gay,” increasingly will feel excluded and rejected.

In addition to the impact of microaggressions on the victim, research shows that holding negative stereotypes and biases can have negative effects on the health of those who hold those biases. For example, individuals who hold racial stereotypes appear to have increased levels of stress hor-

mones when interacting with others against whom they have biases. These hormones are, in turn, linked to serious health outcomes such as heart disease. In other words, microaggressions and biases have real and serious consequences both for the people targeted and for those with the biases.

This community lesson includes exercises that can help you learn to identify and address microaggressions. Learning to identify microaggressions can help you be more aware of them and avoid committing them. The exercises also were developed to help you address or respond to microaggressions appropriately.

## Selected References

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### EXERCISE 1: THIS IS WHAT IT SAYS TO ME

What do microaggressions look like? In many ways, racism, ageism, sexism, and other “isms” are very hard to spot today. It has become unacceptable to use derogatory terms

## Scenarios

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What might be the underlying message?

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1. Jinny, who is 60 years old, is the instructor of a fitness class. When she walks into the exercise classroom, one student approaches her. Looking embarrassed, the student apologizes and says that she had mistakenly thought that this was the intermediate class and not “the easy one for older folks.”
  2. The local college has weekly lunch hour educational sessions. Dr. Jones, an expert in statistics, is the special guest at one of the sessions. A man in his 50s and a woman in her 30s walk into the room. The host comes over to shake the man’s hand and says, “Dr. Jones, such an honor for us to have you today.” This man then points to the woman and says, “This is actually Dr. Jones, I’m her assistant.”
  3. Bryan, age 10, is African American. His robotics project won top prize at the local contest. Several people say that they are especially proud because most minority kids are just into loud music and sports.
  4. A woman in her early 30s parks her luxury car in the parking lot. A passerby compliments her on the car, and then says, “Your husband must really love you to buy you such a nice ride!”
  5. Karen and Sheila travel together a lot for work. For religious reasons, Karen wears a hijab (veil). She notices that she often gets a more thorough checking at the airport, compared to Sheila.
  6. Mikael, an immigrant from the Ukraine, is a receptionist at a doctor’s office. A patient compliments him by saying, “I love meeting people like you. See . . . you are an immigrant but you are working here legally. Why can’t the illegals do just like you do?”
  7. Jon is a member of a crafts club. A friend says, “Why don’t you find a hobby that is less gay?”
  8. During a club meeting, duties are being assigned. The leader says jokingly that Rika, a Korean-American student, probably should be treasurer because Asians are good at math.
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toward people because of their gender, age, race, religion, and sexual orientation. *Microaggressions* are subtle and may even be intended as a compliment. Often, they are not intended to harm others but nonetheless communicate an underlying insult or message of exclusion. Read the scenarios below and try to spot the underlying message. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the characters and think about what the underlying message might be.

#### EXERCISE 2: THIS IS WHAT I SAY TO THAT . . .

How would you react to a microaggression that is directed at you? How would you react if you spot it but it is directed toward someone else? There are different ways to address microaggressions. How you react depends on your level of comfort and your own goals in the situation. Your response may also depend on your relationship with the person committing the microaggression. Try some of these strategies:

### Instructions

Review the strategies below. Using the scenarios chart from Exercise 1, either discuss or role play what happened in each scene and talk about how you would react using these three strategies:

#### STRATEGY 1

Ask an open-ended question to better understand where the speaker is coming from. Probe and have that person explain her or his side. In response to a comment or question, pause and probe. Use it as a teachable moment or a way to open up dialogue.

#### Example:

An African American woman is often complimented about being “articulate.” Although meant as a compliment, this makes her think that the underlying message is that the people giving the compliments were expecting less.

#### Possible responses:

- “Tell me why you were surprised when you heard me speak.”
- “You know, I get that a lot. Why do you think people are surprised that I am articulate?”

#### Example:

A person explains that he is an immigrant to the country and is now working as a school teacher. A colleague says, “Why can’t the illegals be more like you? You went through the legal way and you aren’t taking all our resources.”

#### Possible responses:

- “Could you tell me more about that?”
- “It seems you feel strongly about this issue, tell me more.”

#### STRATEGY 2

Be direct and say that you are not comfortable with the word said or statement made.

#### Example:

Someone says, “That is so retarded.”

#### Possible responses:

- “That term really makes me feel uncomfortable.”
- “I don’t think you should be using that word.”
- “That’s a pretty offensive word.”

#### STRATEGY 3

Coming up with a response right at the moment is difficult. One way to prepare for a difficult situation is to think of a word or phrase you can use to communicate that you are not in agreement with the speaker or actor, but you may not be ready to engage in a dialogue. For example, some people might say, “Sorry, I’m not all right with that,” or “Ouch,” or “Whoa,” or “Oooh . . . I don’t want to hear that.”

You may then engage in further dialogue, walk away, or not say anything else.