

Coping with Microaggressions

Objective

To identify the types of microaggressions and ways to cope.

What to Know

Microaggressions are brief verbal, behavioral, or situational actions and statements that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed or targeted groups. Microaggressions may demean a person's race, gender, weight, sexual orientation, religion, heritage, age, disability, or health status, for example. There are three **forms** of microaggressions:

- microassaults – overt discrimination where people deliberately behave in discriminatory ways; often unintentional; person believes their actions are not noticed or harmful
- microinsults – discriminatory statements or behaviors
- microinvalidations – verbal statements that deny, negate, or undermine

There are several **types** of microaggressions:

- assuming someone is a criminal
- exoticization or sexualization
- assuming others are intellectually or physically inferior
- pathologizing cultural values
- expecting traditional gender roles
- use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology
- discomfort or disapproval of LGBTQ+ experiences
- assumption of sexual pathology and abnormality
- endorsing religious stereotypes
- intersectionalism, which occurs because of a person's multiple groups and may influence the intensity or frequency of microaggressions

Examples of microaggressions include:

- treating someone poorly because of their sexual orientation.
- complimenting a person raised in the United States on their English simply because they are not white.
- telling a person with obesity they should eat less.
- making assumptions about someone based on their religion.
- underrepresenting different races, sexualities, and disabilities in the media.
- being unwilling to find derogatory sports team names offensive.

- using offensive terminology.
- considering certain people to be of more value than others based on their ethnicity, class, or sexuality.

Racial microaggressions are an insidious, pervasive form of racism that have a devastating impact on individuals and communities. Examples of racial microaggressions include:

- immediately serving a white person without checking who was there first.
- denying that racism exists.
- accusing others of being “too sensitive” when they are upset by microaggressions.
- saying, “The best person should get the job, regardless of race,” as this ignores structural and institutional racism.
- not speaking up when a colleague is a target of a microaggression.

While some people believe microaggressions are harmless, research has found that microaggressions negatively impact the mental and physical health of targeted groups. People who experience frequent microaggressions tend to be more depressed, anxious, and are more likely to abuse substances and exhibit trauma symptoms.

What can you do to effectively respond to microaggressions? Initially, you might question if a microaggression has occurred (i.e., “Did I hear her correctly when she made that comment?!”). Then, you might decide whether to act. If you act, there is a likely outcome (e.g., arguments, defensiveness, denial, or additional microaggressions). If you do not respond, you might feel regret, resentment, or sadness. The process of deciding how to respond can be stressful. You can use this three-step process when you experience a microaggression. Ask yourself:

1. What happened?

2. Should I respond? Consider the potential risks or consequences of responding. Ask yourself:

- If I respond, could my physical safety be in danger?
- If I respond, will the person become defensive, and will this lead to an argument?
- If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person?
- If I *don't* respond, will I regret not saying something?
- If I *don't* respond, does that communicate that I accept the behavior or statement?

3. How should I respond?

- approach the situation in a passive-aggressive manner
- react in a proactive way
- act in an assertive way
 - calmly state how the behavior made you feel
 - educate the person, describing what was offensive
 - use “I” statements (e.g., “I felt hurt when you said that.”), instead of attacking statements (e.g., “You’re a racist!”)
 - focus on the behavior, not the perpetrator

When the interaction is over, seek support. This can include:

- seeking practical support (e.g., if this occurs in the workplace, file a complaint with the human resources department).
- receiving social support.
- discussing your reactions with loved ones or a mental health professional.

What if you commit a microaggression? Everyone has done or said something that offended someone else. Sometimes you are aware, and other times it takes another person pointing it out to you.

If you are aware, you may have committed a microaggression, you can:

- admit it.
- learn from your wrongdoing.
- genuinely apologize.

There are things you can do to avoid microaggressions. Always attempt to:

- be aware of the language you use.
- notice subtle messages.
- educate yourself and others.

What to Do

What microaggressions have you experienced? Be specific.

How have these incidents affected you?

Thinking of the most recent experience, describe how you reacted. What happened? Who was involved?

Now, think about a microaggression that was particularly difficult to cope with. Use the three-step process described above.

1. Describe what happened. Be as detailed as possible.

2. Did you respond? _____ Were there risks or consequences? _____

Check off any that apply to this incident.

_____ I believed my physical safety was in danger.

_____ The person became defensive.

_____ Arguments or additional microaggressions occurred. Describe what happened.

_____ My relationship with this person was impacted. If yes, how? _____

If you did not respond to the microaggression, do you have regrets? _____ Why or why not?

Do you think you communicated to the other person that you found the behavior or statement acceptable? Why or why not?

Were you proactive or passive aggressive? Describe.

Could you have acted more assertively? Describe what you might have done differently.

Following the incident, did you seek support? If yes, with whom?

If you experience a microaggression in the future, who can support you?

Did this worksheet help you identify the types of microaggressions and ways to cope? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful).

What did you learn from this exercise?
