

Say What?—Understanding, Identifying, and Addressing Microaggressions

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Lesson Goal

Participants will have a deeper understanding of the concept of “microaggressions” and how to recognize and address them in everyday situations.

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, you 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

Instructions

Ask participants to read through their Participant Guide. Discuss the definition for “microaggression.” In the Participant Guide, *microaggressions* are defined as brief and often unintended negative messages toward individuals based on

their membership in a particular group (e.g., gender, age, and 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”).

Follow-up questions

- Can you share some examples of microaggressions that you have experienced?
- Where have you observed examples of microaggressions? This could be something you have seen (e.g., on TV) or read (e.g., on social media).
- How are microaggressions different from other types of aggression?
- Why is it important to know about microaggressions?

EXERCISE 1: THIS IS WHAT IT SAYS TO ME.

Participants can go through this activity alone, in pairs, or in groups. Ask participants to take a look at the chart and review each scenario. Ask them to reflect on what possible

underlying messages a person might glean from what is said or done. Think about why each scenario represents a micro-aggression.

Here is one example:

Kip, age 14, is of Chinese descent. He was born and raised in the United States. Yet, people he meets often ask where he is from and how old he was when he came to this country. They also praise him on how well he can speak English. He also notices that at school whenever issues around culture or Asia are discussed, the teachers call on him to give his opinion. A possible underlying message that Kip is receiving is that he is different and that he does not really belong to the mainstream culture.

Although there can be several answers to each of the scenarios in the chart, below are some possible responses:

1.	Older people cannot be physically strong. Older people cannot lead challenging classes.
2.	Females are not leaders or intelligent. Females can be assistants but not the main experts.
3.	African Americans do not excel in intellectual pursuits. They are only interested in entertainment activities.
4.	Young females cannot achieve things on their own. They are given things by males.
5.	People of certain religions are criminals and/or terrorists.
6.	Migrants prefer to come to this country illegally. Most migrants are here illegally.
7.	Being gay is negative. Certain activities are stereotyped as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender).
8.	The individual is an outsider. Stereotype of races.

If you have time, get together as a group and discuss the following questions:

- Which of the following scenarios, if any, resonates with you? Why?
- How can you apply what you have learned about micro-aggressions from this exercise into your daily lives?

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

This is an expansion of Exercise 1. Ask participants to review the strategies on how to respond to microaggressions. Ask them to go back to the scenarios in *Exercise 1: This is what it says to me* and discuss which of the strategies they would use for each scenario. Note that some people will grav-

itate toward certain strategies. For example, some people are more comfortable directly confronting others who are saying something that they find offensive. Others find themselves to be less confrontational and thus prefer other strategies. Participants might also have other ideas on how to address these issues.

If you have time, get together as a group and discuss the following questions:

- What strategies do you find to be most effective for you?
- Why do you think you pick some strategies over others?
- Can you think of other strategies?

Resource

The Southern Poverty Law Center has a project called “Teaching Tolerance” (www.tolerance.org), which provides numerous resources. One of its handbooks called “Speak Up!” provides many other strategies that you can use to respond to intolerant speech and microaggression. It can be downloaded for free at: http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/speak_up_handbook.pdf

Wrapping it up and discussing how to avoid committing microaggressions.

Ask participants to share with everyone in the group what they have learned from the lesson. If the group is big, participants can share in smaller groups of two or three. Share these tips on how to avoid committing microaggressions. Here are some suggestions in addition to what your participants might share:

TRY TO BE MINDFUL AND DON'T MINIMIZE THE EXPERIENCE.

Microaggressions may seem trivial but for the person who experiences them (especially if the microaggressions are repeated), it can be a big deal with serious consequences. Do not trivialize the experience by saying or thinking, “You’re too sensitive” or “It shouldn’t really be a big deal.”

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.

We all probably have committed these microaggressions in the past. And we probably will commit them in the future. If it is pointed out to you, reflect on what you said or did. It should not be a judgment of you, but a judgment of what you said or did. Try to understand where the other person is coming from and move forward from there.

LEARN MORE.

Educate yourself about other cultures and groups. Learn why certain actions or words evoke hurt or insult. For example, although it might seem that saying a person of color should actually be 100 percent happy when told, “You’re so articulate,” there is a history behind it. Try to understand why these words can actually hurt. Learning more about various groups can expand our knowledge and help us empathize with what people experience.

BE AN ADVOCATE.

Sometimes, the most important characters in a scenario are the bystanders—not those who are being aggressive or those who are the target. Bystanders can play a very important role in pointing out what is wrong in the situation. They can speak up or they can be silent.

FINALLY, RELAX AND BE CALM.

Whether you are the person who committed the microaggression or the person who spots it, recognize the situation and try to see things from the other person’s point of view. Try to use the situation as a way to grow.

Additional Resources

National Center for Cultural Competence houses numerous resources around the topic, <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/>

For a funny clip that highlights a microaggression, this three-minute clip titled “Where Are You From?” on YouTube is free: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>

A radio clip interview (audio and transcript) of Dr. Derald Sue, one of the most prominent experts on the topic, <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/03/298736678/microaggressions-be-careful-what-you-say>

Microaggressions in Everyday Life, a blog by Dr. David Rivera and Dr. Derald Wing Sue, is hosted on Psychology Today. Access is free and covers a wide range of issues around microaggressions: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life>