



Anti-Racism Action Guide: Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle slights, put-downs, or insults that marginalized groups experience through daily interactions with individuals who may be unaware that they have acted in an offensive or demeaning manner. Microaggressions are often the result of stereotypes or prejudices that are held by the majority group. Examples of microaggressions that are commonly experienced by Black individuals include:

Complimenting a Black person for being “so articulate” or “not sounding Black”

- *Insinuation*: “I didn’t expect a Black person to sound intelligent”
- *Underlying Stereotype*: Black people are less intelligent than White people

Assuming a Black person is a service worker rather than a customer or patron

- *Insinuation*: “I only expect Black people to be in low-status positions”
- *Underlying Prejudice*: Black people’s role is to serve White people

Clutching your bag or crossing the street when you walk past a Black person

- *Insinuation*: “I view you as a danger or a threat”
- *Underlying Stereotype*: Black people are criminals

Research shows that chronic exposure to microaggressions impacts the physical and psychological well-being of marginalized groups. However, microaggressions are subtle enough that they often go unnoticed to those who are not affected (e.g., White or other non-Black individuals). This is important because individuals in the majority group are often better positioned to “call out” microaggressions, as their voice holds more power. However, even when a microaggression does get recognized, people are often unsure how to respond in the moment. This anti-racism action guide includes a series of tips for recognizing and responding to microaggressions, with a focus on those related to anti-Black racism, along with a list of pertinent resources.

TIPS: WHEN YOU OBSERVE OR EXPERIENCE A MICROAGGRESSION

Step 1: Recognize that a Microaggression Has Occurred

- Educate yourself on racial stereotypes that lead to microaggressions
- Read the relevant literature so you can be aware of and sensitive to common microaggressions
- Have conversations with your Black friends and colleagues about comments and behaviors they perceive to be microaggressions

Step 2: Determine Whether to Respond

- Assess the situation:
 - *If I respond, could my physical safety be in danger?*
 - *If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person?*
 - *If you are part of the majority group: Am I in a better position to respond to this, compared to a member of the marginalized group? Will there be fewer consequences for me?*
 - *If I respond, will the person become defensive and will this lead to an argument?*
 - *If I don't respond, will I regret not saying something?*
 - *If I don't respond, does that convey that I accept the behavior or statement?*
- Identify what you are trying to accomplish:
 - *Am I trying to model for others that these comments/behaviors are inappropriate?*
 - *Am I interested in educating the person about microaggressions, so they know their comment/behavior was wrong?*
 - *Am I trying to confront the person because they were making an intentional slight?*
- Consider where and when you could address the microaggression:
 - *If I address the comment/behavior in public, will this lead to defensiveness or a backlash?*
 - *Would it be better to address the comment/behavior now, as a model for others, or to raise the issue later when the person may be more receptive?*

Step 3: Apply Helpful Tactics

- Ask for more clarification
 - Examples:
 - “Could you say more about what you mean by that?”
 - “How have you come to think that?”
 - Why is this helpful?
 - Asking the individual to explain their comment/behavior is likely to lead them to the insinuation, which is based on stereotypes and/or prejudices
- Focus on the impact rather than the intent
 - Example:
 - “I know you didn't realize this, but when you ____ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because ____.”
 - Why is this helpful?
 - The microaggression was probably unintentional, and even if it was intentional you can't prove that. Instead, focus on the impact of the comment/behavior; help the individual understand what happened and how it was hurtful or offensive
- Share your own process

- Example:
 - “I noticed that you ____ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned ____.”
- Why is this helpful?
 - Aligning yourself with the individual helps them feel less attacked, so they are less likely to get defensive and are more likely to be receptive to your message
- Focus on the comment/behavior, rather than the person
 - Example:
 - “Your ____ (comment/behavior) was hurtful...”, rather than, “You are being racist...”
 - Why is this helpful?
 - Comments/behaviors can be addressed and modified directly; racism is much more complicated, and if the person perceives that you are calling them a racist, the conversation will likely end there

TIPS: WHEN YOU RECEIVE FEEDBACK THAT YOU PERFORMED A MICROAGGRESSION

In addition to situations where you observe or experience a microaggression, there may also be times where you inadvertently perform a microaggression. If someone approaches you with concern about one of your comments or behaviors, the following tips may be useful.

Check in with Yourself

- Notice if feelings of defensiveness come up
 - Acknowledge these emotions, without letting them guide your actions
- Remind yourself that microaggressions are about actions, not intentions
 - Keep in mind that no one is completely racist or completely anti-racist; you may have performed a microaggression, even if you identify as an anti-racist ally

Listen

- Do your best to understand the impact you had on someone, rather than focusing on the intention behind your comment/behavior (e.g., “I was only joking”)

Acknowledge the Microaggression

- Acknowledge verbally that the person’s feelings are valid
- Acknowledge verbally that your comment/behavior had a negative impact, even though it wasn’t your intention

Apologize

- Apologize for the impact of your comment/behavior
- Remind yourself that the goal of your apology is to communicate that you acknowledge your mistake, not to receive forgiveness

- You may not receive reassurance, and that's okay

Practice Self-Compassion

- Remember that all humans make mistakes and acknowledging these mistakes is really difficult; if you were able to listen, acknowledge, and apologize for your comment/behavior, you handled this in the best way you could

RESOURCES

This action guide combined and modified information from many of the resources below. For more information on what microaggressions are, how they are harmful, and ways to address them, please refer to the following resources.

How to Respond to Microaggressions

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/smarter-living/how-to-respond-to-microaggressions.html>

A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions

[https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/ELAMICRO%20A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions.pdf](https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/ELAMICRO%20A%20Guide%20to%20Responding%20to%20Microaggressions.pdf)

Dear Anti-Racist Allies: Here's How to Respond to Microaggressions

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/05/health/racial-microaggressions-examples-responses-wellness/index.html>

This Is the Right Way to Respond to Microaggressions at Work

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-respond-microaggressions-at-work>

Allies and Microaggressions

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/04/13/how-be-ally-someone-experiencing-microaggressions-essay>

Everything You Need to Know About Microaggressions

<https://www.oprahmag.com/life/relationships-love/a26294696/what-is-microaggression/>

Microaggressions Are A Big Deal: How To Talk Them Out & When To Walk Away

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away>

Microresistance and Ally Development: Powerful Antidotes to Microaggressions

<https://www.unomaha.edu/faculty-support/teaching-excellence/microaggressions-handout.pdf>

Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders

<https://engineering.purdue.edu/Engr/People/faculty-retention-success/Files/Racial-Microaggressions.pdf>