

Tip Sheet – How to Address Microaggressions

What is a microaggression?

From an article in *Perspectives on Medical Education*, “The term microaggressions refers to ‘everyday subtle put-downs directed towards a marginalized group which may be verbal or non-verbal and are typically automatic’. Microaggressions send disparaging messages to individuals because of their perceived group membership. Often the perpetrators of microaggressions are not aware of their actions.” Microaggression is a term that was popularized by Dr. Derald Wing Sue, a professor at Columbia University.

Some scholars have suggested moving away from the term ‘microaggression’ due to the fact that the word ‘micro’ implies these are minor or less harmful acts. **Research has shown** that ‘microaggressions’ are just as harmful to people as overt acts of discrimination.

What is an example of a microaggression?

This could look like: assuming a racialized person is janitorial or housekeeping staff, assuming that women physicians are nurses, or assuming that Black or racialized people are foreign-born.

For example, if someone asked an Asian person where they are from and they respond, “Halifax,” and the person then asks, “No, where are you really from?,” that would be an example of a microaggression.

What should I do if I hear someone saying something discriminatory?

We’ve all been in a situation where someone says something that stereotypes a person or discriminates against a group of people and sometimes, we aren’t sure what the best response is. Only respond if you feel safe to do so, and try not to put someone on the spot, or “call them out.” Take them aside for a conversation if possible at an appropriate time, and try one of the strategies listed below. (Content adapted from: *Microaggression in the healthcare setting, Ehie et al, 2021*).

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Reflect back: “I heard you say _____, can you explain what you mean by that?”

Communicate impact: “Using words like _____ makes me uncomfortable.”

Raise awareness: “I believe a more inclusive term is _____.”

Re-affirm boundaries: “We do not tolerate that kind of language, and I ask that everyone speak with respect.”

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