

# Did you really just say that?

Here's advice on how to confront microaggressions, whether you're a target, bystander or perpetrator

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"Can I touch your hair?"

"That's so gay."

"You'd be pretty if you lost some weight."

**Microaggressions**—the brief statements or behaviors that, intentionally or not, communicate a negative message about a non-dominant group—are everyday occurrences for many people. In a study published in *Educational Researcher* in 2015, for example, psychologist Carola Suárez-Orozco, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles, observed microaggressions in almost a third of the 60 community college classrooms she and her team studied, most committed by instructors.

"No one is immune from inheriting racial, gender and sexual orientation biases," says Derald Wing Sue, PhD, a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College of Columbia University, who studies multicultural counseling and racism. "Everyone, including marginalized group members, harbors biases and prejudices and can act in discriminatory and hurtful ways toward others."

The fact that microaggressions are often subtle can make them harder to shake off than more overt forms of discrimination, says psychologist Dorainne J. Levy, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow at Indiana University's Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society.

"There's uncertainty about whether or not your experience was due to your race, for example, or due to something unrelated, such as the other person being in a bad mood or having a bad day," says Levy, a visiting assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences. "That uncertainty is distressing."

It can also "consume cognitive resources" as you try to figure out what just happened. In a 2016 literature review in *American Psychologist*, she and co-authors found that the increase in stress hormones and sleep disruptions elicited by race-based stressors may even contribute to the achievement gap between white and minority students.

Given the ubiquity of microaggressions and the harm they cause, how can you help stop them? Here's advice, whether you're the target, a bystander or the perpetrator.

## When you're the target

**Consider the context.** If the person committing the microaggression is someone you don't care about maintaining a relationship with, respond however you see fit if it seems safe to do so, says NiCole Buchanan, PhD, an associate professor of psychology who leads workshops on microaggressions at Michigan State University and beyond. But if the microaggressor is someone closely connected to you, you don't want to burn bridges by being overly blunt. Keep the initial conversation short and schedule a time to talk about it later to give the other person time to think things over, Buchanan suggests. Since such confrontations can be nerve-wracking, she says, plan what you want to say and practice with friends.

Of course, you can also choose not to respond, says Mengchun Chiang, PhD, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at William James College in Newton, Massachusetts. Maybe you don't want to confront

antagonistic people who may become angry or supervisors who could retaliate against you, she points out. If you decide to confront someone despite worries about repercussions, document it and have witnesses.

**Take care of yourself.** Microaggressions can be shocking and make you think you don't belong, says Levy. Fight those feelings by talking things over with peers who are members of the same group you are, she says. "A big part of social support is having your experiences validated," she says. It's also important to cultivate a positive sense of belonging to your group, says Levy, suggesting that individuals expose themselves to role models, books and other resources. It's also important to practice healthy sleep habits and other self-care strategies, such as mindfulness meditation.

**Don't be fooled by microaggressions packaged as opportunities.** When a particular group isn't well-represented on campus, at work or anywhere else, well-intentioned authorities may keep turning to the same members of that group to speak on panels, serve on committees or mentor other members of their group, thereby overloading the minority students or staffers with all the minority-related work. While these opportunities can feel good to begin with, it's easy to become overwhelmed, says Chesleigh Keene, a Navajo doctoral student in counseling psychology at the University of Denver. Ethnic minority students, she points out, often have fewer resources than other students when it comes to money, mentors and other factors, yet may be asked to take on these extra responsibilities.

To help stop such microaggressions, those in power should take it upon themselves to learn about the diversity of their students and staff and to learn more about them than their ethnic identity, Keene recommends. "By spending more time with under-represented students and staff to discuss personal interests, hobbies and, of course, professional trajectories, administrators and faculty can further reinforce a respectful and inclusive environment," she says.

It's also important for students and early career professionals to get comfortable with saying no, says Keene. Although declining opportunities can be scary, especially for people just building their careers, Keene suggests that students and early career professionals express thanks for the opportunity while explaining that the tasks don't fit their schedules or current priorities. Keene also suggests that they might add that they'd be delighted to participate in future opportunities focused on particular topics—a positive way to decline participation while helping to ensure that future offers align with one's research and clinical interests.

## When you're a bystander

**Be an ally.** "It's really important for allies to know that sometimes their voices can be heard even more powerfully than those of the people directly affected by microaggressions," says Nadal. When the targets of microaggression complain, the microaggressor may dismiss them as biased or over-sensitive, he says.

**Speak for yourself.** Don't try to speak on behalf of the person who has experienced the microaggression since doing so can itself be a form of microaggression, says Nadal. "I don't think people should ever speak on behalf of others, especially for historically marginalized groups," he says. "Having someone speak on their behalf can be unintentionally dehumanizing." Instead of saying, "You hurt her feelings," he suggests, say, "Here's why I'm offended, upset or hurt."

## When you're the microaggressor

Even those of us with the best intentions can inadvertently commit microaggressions, says Vincenzo G. Teran, PsyD, president of the Clinical Psychology of Ethnic Minorities Section of APA's Div. 12 (Society of Clinical Psychology) and a psychologist at Cambridge Health Alliance/Harvard Medical School.

"Committing a microaggression is not indicative that we're bad people," says Teran. "It's more indicative of a society where the dominant world view tends to be Eurocentric, masculine and heterosexual."

Even people who are members of marginalized groups themselves can hurt members of other marginalized groups, says Sue. "Because people of color, for example, don't wield power and privilege, the insults and invalidations they deliver to others are technically not considered microaggressions but expressions of implicit bias," he adds. "On an individual level, nevertheless, they are equally harmful." An African-American lesbian, for instance, might succumb to a common microaggression against people with disabilities. People often assume that people with disabilities are disabled in all aspects of life functioning, Sue points out, which can lead to such scenarios as people raising their voices when speaking to a blind person as if they're also deaf.

What should you do if someone accuses you of a microaggression?

**Try not to be defensive**, says Teran. Take stock of your feelings, thoughts and behaviors, whether it's fear of appearing racist, anger about being confronted or attempts to minimize the situation. "Keep in mind that the person is taking a risk in sharing this information," he says.

**Acknowledge the other person's hurt, apologize and reflect** on where the microaggression came from and how you can avoid similar mistakes in the future. Then take responsibility for increasing your understanding of your own privileges and prejudices, Teran says.

Whatever you do, don't fool yourself that you are not doing harm, adds Buchanan. "It's death by a thousand cuts," she says. "All these seemingly small events accumulate over time and can leave you just as bloody as if someone had stabbed you."

## Additional reading

**Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues About Race**  
Sue, D.W., 2016

**Microaggressions Toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Genderqueer People: A Review of the Literature**  
Nadal, K.L., et al. *Journal of Sex Research*, 2016

**"That's So Gay!" Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community**  
Nadal, K.L., 2013