

## **Recognizing and Addressing Common Microaggressions in the Learning Environment**

**Microaggressions** are brief, commonplace slights/insults that can be verbal, behavioral or environmental. They are often automatic and unintentional and trigger a sense of subordination based on a social identity (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability).

Microaggressions typically perpetuate a worldview of White supremacy and superiority. They can be overt (using racist language to refer to a racialized group) or implicit (being surprised by someone’s career ambitions or academic success). Microaggressions can impact student well-being and lead to worse health outcomes.

This resource utilizes the [\*‘Flip the Script’\*](#) framework to help faculty:

- 1) Recognize common examples of microaggressions
- 2) Identify the underlying meaning of common microaggressions
- 3) Develop strategies to address microaggressions when they occur

The strategies here serve as a guide for faculty when responding as a third party after a microaggression has occurred.

### **Microassaults**

Microassaults are microaggressions which are deliberate and explicit. Their intention is to hurt, oppress, or discriminate.

<b>What People Do</b>	<b>How it’s Discriminating</b>	<b>What to Do Instead</b>
Deliberately picking on a White student before a student of color	Racism is defined as the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produce and normalize racial inequities. Picking one student over another simply based on the color of their skin is an overt form of racism and promotes racial inequity.	<p><i>Use strategic questioning</i></p> <p>“Let’s consider the impact of calling on specific students over others” or “we need all students to participate and should ensure they are all called on”</p> <p>You can also remind them of relevant rules or policies</p>

<b>What People Say</b>	<b>How it’s Hurtful</b>	<b>What to Do Instead</b>
“You people” or “all the (insert pluralized form of racial group, eg. Blacks)”	This language over-simplifies classification and groups people based on the color of their skin. It perpetuates stereotypes and indicates that people are not individuals, but rather defined by a singular factor.	<p><i>Describe impact</i></p> <p>“I felt (feeling) when you (comment or behavior) and it (impact)”</p>

## **Microinsults**

*Microinsults are not intentional and typically occur due to underlying biases. They convey insensitivity or demean an individual's identity.*

<b>What People Say</b>  “Where are your ancestors from?” or “your English is so good!”	<b>How it's Insensitive</b>  This makes people feel like an alien in their own land and sends the message that they don't belong here (e.g., you aren't American) or that they shouldn't have good English, which is why it is so surprising.	<b>How to Respond</b>  <i>Ask the speaker to elaborate</i> “Can you elaborate on that point?” or “Tell me more about why you ask?”
<b>What People Say</b>  “All (group) are good at math” or “you people are always good at...”	<b>How it's Demeaning</b>  This attributes a certain skill (math in this example) to a specific cause (in this case the racial identity of an individual). It can make people feel like second-class citizens and a lesser being.	<b>How to Respond</b>  <i>Challenge the stereotype</i> “Actually, in my experience...” or “I think that's a stereotype”
<b>What People Say</b>  “You're so eloquent, well-spoken, articulate” or “I would have never guessed you were a medical student!” or “you don't sound Black”	<b>How it's Offensive</b>  This is known as ascription of intelligence, as if to say it's unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. It may seem like a compliment, but it usually implies that someone didn't expect intelligence from a person of color.	<b>How to Respond</b>  <i>Reframe</i> “I know that was meant as a compliment, but unfortunately it connects to the history of people being surprised that Black people speak so well”
<b>What People Say</b>  “If everyone works hard, they can succeed”	<b>How it's Disfranchising</b>  This ignores issues of structural racism that hinder socioeconomic progress, and blames individuals who have been discriminated against by systemic racism.. Known as the myth of meritocracy, it implies that people of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.	<b>How to Respond</b>  <i>Paraphrase and reflect</i> “What I hear is that you believe everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough. Can you give me some examples?”

## **Microinvalidations**

*Microinvalidations exclude, negate, or undermine an individuals' thoughts or feelings.*

<b>What People Say</b>	<b>How it's Invalidating</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
"I don't see color" or "I'm color blind" or "I'm not a racist" or "When I look at you I don't see color"	Color blindness denies a person of color's racial/ethnic experience. It invalidates the person of color's racial reality and the systemic racism underlying society. The intention is often meant to be inclusive, but it removes the reality of how color and identity impact how people of color experience the world around them.	<i>Redirect</i> "So you don't see color/race/racism; tell me more about your perspective. Others can weigh in as well."

<b>What People Say</b>	<b>How it's Undermining</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
"I can't be racist, my best friend is Black" or "(group) people are racist too"	These statements are a denial of individual racism and equates racism with prejudice. It is making oneself immune because they have friends of color or because another group is racist.	<i>Role model</i> "I noticed that you said...I used to say that too, but then I learned..."

<b>What People Say</b>	<b>How it's Negating</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
"That happened to me too" or "as a (e.g. woman) I know what you go through"	These statements also deny individual racism, indicating that racial oppression is not different than (gender, in this case) oppression.	<i>Use strategic questions</i> "Tell me more; I'm not sure how what you just said honors the individual experience of our colleague"

<b>What People Say</b>	<b>How it's Invalidating</b>	<b>How to Respond</b>
"Just calm down" or "you're overreacting" or "why are you so sensitive" or "if you said it more civilly, people would listen" or "I think you took it the wrong way"	These statements pathologize cultural values and communication styles. They can invalidate an individual's feelings and aim to reassign blame.	<i>Paraphrase/Reflect</i> "It appears you were uncomfortable when (person) said that. How can we honor all styles of communication or expression?"

## **General Tips for Addressing Microaggressions**

- Separate the person from the action or behavior; assume offense was not the intent
- Instead of saying “you’re racist”, try saying “that could be perceived as a racist remark.” Avoid putting people on the defensive as an initial strategy and try to explain how the slight/insult may be interpreted by others.
- Ask follow-up questions. Try to avoid starting questions with “why” as it is more likely to put people on the defensive. Consider starting with “how”, “who”, “what”.
- Make the invisible, visible; help people become more aware by engaging in discussion rather than accusing.
- Acknowledge how someone is feeling (angry, frustrated, etc.); show empathy and compassion
- Actively listen; be cognizant of your eye contact, body language and posture
- Disarm the microaggression when able; steer the conversation away from the problematic statement and make clear that is offensive

## **References**

1. [How to Respond to Microaggressions](#)
2. [A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions](#)
3. [Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice](#)
4. [The Impact of Microaggressions - An Introductory Training](#)
5. [Here’s How to Respond to Microaggressions](#)
6. [Microaggressions and micro-affirmations](#)
7. [Responding to Microaggressions and Bias](#)
8. [Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions](#)