

# What is Racism and What are Microaggressions? Let's Find Out!



## What is Racism and What are Microaggressions?

“Racism” is the mistreatment of others due to the colour of their skin. In other words, racism is defined as the prejudice, oppression, and discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior. Racism can take on many different forms and is not always easy to recognize. In some situations, it can be hidden through the language people use to disguise their beliefs. This is referred to as a microaggression.

Microaggressions are the indirect, subtle and, sometimes, unintentional phrases people use to discriminate against others. An example of a microaggression could be to ask a person of colour where they “*really come from*” despite being born in the same country.

### Key Messages

Racial microaggressions are subtle verbal, behavioural, or environmental signals that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial insults towards people of colour. They are so pervasive and unconscious in everyday interactions that they are often dismissed and seen as being innocent. Microaggressions contribute to racial bias and make life harder for racialized communities. Recognizing microaggressions can be hard, but it becomes easier once you understand it. For example, you might hear a non-racialized person say, “you are so articulate” to a person of colour. While this may sound like a compliment, the reality is the perpetrator has assigned a lower level of intelligence to the person of color, based on their race, and they are surprised to be incorrect. You may also see a white person clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Brown person passes by. This infers that a person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race. At the end of the day, racism impacts mental health in a variety of ways, and it may cause or worsen mental health conditions. Seeking support from people who understand what it is like to experience racism may help you learn about racism, what it looks like, and how you can contribute to reducing its impact in our communities.

### Resources

For more information on racism, or if you would like support, please visit:

- [Experiences Canada: Anti-Racism Resources](#)
- [Ontario Federation of Labour: Resource List](#)
- [Free Counselling at CounsellingConnect.org](#)
- [Anti-Racism: Engage Ottawa](#)

## Activity 1: The Meaning of Terms

### Goal

- To define, identify and understand racism and terms associated with it.

### Messages

- Racism is a public health issue experienced worldwide.
- Canada's Indigenous populations and communities of different racial backgrounds report experiences of discrimination related to their race, culture, and ethnicity.
- The words you use can be powerful, so it is important to understand the meanings of the things you say.
- By continuously educating yourself and understanding more about the topic, you can apply what you have learned to future discussions.

### Time

- 10-20 minutes.

### Supplies

- *HaveTHATtalk* video: "[What is Racism?](#)"
- Pencils, pens, or markers.
- Print one worksheet for each participant.
- For more information on racism and its impact, visit the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, [Let's Talk Racism and Health Equity](#).

### Activity

1. View the *HaveTHATtalk* video: "[What is Racism?](#)"
2. Listed below are terms from the video and their definitions.
3. Match each term to its definition. Write the correct term from the word bank in the space provided.

### Answer Key:

1. **Racism:** Prejudice, oppression, or discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.
2. **Explicit/Conscious bias:** Attitudes and beliefs we have about a person, or group of people, on a conscious level.
3. **Assumption:** A thought or belief accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.
4. **Oppression:** The exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner.
5. **Prejudice:** An unfavorable opinion or feeling formed without knowledge, thought, or reason.
6. **Discrimination:** The practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from others.
7. **Implicit/Unconscious bias:** Negative assumptions about people from different races that are held unconsciously or without realizing.

8. **White Privilege**: Unearned, mostly unacknowledged social advantage white people have over other racial groups simply because they are white.

9. **Systemic racism**: A form of racism embedded in the laws and policies of a society or an organization. This results in or supports a continued unfair advantage to some, and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race.

## Worksheet: The Meaning of Terms

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Prejudice, oppression, or discrimination directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Attitudes and beliefs we have about a person, or group of people, on a conscious level.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ A thought or belief accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ An unfavorable opinion or feeling formed without knowledge, thought, or reason.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from others.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Negative assumptions about people from different races that are held unconsciously or without realizing.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Unearned, mostly unacknowledged social advantage white people have over other racial groups simply because they are white.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ A form of racism embedded in the laws and policies of a society or an organization. This results in or supports a continued unfair advantage to some, and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race.

### Word Bank

a. Racism	b. Systemic Racism	c. Prejudice
d. Implicit/Unconscious bias	e. White Privilege	f. Discrimination
g. Explicit/Conscious bias	h. Assumption	i. Oppression

## Activity 2: What Would You Do?

### Goals

- To identify racist phrases or behaviours.
- To re-evaluate our own actions and how they might affect others (e.g., colleagues, peers, family members).

### Messages

- Our words and actions can have a negative impact on the feelings and thoughts of others.
- Be respectful to other culture and language. We are all different, and that is ok.
- Do not encourage stereotypes. They cause a person to be judged as a group rather than as a person.
- Intervene if you must. Inappropriate behaviour should be gently corrected. Let people know what they said or did is not ok.
- Speak up and show support to others. Ask the person being targeted if they feel ok.

### Time

20-30 minutes.

### Supplies

- *HaveTHATtalk* video: "[What is Racism?](#)"
- Print copies of the "scenarios" section for everyone to read.

### Activity

1. Have the group read out the 3 scenarios below. Depending on the group, you can choose to have people take turns reading each scenario out loud or have them read independently at their own pace.
2. Ask these questions to the group:
  - a. What is the main problem with each scenario? What happened? What was said? What impact did these words have on the main person in each scenario?
  - b. Do you consider these statements or attitudes to be harmless or harmful? Do you understand why other people might consider these statements hurtful? What long term effects do these words have on each character?
  - c. If you were in the place of the person, what might you say or feel? What would you do if you watched this interaction play out in front of you?
  - d. It is possible that people in the group have already experienced incidents where they have been discriminated against based on their appearance or culture. Ask the group to think of possible interventions to the discriminatory words in the scenarios.

3. Complete the activity by reminding the group to take care of their own mental health, and that the words we use can hurt others. If group members are distressed by the activity, refer them to OPH's [Mental Health and Substance Use Resources page](#).

## Scenarios

1. Aaron is not served when dining out with his friends.

Aaron is a black man who is at a restaurant with his friends. Upon his arrival, he is not greeted and is promptly told to sit on the side until a table is ready. When Aaron looks into the dining area, he sees that the restaurant is empty, but complies. As Aaron and his friends are waiting, another family walks in for lunch. They are immediately welcomed and despite not having a reservation, are seated. When Aaron asks the hostess why the family was served before him, he is ignored. Aaron is confused and upset and does not understand why this is happening to him.

2. Anisa is criticized for her English.

Anisa is a newcomer in Canada. Her family immigrated recently, and she is still learning English. Anisa is more comfortable speaking Arabic, but she is trying to speak English among her colleagues. She notices they tend to exclude her in conversations or ignore her. She asks one of her coworkers privately why she is being ignored. Her colleague tells her politely although they all like her, they find her accent difficult to understand. Anisa is embarrassed and feels less encouraged to speak in front of her peers.

3. Lucy has good grades

Lucy is South Korean and is at the top of her class. She's very proud about this, until someone in her class says, "must be nice to have good Asian genes." Lucy is confused and asks, "what do you mean?" Her classmate responds "I'm saying that the only reason why you got good grades is because you're Chinese. Some of us need to actually work hard to get good grades, unlike you." Lucy is very upset because she was misidentified and told her grades were because of her ethnicity. Lucy does not know if telling someone would make the situation better or worse. She starts to believe that her efforts in school are meaningless and her self-esteem deteriorates.

## Possible Participant Answers

1. Aaron's lunch:
  - a. The main problem is Aaron was not served and rudely ignored because he is black.
  - b. Some participants may find the hostess's behaviour to be offensive.
    - i. Aaron is being treated differently because of his race, which is not okay.
    - ii. Despite being told all other tables were reserved, clients that came in after him were immediately seated. This is unfair treatment and is indicative of discrimination

- iii. This makes Aaron feel helpless and he struggles with understanding why this happened and why he is treated differently.
- c. Possible responses in the scenario:
  - i. Aaron and his friends can ask to speak with the manager.
  - ii. They can let others in the restaurant know what happened.
  - iii. The participants may say if they were present, they may want to join Aaron and his friends in leaving or complaining.
  - iv. They could tell the hostess she is making people uncomfortable by being racially discriminatory.
  - v. They would ask Aaron and his group if they feel ok.
  - vi. They could leave a review online about their experience with this restaurant.

## 2. Anisa's English

- a. The main problem is that the coworkers are excluding Anisa for not being fluent in English. Anisa has started to speak less often and continued to be isolated at the workplace.
- b. Some coworkers may find the comments and behaviour harmful as she was being excluded due to her accent.
  - i. What her coworker said to her is hurtful. It is difficult to change your accent or the way you talk.
  - ii. Anisa might start to speak less often or stop trying to speak English.
  - iii. Anisa will start to feel isolated at work, which will impact her mental health and productivity.
- c. Possible responses:
  - i. The participants might say the coworkers were being unfair and discriminatory as Anisa cannot control her accent and is trying her best.
  - ii. They may say if they were in the situation, they would explain that Anisa is still learning English, and should not be excluded.
  - iii. Participants may support Anisa by being her friend at work and asking if she feels ok.
- d. If the group members feel comfortable, they may share if they have experienced a similar incident.
  - i. They might want to tell the coworkers if they were in Anisa's situation, being excluded would not be a good feeling.
  - ii. They could report this behaviour to their manager or supervisor.
  - iii. They could encourage Anisa to keep trying to learn English, and her accent is not funny or weird.

3. Lucy gets stereotyped:
  - a. The main problem is Lucy was stereotyped by her peers, which resulted in her feeling worse about herself. It was implied she had good grades because of her ethnicity and not her own hard work. Lucy started to doubt her own abilities. Lucy was also called Chinese despite being South Korean.
  - b. Make sure the group understands that what may be harmless to one person might be harmful to another.
    - i. Participants might say what was said was harmful as it encourages the stereotype that Asians are naturally smart, which can minimize the student's efforts.
    - ii. Other participants might say this statement is not harmful as Lucy was said to have "smart genetics" and that this is a good thing. It is important to explain while it is good to think of someone being intelligent, it is not okay to minimize their hard work based on racial stereotypes.
    - iii. Other participants may say these statements are harmful as she was racially misidentified.
    - iv. Lucy will have worse self-esteem as she believes her efforts in school are meaningless and do not matter.
  - c. Possible Responses:
    - i. Some participants might want to tell Lucy's peers what they said was a stereotype. Even if it is a "positive" stereotype, it is still harmful to act like they are facts.
    - ii. They might want to say Lucy's grades are from her own hard work.
  - d. If the group members feel comfortable, they may share if they have experienced a similar incident.
    - i. They might tell the classmates if they were in Lucy's position of being stereotyped, it would not feel good. Stereotypes can affect people differently.
    - ii. They could encourage Lucy that her grades were from her own hard work and not her genetics or ethnicity.

### Remember

What you say can significantly impact on someone's feelings. Speak with compassion and care. Avoid perpetuating stereotypes, both negative and positive. Support those around you and learn to examine your own biases.

## Activity 3: Reflecting on Microaggressions

### Goal

- To identify what microaggressions are.
- To better understand why microaggressions can be harmful.
- To help participants identify how they can respond to experiences of microaggressions.

### Messages

- Learn how to identify and respond to acts of microaggression.
- Being aware of microaggressions can help you label and validate your experiences.
- Learn and reflect on experiences of microaggression.
- Support friends, coworkers, and family members by acknowledging their experiences.
- Seek support for yourself if you experience microaggressions.

### Time

- 30-40 minutes

### Supplies

- *HaveTHATtalk* video: ["What is Racism?"](#)
- Print the “reflecting on microaggressions” worksheet for each participant.
- Pencil, pen, or marker.
- For more information, visit [The University of British Columbia’s Microaggressions](#) resource and [Psychology Today: Microaggression](#).

### Fact Sheet

- Microaggressions are insults, whether intentional or unintentional. They are negative messages targeting a person based on their group or identity.
- Microaggressions may invalidate someone’s group identity or individual experience, and communicate:
  - They are less important as human beings.
  - They do not belong.
  - Their existence is intimidating.
- Statements of microaggression can be based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, class, or sexual orientation.
- Microaggressions can be purposeful acts of racism, such as verbal remarks with hidden messages that make people feel “less than” because of their identity.
- There are different ways to respond to statements of microaggression. They range from no response, respond immediately, or respond later.

- Potential responses to microaggressions include asking for clarification, asking them to restate what was said, expressing your feelings, challenging the statement by sharing your experience, or acknowledging the person’s true hidden feelings.
- For more information, visit [The University of British Columbia’s Microaggressions](#) resource and [Psychology Today: Microaggression](#)

### Activity

1. Read the “fact sheet” above to better understand what microaggressions are.
3. Ask everyone to take a moment to write down the identity group they belong to. Ask them to come up with 1 to 3 positive traits and/or privileges, and then 1 to 3 negative traits and/or challenges from being a member of this group.
4. Reflect on these traits. Do they come from their own experience as a member of this group or from microaggressions they have faced? If they are comfortable, ask them to discuss their answers.
5. Give each participant “reflecting on microaggressions” worksheet and ask them to complete the chart.
6. Discuss the answers in the charts that the participants have created.

### Possible Answers:

Statement of Microaggression You Have Heard or Experienced (Directed at you or another)	What did you feel or think?	What was the response to the statement?	Was the response satisfactory or unsatisfactory? How could the response be improved?
“Where are you <i>really</i> from?”	I felt annoyed.	I answered by telling them my ethnicity.	My response was unsatisfactory. I could have expressed my feelings surrounding questions that imply that I am not from the same country as them, despite being born in the same place.

<p>“You speak English really well.”</p>	<p>I felt offended.</p>	<p>I did not respond.</p>	<p>It was unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification and asked why they initially assumed I couldn’t speak English well.</p>
<p>“Racism doesn’t exist, I don’t see colour.”</p>	<p>I felt like I was not being heard. I felt frustrated because if you don’t see race, you don’t see me.</p>	<p>I responded immediately and asked why they felt that way. I expressed my feelings on statements such as those.</p>	<p>It was satisfactory. I could challenge this statement by offering personal experiences of racism and encourage them to reflect on their own beliefs.</p>
<p>Being asked to prepay a meal at a restaurant while others didn’t receive the same request.</p>	<p>I felt angry, the way I was being treated was unfair.</p>	<p>I asked the waiter why I had to prepay when others did not. It became clear I was not going to get a valid answer, so I left the restaurant.</p>	<p>It was unsatisfactory. I wish I continued to ask for clarification or spoke to the manager.</p>
<p>Being followed around a retail store by an employee</p>	<p>I was afraid, I did not want to be accused of something I did not do.</p>	<p>I did not respond, and I left the store without buying anything.</p>	<p>It was unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification for their actions and expressed my feelings.</p>

## Worksheet: Reflecting on Microaggressions

Identity:

Positive Traits/Privileges:

Negative Traits/Challenges:

Statement of Microaggression You Have Heard or Experienced (Directed at you or another)	What did you feel or think?	What was the response to the statement?	Was the response satisfactory or unsatisfactory? How could the response be improved?
Example: "You speak English really well."	I felt offended.	I did not respond.	It was unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification and asked why they initially assumed I couldn't speak English well.