

Microaggressions & Mental Health


haveTHAT talk



Microaggressions and Mental Health

Microaggressions are subtle acts of racism that discriminate against minority groups. They can be expressed in different ways, such as the things people do or say to others and are sometimes difficult to spot. Microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional and typically have hidden meanings. An example of a microaggression is asking a racialized individual where they are "really from". Microaggressions are harmful because they create negative assumptions and stereotypes about certain groups of people. Because they are hidden, they are often dismissed as being innocent.

Microaggressions make it harder to access mental health supports and may delay a person from seeking help.¹ Additionally, those who experience frequent microaggressions may develop negative mental health outcomes such as high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, psychological distress, and suicide.²

Key Messages

- Microaggressions can be based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, class, sexual orientation, and other differences.
- They create bias, stigma, and make life harder for individuals and communities.
- Microaggressions can cause someone to doubt what they have experienced. It might also make them feel like:
 - They are less important.
 - They do not belong.
 - Their existence is intimidating.
- Microaggressions can impact a person's mental health and lead to mental illnesses and other health conditions.
- People experiencing microaggressions may decide to respond immediately, at a later time, or not at all. It is important to do what feels the most comfortable.
- Potential responses to microaggressions include:
 - Asking for clarification.
 - Asking individuals to restate or explain what they said.
 - Sharing your feelings.
 - Sharing your experience.
 - Acknowledging others' feelings.
 - Speaking to others for support.

Additional Resources

English

- [What are Microaggressions?](#)
- [The Micropedia of Microaggressions](#)
- [Anti Racism Learning Series](#)
- [Microaggressions against Indigenous peoples](#)

French

- [La micropédie des microagressions](#)
- [Série d'apprentissage contre le racisme](#)

¹Feng, R. Y., Krygsman, A., Vaillancourt, T., & Vitoroulis, I. (2023). *Experiences of racial microaggression among immigrant and Canadian-born young adults: Effects of double stigma on mental health and service use*. The International journal of social psychiatry, 69(7), 1723–1735. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640231174374>

²Williams, M. T. (2020). Perspectives on Psychological Science, 15(1), 3-26. Microaggressions: *Clarification, Evidence, and Impact*. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619827499>

Activity 1: 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 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

- Video: [*"What is Racism?"*](#)
- Print one *"Reflecting on Microaggressions"* worksheet and one *"Microaggressions Fact Sheet"* for each participant.
- Pencil, pen, or marker.

Activity

- Read the *"Microaggressions Fact Sheet"* with the participants to better understand what microaggressions are. Ask the group if they understand what a microaggression is. Provide clarification and examples.
- Ask participants to begin filling out the *"Reflecting on Microaggressions"* worksheet, while thinking about their own identity and culture.
- Ask them to come up with 1 to 3 positive traits and/or privileges, and then 1 to 3 negative traits and/or challenges that are part of being a member of this group.
- 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.
- Discuss the answers in the charts that the participants have created.

Worksheet: Reflecting on Microaggressions

Identity:

Positive

Traits/Privileges:

Negative

Traits/Challenges:

Microaggressions you have heard or experienced, either directed at you or another person:	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.	Unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification and asked why they initially assumed I couldn't speak English well.

Possible Answers: Worksheet: Reflecting on Microaggressions

Microaggressions you have heard or experienced, either directed at you or another person:	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 really from?"	I felt annoyed.	I answered by telling them my ethnicity.	Unsatisfactory. I could have expressed my feelings regarding questions that imply that I am not from the same country as them, despite being born in the same place.
"You speak English really well."	I felt offended.	I did not respond.	Unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification and asked why they assumed I couldn't speak English well.
"Racism doesn't exist, I don't see colour."	I felt like I was not being heard. I felt frustrated because if you don't see race, you don't see me.	I responded immediately and asked why they felt that way. I expressed my feelings on these types of statements.	Satisfactory. I could challenge this statement by offering personal experiences of racism and encourage them to reflect on their own beliefs.

Being asked to prepay for a meal at a restaurant while others didn't receive the same request.	I felt angry, the way I was being treated was unfair.	I asked the waiter why I had to prepay when others did not. It became clear that I was not going to get a valid answer, so I left the restaurant.	Unsatisfactory. I wish I continued to ask for clarification or spoke to the manager.
Being followed around a retail store by an employee	I was afraid, I did not want to be accused of doing something I did not do.	I did not respond, and I left the store without buying anything.	Unsatisfactory. I could have asked for clarification for their actions and expressed my feelings of discomfort. I could have spoken to a manager.

Microaggressions Fact Sheet

Microaggressions are subtle ways that people say or do things that discriminate against others. These actions can be intentional or unintentional. They are negative messages that target individuals based on their group or identity. Microaggressions can be based on different aspects of a person, like race, gender, ethnicity, ability, wealth, and sexual orientation.

- Microaggressions are subtle insults that may be unintentional. They can also be purposeful acts of racism, such as verbal remarks with hidden messages.
- Microaggressions can invalidate someone's identity and experiences. They can communicate that individuals are less important, that they do not belong, or that they are intimidating.
- There are many ways to respond to microaggressions. They range from no response to responding immediately or responding later.

Potential ways to respond to microaggressions include:

- Asking for clarification.
- Asking them to restate what was said.
- Expressing your feelings.
- Challenging the statement by sharing your experience.
- Acknowledging the person's true hidden feelings.

Activity 2: What Would You Do?

Goals

- To identify racist phrases or behaviours.
- To reflect on our 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 of other cultures and languages. 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.
- Inappropriate behaviour should be gently corrected. Let people know that what they said or did is not ok.
- Speak up and show support to others. Ask the person being targeted if they feel alright.

Time

- 20-30 minutes.

Supplies

- Video: ["What is Racism?"](#)
- Print one copy of the "Scenarios" section for each participant to read.

Activity

- Have the group read the "Scenarios" page found below. Depending on the group, you may decide to have participants take turns reading each scenario out loud or have them read independently at their own pace.
- Ask the group the following questions:
 1. What is the main problem with each scenario?
 2. What impact did these words or actions have on the main person in each scenario?
 3. Do you consider these statements or attitudes to be harmless or harmful? Why or why not?
 4. 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?
 5. It is possible that people in this group have experienced incidents of discrimination. How can we support those who have experienced this?
- Remind the group to take care of their own mental health. If group members are distressed by the activity, encourage them to speak to someone they trust. You can also refer them to OPH's [Mental Health and Substance Use Resources page for additional resources.](#)

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. 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 host 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 learning English. Anisa is more comfortable speaking Arabic, but she is trying to speak English with her colleagues. She notices they tend to exclude or ignore her in conversations. She privately asks one of her coworkers why she is being ignored. Her colleague tells her politely that 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 of 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 is too scared to tell anyone. She starts to believe that her efforts in school are meaningless, and her self-esteem decreases.

Possible Answers

Scenario #1: Aaron's Lunch	
1. What is the main problem with each scenario?	• Aaron was not served and is rudely ignored because he is black. • Aaron is being treated differently because of his race. • 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.
2. What impact did these words or actions have on the main person in each scenario?	• Aaron feels helpless and he struggles with understanding why this happened and why he is treated differently. • Aaron might avoid interacting with the public in fear of experiencing more racism or discrimination. • Aaron's mental health might be affected because of the way people treat him.
3. Do you consider these statements or attitudes to be harmless or harmful? Why or why not?	• Attitudes of the servers are hurtful and harmful. They imply that Aaron is less important than other customers.
4. 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?	• Ask to speak with the manager. • Let others in the restaurant know what happened. • Join Aaron and his friends in leaving or complaining. • Tell the hostess that she is making people uncomfortable by being discriminatory. • Ask Aaron and his group if they feel ok. • Leave a review online about their experience with this restaurant.
5. It is possible that people in this group have experienced incidents where they have been discriminated against. What are some ways we can support those who have gone through this?	• Be a good listener and let them vent if it helps. • Reassure them that the negative things they experience do not lower their worth.

	• Connect them to local community resources and supports.
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Scenario #1: Anisa's English	
1. What is the main problem with each scenario?	• Coworkers are excluding Anisa for not being fluent in English.
2. What impact did these words or actions have on the main person in each scenario?	• Anisa has started to speak less often and has become isolated in the workplace. • Anisa might begin to feel isolated at work, which may impact her mental health and productivity.
3. Do you consider these statements or attitudes to be harmless or harmful? Why or why not?	• Anisa was excluded because of her accent. This is harmful. It might cause Anisa to feel less confident, participate less, and feel isolated. • It is difficult to change your accent or the way you talk.
4. 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?	• Anisa's coworkers were being unfair and discriminatory as Anisa cannot control her accent and is trying her best. • Explain that Anisa is still learning English and should not be excluded. • Support Anisa by being her friend, supporting her at work and including her in work and social activities
5. It is possible that people in this group have experienced incidents where they have been discriminated against. What are some ways we can support those who have gone through this?	• Speak to coworkers regarding how Anisa feels (if Anisa is okay with this) • Report the behaviour to their manager or supervisor. • Encourage Anisa to continue to practice speaking. Let her know that her accent is not funny or weird. • Advocate for training on racism and microaggressions for the workplace.

Scenario #1: Lucy's Grades	
1. What is the main problem with each scenario?	• Lucy was stereotyped by her peers, which resulted in her feeling badly about herself. • It was implied that she had good grades because of her ethnicity and not her own hard work. Lucy has started to doubt her own abilities. • Lucy was also misidentified as Chinese despite being South Korean.
2. What impact did these words or actions have on the main person in each scenario?	• Lucy's self-esteem might have decreased as she believes her efforts in school are meaningless and do not matter. • Lucy might have felt hurt because her classmates will not learn where she is from and continue to misidentify her.
3. Do you consider these statements or attitudes to be harmless or harmful? Why or why not?	• Harmful as it encourages the stereotype that "Asians are naturally smart". This minimizes Lucy's hard work. • Harmful as she was misidentified. • Some participants might say that 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 that while it is good to think someone is intelligent, it is not okay to minimize their hard work based on racial stereotypes.
4. 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?	• Tell Lucy's peers that they are stereotyping her and taking away from her hard work. • Explain that "positive" stereotypes are still stereotypes and are harmful.
5. It is possible that people in this group have experienced incidents where they have been discriminated against. What are	• Ask Lucy how she is feeling. • Tell a teacher or other staff member. • Encourage Lucy and support her by telling her that her grades are

some ways we can support those who have gone through this?	a result her own hard work.
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Remember

What you say can affect someone's feelings. Speak with kindness and care. Avoid adding to positive and negative stereotypes. Support those around you. Examine your own biases.