

# What to know about microaggressions

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## **Definition**

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## **Summary**

A microaggression is a comment or action that negatively targets a marginalized group of people. A microaggression can be intentional or accidental. It is a form of discrimination.

People who use microaggressions may mean no harm toward the person or group they use it against. They may not even realize that they are making a microaggressive comment or action.

However, microaggressions can be very hurtful to the people who experience them.

This article will provide more detail on what a microaggression is, as well as some examples and how to avoid using them.

## **What are they?**

Although a person may not mean any harm, microaggressions can be stigmatizing and very hurtful.

Chester M. Pierce first coined the term microaggression in the 1970s, as a way to describe the subtle insults and put-downs that African Americans experienced regularly.

In the present day, people can direct microaggressions toward any marginalized group. A marginalized group comprises “individuals, groups, or populations outside of ‘mainstream society,’ living at the margins of those in the center of power, of cultural dominance, and economical and social welfare.”

Groups may experience marginalization due to their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

It is usually clear when someone is being discriminatory, such as when they use a racial slur. However, a microaggression may be harder to identify. The person using the microaggression may not even realize that what they are saying is harmful.

### **Different forms of microaggression**

**Microaggressions can take several different forms. They can be:**

**Verbal:** A verbal microaggression is a comment or question that is hurtful or stigmatizing to a certain marginalized group of people. For example, saying, “You’re so smart for a woman” would be a verbal microaggression.

**Behavioral:** A behavioral microaggression occurs when someone behaves in a way that is hurtful or discriminatory to a certain group of people. An example of a behavioral microaggression would be a bartender ignoring a transgender person and instead serving a cisgender person (someone whose biological sex matches their gender identity) first.

**Environmental:** An environmental microaggression is when a subtle discrimination occurs within society. One example of an environmental microaggression would be a college campus that only has buildings named after white people.

Health inequities affect all of us differently. Visit our dedicated hub for an in-depth look at social disparities in health and what we can do to correct them.

## **Types**

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue and colleagues defined three types of microaggression:

**Microassaults:** A microassault is when a person intentionally behaves in a discriminatory way while not intending to be offensive. An example of a microassault is a person telling a racist joke then saying, "I was just joking."

**Microinsults:** A microinsult is a comment or action that is unintentionally discriminatory. For example, this could be a person saying to an Indian doctor, "Your people must be so proud."

**Microinvalidations:** A microinvalidation is when a person's comment invalidates or undermines the experiences of a certain group of people. An example of a microinvalidation would be a white person telling a black person that "racism does not exist in today's society."

## **Examples**

There are many everyday examples of microaggressions. People may target others with microaggressions because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, disability, mental health, weight, or age, among other factors.

In 2018, Kansas State University in Manhattan conducted a study into workplace microaggressions. The researchers found that 73% of women working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics experienced at least one form of sexual objectification.

### **Some other examples of microaggressions include:**

treating someone as a second-class citizen because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation

complimenting a person born and raised in the United States on their English simply because they are not white

telling a thin person that they should eat more food  
making assumptions about someone based on their religion, age, or class  
deliberately not using a transgender person's preferred pronouns  
underrepresenting different races, sexualities, and disabilities in the media  
being unwilling to find stereotypical or derogatory sports team names  
offensive  
using outdated and offensive terminology, such as, "That's so gay"  
considering certain people to be of more value than others based on their  
ethnicity, class, or sexuality

How do microaggressions cause harm?

Microaggressions can be harmful and stressful to the people who experience them.

Researchers studying the effects of racial microaggressions on undergraduate college students found that those who experienced them regularly had lower self-esteem. The researchers also discovered that these racial microaggressions were especially harmful in work and educational settings.

In another study, researchers found that people who experienced ethnic microaggressions had higher levels of depression and trauma. However, the study could not confirm that the microaggressions directly caused the participants' depression.

Also, a study in India found that "experiencing invisibility caused distress for participants who saw themselves as prototypical of the Northeasterners."

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How to avoid microaggressions

It can be difficult for a person with learned bias to change how they act toward marginalized groups. However, there are certain methods a person can use to change their behavior.

Listen to the person on the receiving end of the microaggression and be empathetic to their feelings.

Try not to be defensive or dismiss the person's feelings.

Take responsibility for any underlying bias held toward certain groups and take steps to become more educated and understanding.

Commit to changing microaggressive behaviors.

Summary

Microaggressions are actions or comments that can be stigmatizing and hurtful to those who experience them.

Although it can be difficult to admit fault, a person who uses microaggressions can educate themselves on the impact of using harmful language and change their behaviors.