

# Responding Effectively to Microaggressions: A Research-Based Workshop

Christy M. Byrd, PhD  
University of California, Santa Cruz

## Summary

This poster describes a workshop to teach students how to respond effectively to microaggressions. The strategies are based on the Confronting Prejudiced Responses Model (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008) and a literature review considering the unique nature of microaggressions. Students are taught to analyze aspects of the situation and to practice responses.

## Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal slights based on social group membership, and they are ubiquitous in the lives of racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ individuals (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions differ from overt forms of discrimination as they are often unintentional or meant in joking manner—nevertheless, they are associated with a host of negative outcomes for individuals who experience them (Sue, 2010). Since 2007, research on microaggressions has grown exponentially (Wong et al., 2014), but there is little research on the most effective ways for individuals to respond to them.

## Barriers to Responding

Ashburn-Nardo et al. (2008) have identified five barriers responding to discrimination. Some of these are heightened for microaggressions in particular.

### Interpreting the incident as discrimination

- Microaggressions are more subtle and ambiguous

### Deciding whether it is serious enough to warrant a response

- Targets may be reluctant to respond

### Taking responsibility for confronting

- Similar to other forms of discrimination

### Deciding on a strategy

- Methods for responding to overt discrimination may be seen as inappropriate
- Lack of knowledge for most effective responses

### Responding

- Similar risks for negative repercussions

## Defining Effective Responses

Based on the literature of responses to prejudiced comments, effective responses are:

- Active rather than passive
- Maintain norms of politeness
- Refrain from labeling the aggressor as racist or sexist
- Focus on fairness and positive values

## Confrontation

The workshop emphasizes confrontation (expressing disagreement) as the primary strategy. Confrontation can be effective because it:

- Can create feelings of discrepancy between egalitarian self-concept and behavior
- Signals to bystanders that the comments are not appropriate

However, the confronter may be seen as rude, a complainer, or hypersensitive, especially if the confrontation is aggressive or the prejudice subtle.

## The Workshop

This workshop can be done in an hour and a half with groups of almost any size. The handout pictured below can be used as a visual aid.

1. **Introduction to Microaggressions:** Participants are introduced to the concept of microaggressions and their negative effects.
2. **The Situational Factors:** Facilitators discuss two factors to consider when thinking of whether and how to respond to a microaggression: **Your Goal** (what do you want to accomplish?) and **Your Role** (what is your relationship to the aggressor?).
3. **The Strategies:** Facilitators introduce the strategies and explain why they are effective.
4. **Role-Play Practice:** Participants divide into triads and role play example scenarios, with the target using one of the taught strategies to respond. The groups discuss the effectiveness of the response(s) and rotate through each role. After about half an hour, the facilitators lead a large group discussion focusing on reactions to the role play and ideas about which strategies would be most successful when.

## Responding to Microaggressions

### What is a microaggression?

Microaggressions are subtle verbal or non-verbal slights and indignities based on membership in a social group. They are a form of discrimination and are hurtful even though they are sometimes unintentional or meant in a joking way. We refer to the person who says/does the microaggression as the *aggressor* and the person who they are speaking to as the *target*.

### Why confront microaggressions?

Most people don't confront microaggressions, but confronting can help the other person to realize their bias and change their behavior. Confronting also sets a norm that the behavior isn't OK, so people around are less likely to do or say something similar. When thinking about responding, consider:

<b>Your goal</b> •What do you want to accomplish?	<b>Your role</b> •What is your relationship to the aggressor and bystanders?
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### How do I respond?

When your goal is to affect someone's bias, the most effective responses are polite rather than hostile and focus on positive qualities rather than accusations of prejudice.

<b>Appeal to values</b>	•“You're too smart to believe that!”
<b>Express your feelings</b>	•“That hurts my feelings.”
<b>Get them to explain</b>	•“What did you mean by that?”
<b>Empathize with the underlying feeling</b>	•“I know it's hard to find a job after college, [but immigration isn't the problem.]”
<b>Give information</b>	•“Actually, most people on welfare are White.”
<b>Use humor</b>	•Make a joke
<b>Involve others</b>	•“Did you hear that?”
<b>Non-verbal response</b>	•Roll your eyes

### How might they react?

Most people feel negative emotions when they are confronted, but they can still learn from the experience. Here are some common reactions:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anger</li><li>• Denial</li><li>• Dismissal/minimization</li><li>• Attack</li><li>• Claim it was a joke</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try to explain your misinterpretation</li><li>• Guilt or shame</li><li>• Freeze</li><li>• Get others to agree with them</li><li>• Apologize/try to make up for it</li></ul>
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## The Strategies

### Appeal to values

- Making the aggressor aware of the discrepancy between their egalitarian values and negative behavior can induce feelings of guilt and motivation to make their behavior more in line with their values.

### Express your feelings

- This strategy can also induce the value-behavior discrepancy, especially when the target and aggressor have a close relationship and/or the remark is meant as a joke. This approach can also call for perspective-taking and create empathy, which has been shown to reduce stereotyping and denial of discrimination.

### Get the aggressor to explain

- Asking for further information can be useful for highlighting logical inconsistencies in the aggressor's words or uncovering unconscious bias. It can also provide an opportunity for the confronter to introduce information to correct a false belief.

### Empathize with the underlying feeling

- Using empathy can help the aggressor see the target as having similar values and promote inclusion of the other in the self, where another's attributes are seen as part of one's self-concept. Affirming the aggressor can also reduce feelings of threat, which has been shown reduce bias in intergroup interactions and make aggressors more willing to acknowledge guilt after a biased action.

### Give information that contradicts the aggressor or gives a new perspective on the issue

- Providing counter-stereotypic information about one's self is a form of individuation than can be effective for reducing prejudice (at the risk of validating stereotypes).
- Alternatively, the confronter can present statistics or data that contradicts the aggressor.

### Use humor

- Humor may reduce defensiveness compared to more challenging approaches.

### Involve others

- By confronting, targets and bystanders set the norm that the behavior is inappropriate. Involving others can be a strategy to invoke “safety in numbers” to highlight the norm violation to the aggressor.

### Non-verbal response

- A non-verbal response such as a look or sigh may still be impactful without requiring a high level of preparation or energy from the confronter.