

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:

Your goal

- What do you want to accomplish?

Your role

- What is your relationship to the aggressor and bystanders?

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.

Appeal to values

- "You're too smart to believe that!"

Express your feelings

- "That hurts my feelings."

Get them to explain

- "What did you mean by that?"

Empathize with the underlying feeling

- "I know it's hard to find a job after college, [but immigration isn't the problem.]"

Give information

- "Actually, most people on welfare are White."

Use humor

- Make a joke

Involve others

- "Did you hear that?"

Non-verbal response

- 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:

- Anger
- Denial
- Dismissal/minimization
- Attack
- Claim it was a joke
- Try to explain your misinterpretation
- Guilt or shame
- Freeze
- Get others to agree with them
- Apologize/try to make up for it