

HOW TO IDENTIFY *Microaggressions* & THE IMPORTANCE OF *Disrupting Them*



WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

Statements, actions, or incidents regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. Microaggressions are often ignored and unacknowledged.

According to Professor Derald Wing Sue in his article, “Microaggressions: Death by a Thousand Cuts,”

“Critics of microaggression theory believe that we are ‘making a mountain out of a molehill’ and that such incidents are no different from the everyday incivilities that a white person might experience from a rude clerk.”

Scientific research, however, reveals that microaggressions can lead to depression, anxiety, and other negative long-term health conditions including suicidality.

Here’s the the thing about microaggressions:

- A microaggression can be intentional or accidental. It is a form of discrimination.
- Microaggressions are often not done on purpose are often committed unintentionally by well meaning people. The important thing to keep in mind is their impact, which is harmful. Particularly since people who experience them often experience them persistently. Over time, it can be extremely painful.
- People who don’t belong to specific groups are often unaware that these microaggressions are happening.

Groups who often experience microaggressions in our Jewish communities include, but are not limited to:

- Jews of Color (JOC) and People of Color (POC)
- Members of the LGBTQ+ Community (including trans, gender expansive, and non-binary individuals)
- People with disabilities
- People of Size, fat, or larger-bodied people

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MICROAGGRESSIVE COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS?

- “So, how are you Jewish?” (Often said to a POC)
- “Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” (Often said to a POC)
- “You don’t look like a lesbian.”
- “I mean you’re not *gay* gay.”
- “Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?”
- “I’m surprised you know so much about Judaism.” (Often said to a POC)
- “You’re so pretty for someone [who uses a wheelchair/who is trans].”
- “You’re my only [insert race/gender/sexuality/disability here] friend.”
- “I don’t think you can handle this activity.” (Said to someone with a visible disability)
- “He...they...whatever they call themselves.” (Said to or about someone who is non-binary or uses they/them pronouns)
- “I wish I could sit down all the time!” (Said to someone who uses a wheelchair/scooter/mobility aid)
- “I wish I could be as confident as you and wear that dress.” (Said to a larger-bodied person, implying they are “brave” to wear a certain piece of clothing)
- “So, where are you in your transition?” (Said to someone who is trans)
- “Everyone, suck it in!” or “Turn sideways to look thinner for the picture!”

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MICROAGGRESSIVE EXPERIENCES & ASSUMPTIONS?

- Being repeatedly misgendered
- Being asked to speak on behalf of all [trans people/LGBTQ+/POC]
- Being disproportionately and aggressively questioned by security (often experienced by POC)
- Walking into a camp and feeling unsafe as the only [trans person/gender expansive person/ POC] present
- People assuming you have a lot of money because you are Jewish
- People assuming a POC is related to another POC in a space
- Assumptions about abilities/talents (“You’re Black, you play basketball, right?”)
- Assuming abilities (“let’s all rise” for certain prayers, “let’s run down to the lake,” “meet you at the top!”)
- Heteronormative assumptions about family structures (guessing someone has one male father and one female mother)

WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR ADDRESSING MICROAGGRESSIONS.

Here are some considerations that may help you disrupt microaggressions:

- We are almost never prepared to deal with a microaggression.
- Consider your role in the situation. Are you close with the person being aggressed? Can you check in with them first? Are they a stranger but you know you should take a risk?
- DON’T over consider and DON’T assume someone else will jump in.
- Perfection, comfort, and safety are the enemies of being an upstander.
- This is NOT going to be smooth! Interrupting a microaggression is often messy, hard, and nerve-racking. Many of us exhibit physiological symptoms like heart racing, belly aches, and sweating. This doesn’t mean we are doing something wrong, it means we are doing something society, founded on oppressive principles, has taught us not to do.
- Our society has prepared us for “business as usual.” Addressing a microaggression disrupts this pattern and can be highly uncomfortable.

As Jews, we are commanded to pursue justice. “Tzedek, tzedek tirdof” (justice, justice you shall pursue) is one of our guiding principles. The word “pursue” communicates that this work is ongoing every day. The work of addressing microaggressions is continuous. Kelly Nguyen states, “increasing awareness begins with standing up to casual racism or sexism [or transphobia, sizeism, ableism, and other forms of oppression] by being willing to acknowledge the problem and educate others when they make such comments. Changing a system already implemented as normal is difficult, but not impossible. Opening people’s eyes and opening the door for further conversation is a responsibility.”

PREPARE TO BOTH FAIL AND SUCCEED

While this work is messy, below are some tactics that might make addressing a microaggression easier:

Restate or paraphrase.

"I think I heard you saying _____ (paraphrase their comments). Is that correct?"

Ask for clarification or more information.

"Could you say more about what you mean by that?"

"How have you come to think that?"

Separate intent from impact.

"I know you didn't realize this, but when you _____ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because _____. Instead, you could _____ (different language or behavior)."

[You can find more strategies for disrupting microaggressions in the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's guide, "Responding to Microaggressions and Bias."](#)

WHAT DO I DO WHEN I COMMIT A MICROAGGRESSION?

We all have committed microaggressions and will likely do so again. Below are some steps you can take move toward repair.

- **Breathe.**
- **Listen** without defensiveness.
- **Apologize** swiftly. Our apology doesn't need to take a long time. State clearly that you know what you did was wrong. You can apologize even if you don't yet quite understand why what you said caused harm. This is especially true if the other person has lived experience with a marginalized identity that you don't share. You can learn more later about the harm you caused on your own time.
- **Don't make it about you.** You do not need to make excuses as to why you did this, take up more time from the person who experienced the microaggression, or tell a long a story about your "best friend" who has the same identity as them.
- **Appreciate.** If someone else pointed out that what you did/said was wrong, briefly thank them for pointing it out to you. It takes courage to point out microaggressions. Thank them for giving you the opportunity to do better.
- **Consider following up.** A follow-up email, text, chat, ect. lets them know you are doing your own work and learning. For example, you could say: "I just wanted to thank you again for letting me apologize. I wanted to let you know I have joined a white antiracist affinity space and I am learning all about antiracism. Thanks again for letting me know the messed up, I see that information as a gift."
- **Continue to learn** on your own. Keep reading existing resources and content created by people with marginalized identities that you don't have.
- **Commit to doing better in the future.**