



## Navigating Microaggressions in Learning Environments

Microinterventions are “antibias actions used by targets, parents/significant others, allies, and well-intentioned bystanders to counteract, challenge, diminish, or neutralize the individual (microaggressions)...of prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination” (Sue et al., 2021). This resource presents the everyday actions we can take in the teaching contexts, and as individuals, to confront the bias and discrimination expressed through microaggressions.

### Responding to microaggressions

To reduce the potential harm to the targets of microaggressions, it is important for educators to take actions when a microaggression occurs in the learning environment. Instructors must address the issue, continue the conversation to disrupt the potential harm for the targets, and plan actions for potential future instances. Several scholars have suggested tools and approaches to respond to microaggression in classrooms including [Taking ACTION](#) by Tasha Souza (2018), which is discussed in more detail in a different resource, and the RAVEN approach by CORA Learning (2020). The RAVEN approach is based on the following steps:

- **Redirect:** Intervene in the moment to stop further harm
  - Pause the conversation and open up discussion about the issue
- **Ask:** Ask probing questions for clarity
  - “I think I heard you say... what did you mean by that?”
  - “I want to make sure I understand what you were saying, where you mentioned...”
- **Values:** Clarify shared values of the course, department, and the university to remind the individual about the misalignment of the values shared through the comments/actions
  - “You know, in this [course/department/institution], we work hard to create a space that is safe and welcoming for all students”
  - “What you just said is not in alignment and/or is inconsistent with the values that prioritize equity and inclusion”
- **Emphasize:** Express own thoughts and feelings, showing empathy
  - “When I hear your comments, I think/feel...”
  - “In my experience...when someone says, or does this...”
- **Next Steps:** End conversation with concrete feedback and plans for future instances perpetuating the microaggressions.

In addition, instructors can consider the following:

1. Develop actionable steps for creating an inclusive educational space
  - a. In syllabi, consider adding components that discuss the shared values of the course community to create an inclusive, safe, and welcoming environment for every student.
  - b. Consider adding interactive components in lessons, curricular resources and references that invite learners to discuss the negative effect of microaggressions, and how to respond to it.
2. Discuss institutional Strategies
  - a. Report Bias: Penn Educational Equity Center provides a [form](#) for students, faculty, and staff to report bias that occurred at Penn State. A report can be made by calling a 24-hour hotline on 1-800-560-1637, or by submitting the online form.
  - b. Consider how your course implements [inclusive teaching practices](#).

## Individual actions

On the individual level, it is important for those who commit microaggressions to take restorative actions. For people being targeted, it can be beneficial to engage in conversation, if the environment feels safe enough to do so. While silencing and inaction may cause internal negative consequences, engaging in actions (for those being targeted) often leads to psychological benefits, which include strengthened feeling of empowerment and self-efficacy (Sue et al., 2021).

### People experiencing microaggressions

1. Ask for clarification or more information
  - a. "Can you say more about what you mean by that?", "How have you come to think that?"
2. Separate intent from impact
  - a. "I know you didn't realize this, but when you \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because \_\_\_\_\_."
3. Share your own process
  - a. "I noticed that you \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned \_\_\_\_\_."
4. Express your feelings
  - a. "Your \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior) was hurtful..."
  - b. "When I hear comments like that, I feel..."
  - c. "It makes me uncomfortable when..."

### People committing microaggressions

1. Take a moment to pause. Check in with yourself. Avoid defensiveness, minimization, and blaming. Remember that everyone can make mistakes, but the important thing is to reflect on it and avoid making the same mistake in the future.
2. Listen for understanding
  - a. Make sure you have understood the point of view of the person who experience the microaggression by restating what you've heard: "I think I heard you saying..., Is that correct?"
3. Acknowledge and apologize
  - a. You could say, "I can now better understand how I was wrong in this situation. I will work to become more aware of [the topic that you've discussed]."
4. Create a space to follow up
  - a. Allow yourself and others to engage in follow-up conversations to continue discussing the topic.

## References

- Cora Learning. (2020, April 28). Addressing Racial Bias and Microaggressions in Online Environments [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/9cEWQJ32nqU>
- Sue, D. W. (2021). *Microintervention strategies: What you can do to disarm and dismantle individual and systemic racism and bias*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Washington, E. F. (2022, May 10). *Recognizing and responding to microaggressions at work*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2022/05/recognizing-and-responding-to-microaggressions-at-work>