Navigating microaggressions in the workplace:

Recognizing and dismantling subtle acts of exclusion

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MDAnderson Cancer Center

Making Cancer History®

Objectives

- Recognize microaggressions in the workplace.
- Understand the challenges of microaggressions and how they negatively impact the workplace.
- Learn and implement strategies to effectively address microaggressions.

Disclaimer

Defining microaggressions

- Commonplace behavioral indignities whether intentional or unintentional communicating hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes toward marginalized groups', which can be found historically throughout man's existence (Pierce 1974, as cited in Ehie et al., 2021).
- Overt or subtle communications perpetrated by individuals or organizations that convey disrespect to the target individuals or groups (Ross-Sheriff 2012).
- Daily commonplace, subtle behaviors and attitudes towards others that arise from conscious or unconscious bias (Ehie et al., 2021).

Defining microaggressions

They are

a. constant and continual in the lives of people of color
b. cumulative in nature and represent a lifelong burden of stress

- c.continuous reminders of the target group's second-class status in society
- d.symbolic of past governmental injustices directed toward people of color (Sue et al. 2019)

Origins

- Racial differences; used as justification of slavery
- 1970s work of Dr. Chester Pierce
- Lack of empathy and/or understanding
- Cognitive placeholders



What are microaggressions?

- A hurtful effect that can be intentional or unintentional
- Verbal or nonverbal
- Single occurrence or part of a pattern
- Reduces the confidence, self-esteem, or effectiveness of the target persons
- Contains conscious communication and hidden or metacommunication
- The impact is what matters, not the intent of what was said

Types of Microaggressions

Microassaults

Microinsults

Microinvalidations

Environmental microaggressions

Microassaults

- Conscious biases or discriminatory verbal abuse or behaviors
- Explicit statements or actions intended to hurt the recipient
- Name calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions

Microinsults

- Unconscious messages that are insensitive to a person's racial identity or background
- More subtle not intended to be discriminatory
- Still conveys a humiliating or demeaning undertone

Microinvalidations

• Behaviors intended to diminish a person's experience, thoughts or feelings

Environmental microaggressions

- Delivered through
 - Social Media
 - Educational Curriculum (Texas)
 - •TV Programs
 - Mascots
 - Monuments

From Microaggressions to Subtle Acts of Exclusion

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From microaggressions to subtle acts of exclusion

- Lack of clarity
- Not helpful to bringing people together to work on solutions
- The term communicates it's not a big deal
- Provokes defensiveness
- Focuses on the intent as aggressive
- Makes people feel small and unimportant

From microaggressions to subtle acts of exclusion

- Subtle Acts of Exclusion (SAE)
- **1. They are subtle.**
- 2. They are acts.
- 3. They serve to exclude.

SAE Activity

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Roles in a SAE event

- Subject
- Initiator
- Observer
 - •Ally
 - •Bystander

Subject

• The person or group being excluded

Initiator

• Person who says or who nonverbally does the SAE

Observer (Bystander & Ally)

Observer: Anyone who overhears or sees the SAE

Bystander: An observer who chooses not to speak up (can be anyone)

- Fear of retaliation
- Losing friends
- Not wanting to get involved

Ally: An observer that speaks up (commitment to external action)

Categories of SAEs

- Gender and sexuality
- Race and ethnicity
- Ability
- Religion
- Age and generation

SAE Activity

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SAE in Social Work Practice

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Systemic effects of SAE in social work

- Institutional (systemic)
- Supervisor/Supervisees
- Individual Contributors/Colleagues

Institutional (systemic)

- strong power differential exists between perpetrator [initiator] and target [subject]
- the microaggression is blatant and immediately harmful (microassault)
- it would be risky to respond personally
- institutional changes must be implemented

(Sue et al., 2019)

Supervisor/Supervisees

Listening Skills

Take TIME to increase connection amongst peers and to create trust among colleagues

Employees who feel heard are more engaged and motivated

3 out 10 employees feel heard at work

Individual contributors/colleagues

- Microtrauma
 - Lifetime of microaggressions
 - Increases stress
 - Lower emotional well being
 - Increase depression and negative feeling
 - Create a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate
 - Impede learning and problem solving

Individual contributors/colleagues



Racial Battle Fatigue

- Experiences cause a "freeze effect" (Goodman, 2011 as cited from Sue et al., 2019)
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Self-disappointment
- Rumination from not acting, negative selfevaluation

- Internalizing
 prevalent
 discriminatory
 attitudes and
 negative beliefs
 about oneself
- Social support
- Spirituality or religion
- Humor
- Role shifting

- Armoring
- Cognitive reinterpretation
- Withdrawing for selfprotection,
- Self-affirmations
- Directly or indirectly confronting the SAE

To understand SAEs

- Connect with your own marginalized identities
- Listen for understanding
- Think before you speak
- Close the loop



We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the

hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the

appalling silence of the good people."

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." —Albert Einstein

Solutions

Make	the "invisible" visible
Disarm	the microaggression
Educate	the initiator about the metacommunications they send
Seek	external support when needed



- Pick your battles
- Educate rather than confront
- Consider where and when to address the initiator
- Adjust your response as the situation warrants

DISARMING MICROAGGRESSIONS Microintervention strategies

Ir	ected Toward Perpetrator Microaggressions	Directed Toward Institutional Macroaggressions	Directed Toward Societal Macroaggressions
		Make the "Invisible" Visible	
•	Undermine the meta- communication Make the meta-communication explicit Challenge the stereotype Broaden the ascribed trait to a universal human behavior Ask for clarification	 Keep a log of inequitable practices as you see them Run your observations by allies who can corroborate Solicit feedback from fellow coworkers/students Monitor trends around recruiting, hiring, retention, promotion 	 Create partnerships with academi institutions to analyze data related to disparities in education, health care, employment Disseminate research on disparity trends to general public and medi Organize peaceful demonstration
	Dis	arm the Microaggression/Macroaggress	sion
	Express disagreement • State values and set limits Describe what is happening • Use an exclamation Use non-verbal • communication Interrupt and redirect •	Boycott, strike, or protest the institution Request meetings with intermediary or senior leadership to share perspectives Exercise right to serve on boards to voice your concerns Delineate financial repercussions of continued macroaggressions Notify press or other media outlets	 Protest political leaders who reinforce inequity and division/ support those who do not Revise and veto unjust communit policies, practices, and laws Lobby to your congressmen or senators Attend televised town hall meetings to voice your concerns

Educate the Offender

Point out the commonality Appeal to the offenders values and principlesDescribe the benefits of workforce diversityDifferentiate between intent and impact Promote empath Point to how they benefitInstitute long-term mandated training on cultural sensitivity for all levels Infuse multicultural principles into organizational mission and values	 Raise children to understand concepts like prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Challenge silence/lack of response to macroaggression Identify shared mutual goals among people Increase community's exposure to positive examples of diverse cultures to offset negative stereotypes and biases
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Seek External Intervention

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 Alert Authorities Report the act Seek therapy/counseling Seek support through spirituality/religion/community Set up a buddy system 	 Report inequitable practices to your union Create networking/mentoring opportunities for underrepresented employees/students Maintain an open, supportive, and 	 Foster cooperation over competition Foster a sense of community belonging Create caucuses for allies and targets
Attend support groups	 responsive environment Call on consultants to conduct 	 Participate in healing circles, vigils, memorials that remind us

external assessments/cultural audits the consequences of hate

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The SAE Accountability System

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The SAE accountability system

Speaking up in a way that holds people accountable with productive, open, and civil conversations

Guidelines as the subject or observer

Pause	Pause the action.
Assume	Assume good intent.
Explain	Explain why the action was paused.
Progress	Have patience but expect progress.

Guidelines as the Initiator

Acknowledge	Acknowledge the feedback with gratitude.
Replace	Replace defensiveness with curiosity and empathy.
Follow up	Follow through and follow up.

Making the change in organizational culture

- Expect SAE to happen
- Communicate the norm
- Practice speaking up

Organizational roles

- Executive leadership
- Middle management (social work supervisors)
- Individual contributors (social workers)

Executive Leadership

- Need to be the first to learn the SAE accountability system
- Model best practices and set the tone
- If they initiate an SAE accountability system, they need to be fully on board
- If SAEs are not actively discouraged, then they are tacitly encouraged

Tools for executive leadership

Surveys

Interviews

Focus groups or forums

Town hall meetings

Middle Management

- SAE accountability system can be done as a top-down or pushing the idea up to executive leadership
- Implement with teams to improve communication and functioning
- Responding to the system can feel burdensome
- People leave their bosses, not the company
- Empower people to voice their grievances in the moment

Individual contributors (social workers)

- Most important role
- No business without contributors
- Resist the urge to abuse the privilege and weaponize SAE accountability

TABLE 7.1 How to Respond to a Microaggression

Microintervention Action

Intent of the Microaggression	Pause	Name and Disarm	Educate	Report	Treat the Impact
Not to cause harm	~	~	~	*	1
To cause harm	~	~		~	~
In either case, if you don't feel safe		Work with a colleague or supervisor to determine the best interventions together.			

* If someone continues to use microaggressions after repeated microinterventions, you may consider escalating it to a supervisor.

Allyship

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Allyship is...

Allyship is empathy in action

It's really seeing the person next to us

Advocating for the person missing who should be next to us We use our power and influence to create positive change for our colleagues, friends, and neighbors

Deloitte's Six Signature Traits of an Inclusive Leader



Develop inclusive leadership skills



Commitment. Develop personal values that include DEI, and stay true to those values by committing to action. These values might relate to fairness, respect, kindness, justice, and a belief in the value of diversity for your team and business.



Courage. Show vulnerability and humility, acknowledge your personal strengths and weaknesses and work on them, and admit mistakes. Also, be brave as an agent of change, take responsibility for challenging the status quo, do the work to create needed change, and hold yourself and others accountable.

Deloitte's Six Signature Traits of an Inclusive Leader

Cognizance. Become self-aware of your biases, and mindful of situations where you're most likely to be biased (e.g., when you're fatigued or stressed)

Curiosity. Be open to different perspectives, and tolerate ambiguity

MM

Cultural intelligence. Seek to empathize and gain knowledge about people with identities and cultures different from your own

Collaboration. Give people autonomy, trust them, and empower them to fully contribute



An observer is testing their new understanding: My motivation is becoming clear. While I may feel uncomfortable or excluded from participating, I'm starting to understand why it's important.

DENIER

Most people start here: I don't know that I may be causing harm without intending to, and that people need me to be an ally or advocate. I may be opposed to DEI efforts overall, or I just haven't had an awakening moment yet.

ACTIVIST

An activist dedicates their life and career to creating change: My primary or secondary job focuses on diversity, equity, inclusion, allyship, advocacy, or activism. I'm all in. But I need support and

opportunities to regenerate.

OF ALLYSHIP

STAGES

0

A learner is soaking in information: I look outside my normal avenues for learning, participate in events, and work to expand my network. I may take some small actions, but I'm not very active as an ally yet.

LEARNER

ALLY

An ally is activated: I take action to reduce the unintentional harm of biases and microaggressions, and learn to intervene and become a champion. I gradually increase my allyship actions over time.

ACCOMPLICE /

An accomplice breaks the rules to help dismantle inequitable structures for the benefit of others: I take risks for justice and equity—I might participate in a workplace walkout, get arrested at a protest, or try a radical system change inside the workplace.

ADVOCATE An advocate leads the

change: I push for systemic change across my company, industry, and/or society. I advocate for people whether or not they are in the room, stand up for what's right regularly, and use my power and influence to correct inequity.

How to be an ally

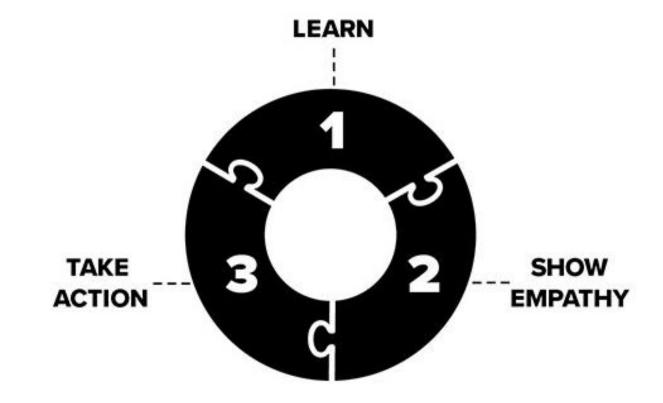


FIGURE 1.1 How to Be an Ally

- 1. Learn, unlearn, and relearn. Learn about and recognize historical harm and its intergenerational impact, unlearn biases from history and cultural marginalization, and relearn from new perspectives.
- 2. Do no harm—understand and correct our biases. Work to change your behaviors and actions so that you don't unintentionally harm people with biases.
- **3. Recognize and overcome microaggressions.** Develop your awareness and empathy skills to identify and eliminate microaggressions.
- **4.** Advocate for people. Step up and advocate for people in small, everyday ways that can make a big difference.
- 5. **Stand up for what's right.** Intervene to stop microaggressions and support people who have been harmed.
- 6. Lead the change. When you're ready, take action to lead the change in your work, on your teams, and in your workplace.
- 7. **Transform your organization, industry, and society.** Address biases and inequities in your company and in the broader world.

Reinforcing psychological safety

 Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is sage for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999 as cited in Jana & Baran, 2020).



SAE Activity

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Resources and tools

- www.subtleactsofexclusion.com
- InQuest Digital
- Loom Technologies
- Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale
 (R28REMS)
- Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist
- Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)

Questions?

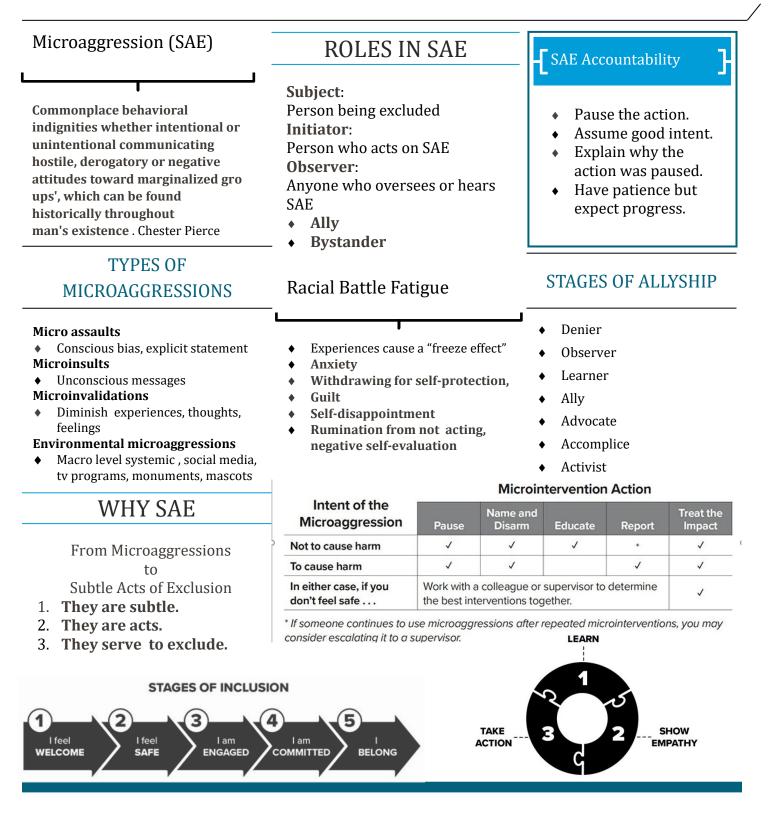
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Avoid these microaggressions	Consider this
Interrupting: • Interrupting someone while they are speaking. • Talking over someone's words. • Not allowing someone to finish their thought.	People with underrepresented identities are more likely to be interrupted. Men are three times more likely to interrupt a woman than another man? Interruptions can be verbal and nonverbal—if we are thinking about what we're going to say next, we might be saying something with our body that tells someone we aren't listening and want to talk. Take a step back and listen with empathy; respectfully allow someone to finish their complete thought.
 Taking up more than your share of airtime: Dominating the conversation. Not creating space for someone to speak. Speaking on panels or at events that don't have diverse speakers. 	A study from Brigham Young and Princeton Universities found that given a mixed population at the table, men take up 75 percent of the conversation in a meeting. ⁸ Be aware of who has taken up airtime, create openings, and genuinely invite people to share their thoughts. Say no to panels without diverse speakers; suggest someone with an underrepresented identity in your place.

Common Verbal Microaggressions

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Common Nonverba	i wiicroaggressions	In	the	workplace

Common Nonverbal Microaggressions in the Workplace						
Avoid these microaggressions	Consider this					
Invisibilization and exclusion: • Ignoring someone's presence in the room, in a conversation, or in a public space. • Not inviting someone to a meeting when they should be there because of their expertise and role. • Having non-senior-level people or non- "VIPs" sit against the wall versus sit at the table. • Seeing or treating two Black women as interchangeable.	Invisibilization is a form of othering: "I don't see you or recognize you." This could happen in meetings or events, where no one introduces themselves to a person with an underrepresented identity. Or walking past someone and pretending they don't exist. This happens to me often in my own neighborhood in San Francisco, the heart of the tech industry: men will literally run into me because they don't see me, or expect me to move out of their way. Be mindful of inclusion in meetings—invite people to be in the room where decisions are made, with a powerful position at that table. Ensure everyone is introduced to ome another. Pause, humanize, and empathize.					
 Not paying attention: Looking at your laptop or cell phone or otherwise multitasking while someone is speaking. Talking aside to someone else when a person is sharing an idea or experience. Closing off your body or communicating disinterest when someone is speaking. 	Give people your full attention. Put down your phone, close your laptop, and pay attention. Practice empathetic listening. Use open body language and facial expressions that connect with the speaker, show you are truly listening and care what they have to say. If someone is new to a group or company, the only person like them in the room, or just nervous, this can make a huge difference. And you may also find that you remember more about what they say.					

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DISARMING MICROAGGRESSIONS

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Express disagreement State values and set limits Describe what is happening Use an exclamation Use non-verbal communication Interrupt and redirect	 Boycott, strike, or protest the institution Request meetings with intermediary or senior leadership to share perspectives Exercise right to serve on boards to voice your concerns Delineate financial repercussions of continued macroaggressions Notify press or other media outlets 	 Protest political leaders who reinforce inequity and division/ support those who do not Revise and veto unjust communi- policies, practices, and laws Lobby to your congressmen or senators Attend televised town hall meetings to voice your concerns
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Point out the commonality Appeal to the offenders values and principles Differentiate between intent and impact Promote empath Point to how they benefit	 Describe the benefits of workforce diversity Institute long-term mandated training on cultural sensitivity for all levels Infuse multicultural principles into organizational mission and values 	 Raise children to understand concepts like prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Challenge silence/lack of response to macroaggression Identify shared mutual goals among people Increase community's exposure positive examples of diverse cultures to offset negative stereotypes and biases
	Seek External Intervention	
Alert Authorities Report the act Seek therapy/counseling Seek support through spirituality/religion/community Set up a buddy system Attend support groups	 Report inequitable practices to your union Create networking/mentoring opportunities for underrepresented employees/students Maintain an open, supportive, and responsive environment Call on consultants to conduct external assessments/cultural audits 	 Foster cooperation over competition Foster a sense of community belonging Create caucuses for allies and targets Participate in healing circles, vigils, memorials that remind us the consequences of hate

Figure 1. Microintervention strategies.

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