

What is a microaggression and how to avoid committing them:

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as: “Brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”

In order to avoid inadvertently perpetrating a microaggression, think before you make a reference, a joke or tell a story about a social identity or cultural group that is not your own.

Ask yourself:

- a. Am I making fun of someone’s identity (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and/or sexual orientation)?
- b. Might someone take offense to my words?

If yes to either of the above, don’t say it.

Examples of microaggressions:

- a. “What are you? You’re so interesting looking.”
- b. To a woman: “Surgery may be a difficult specialty to pursue if you want to have children”
- c. To a woman of color: “I would have never guessed that you were a scientist.”

Lastly, if (or more likely *when*) we commit a microaggression and learn that someone was hurt by our action, it is natural for us to respond based on our intention (“I didn’t mean to hurt you”). Though this may help make us feel better, it does very little to comfort the recipient impacted by our behavior. Rather than focusing on our intent, if we focus on the action and acknowledge its impact, we take responsibility for our action (i.e., “I apologize for saying that and I won’t do it again”).

Remember, we cannot assume we know everything about what is appropriate for every person, culture or group. If we keep in mind that we do not know what we do not know and that at times our actions may inadvertently cause people pain, we can acknowledge that pain and take the opportunity to learn from our experiences.

References:

Interrupting Microaggressions in Health Care Settings: A Guide for Teaching Medical Students

https://www.mededportal.org/doi/10.15766/mep_2374-8265.10969