## The Hidden Harm of Microaggressions and How We Can Do Better

By TANYEE CHEUNG

**W icroaggressions are subtle**, often unconscious, forms of discrimination that can have a significant impact on the mental health of marginalized groups, particularly women, communities of color, and older adults. While often not intentionally seeking to cause harm, microaggressions can leave even the most resilient of us feeling "less than." These small, subtle, and seemingly insignificant actions or comments can cumulatively create a hostile and oppressive environment, leading to feelings of stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Microaggressions can show up in the form of back-handed compliments and jokes, and can even be clothed in honesty and good intentions. Mocking an older person for their lack of technological skills may seem funny in the moment, but what if that person already feels insecure about their skills? What if they secretly feel that others perceive them as less useful because they are not up-to-date on technology? "Jokes" could further their insecurities. Back-handed compliments such as "I was surprised by how good your brief was" or "I don't know how you manage being a good parent and working full time" said off-the-cuff can lead someone to ruminate over such surprise regarding their work quality or parenting skills. Comments like "Taking a half-day?" to associates who leave the office at 5 p.m. can seem harmless but can weigh on the recipient, especially if they are leaving to address an already stressful situation.

Experiencers of microaggressions often feel that there is little that can be done. Often there are power dynamics at play and speaking up can have a negative impact. Due to the fear of making the speaker uncomfortable or being labelled "overly-sensitive," experiencers of microaggressions often say nothing. Even if there are no overt consequences for speaking up, intangible consequences such as loss of connection and community is also a concern.

In my own life, I realize that I have often suppressed my feelings or have downplayed other people's microaggressive behaviors in an attempt to not "rock the boat." Wanting to be part of the team, I would often stay silent, or give a vague, uncomfortable smile, hoping I would melt into my seat and that no one would notice my discomfort. There were times when the deliverer of microaggressions signaled to me that I should stay quiet. They



would start their statement with the dreaded words, "I hope you don't get offended" or "Can I be honest with you?" Statements such as these set up the experiencer to "misinterpret" the speaker's intent if they object to the next statements. On occasions when I have spoken up, instead of recognizing their offense, the offender becomes the offended, so I would quickly move on to the next topic.

It's not hard to understand why microaggressions remain so prevalent since microaggressors often are unaware of their actions. Whether it is to avoid discomfort, to be a "team player," or to avoid "offending," those experiencing microaggressions are often discouraged from addressing the situation. It is also worth noting that marginalized group may also make these off-handed comments. As I wrote this article, I wondered if I have been guilty of microaggressions that no one has called me out on, so I discussed the topic with my children, and they shared their experiences of instances in which they had felt the impact of my unconscious microaggressions. For all my good intentions, I was also guilty of this behavior. And for all the reasons I noted above, the experiencers of my microaggressions didn't speak up. So what can we do? How can we stop something that we don't even know we are doing?

For starters, we can become more aware of microaggressions and their impact. So, take a moment. Yes, right now, take this moment. Ask yourself 1) If you have ever made a statement that could have been viewed as a microaggression and 2) if you have ever experienced microaggressions. If you have, take a moment to recognize how that feels. Bringing awareness is the first step. Now that we know better, how can we do better? The answer isn't to dissect every word that comes out of our mouths—that would be exhausting. But, we can take action to bring awareness and create an environment that encourages open dialogue. Here are a few things you can do to get the ball rolling:

- Educate yourself: Learn about the different forms of microaggressions and the impact they can have; this can help you to recognize when they occur and understand the reasons why they are harmful. As a business, consider having a speaker educate your team on microaggressions.
- Encourage others to speak up/be open to feedback: This can be as simple as letting people know you are open to it. If you have a situation in which you might have experienced microaggressions, share the experience and let others know that you wouldn't want to inadvertently display this behavior. Let people know that informing you of instances of microaggresions would be welcomed.
- Listen actively: When someone tells you about a microaggression they have experienced, listen actively and try to understand their perspective. Avoid being defensive or dismissive, and instead show empathy and support.
- **Be aware of your own biases:** We all have unconscious biases, and these can influence our actions and words. Be mindful of your own biases and try to challenge them when they surface.
- >Practice self-reflection: Take the time to reflect on your own actions and words, and consider how they might be perceived by others. Reflect on any instances of microaggressions you may have committed and think about how to avoid similar situations in the future.
- >Avoid priming for silence: For anyone compelled to start a conversation with, "Can I be honest with you?" or "I hope you don't get offended," think about why you feel the need to make those statements. It's likely that your next statement will be diminishing or offensive. Think about what you are about to say and ask yourself 1) Why do I feel the need to open with these qualifying statements?; 2) Do I really need to say what comes next? Does it serve a purpose?; and 3) Is there a better way to approach it?

Know your audience: For the joke makers, consider how well you really know the person. Do you think that if the person had insecurities, they would share them with you? Have they shared any with you before? If the answer is no, then ask yourself, "If I had a real insecurity about \_\_\_\_ (e.g. my age, my skills, my gender, working hard), how would this statement come across?" As a leader, consider if there are ways to bring ease and comfort and build community and connection without potential for harm. Vulnerability is often a great equalizer and can help leaders connect more than a joke at another's expense.

It's important to recognize that microaggressions can have a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of those who experience them. It's crucial that we all strive to be more aware of the ways in which our words and actions may be perceived by others, and work to create a more inclusive and respectful environment for all. It surely will not change overnight but if we can shine a light on it, if we can raise awareness in ourselves and others, if we can empower people to speak up, if we take the time to self-reflect, we can slowly change ourselves and by so doing, change our culture.



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