

# **MICROAGGRESSIONS**

## **WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?**

- Brief, everyday interactions (i.e. comments, questions, looks, or ignoring) that send negative messages toward an individual because of a group they belong to (Sue et al., 2007).
- They often include making assumptions based on stereotypes about a group of people.
- You or others may not be aware that you are using microaggressions because they are not as obvious or as intentional as racist comments (Portman, et. al, 2009). However, they are still damaging to the receiver.
- Often times when experiencing microaggressions, you may feel something was “off” about the interaction, but you do not have the words to describe why it felt wrong or why you feel bad about it.

Ex. – (1) A professor, colleague, or peer asks you about the Native American perspective (therefore assuming that you should be able to represent all American Indians).

Ex. – (2) During a pow-wow, someone comes up to you and says “What a great costume you’re wearing!” (devaluing or minimizing spiritual/cultural heritage).

Ex. – (3) A professor expresses surprise that you did well on a test in his/her college course (assuming that you would not perform well based on gender or ethnicity).

Ex. – (4) American Indian students at the University of Illinois see Native American symbols and mascots exemplified by Chief Illiniwek dancing and whooping fiercely during football games (perpetuating a stereotype that American Indians are blood-thirsty savages; Sue, 2010)

**DISCUSSION: What have your experiences been with microaggressions (either sending or receiving)? How did you cope with these experiences?**

## **REACTIONS TO THE MICROAGGRESSION**

<b>THOUGHTS</b>	<b>FEELINGS</b>	<b>BEHAVIORS</b>
You may ask yourself: Did what I think happened really happen? Was this deliberate or unintentional? How should I respond? If I bring the topic up, how do I prove it? It is worth the effort, or should I drop it?	You may feel: angry, confused, sad, hurt, misunderstood, worried, indignant, offended, surprised, or scared.  Can you think of any other emotions?	You may withdraw, shut down, ignore it, or take action.  Have you experienced this?

## **THE “CATCH-22” OF RESPONDING TO MICROAGGRESSIONS**

- Possible consequences of not addressing the microaggression:
  - If left unaddressed, microaggressions can cause psychological harm to the person experiencing the microaggressions (Sue et al., 2012).
    - Microaggressions can make a person question his or her experience.
    - Microaggressions can cause feelings of pent up anger or self-doubt that can negatively affect physical and emotional health.
- Possible consequences of directly addressing the microaggression:

- May be perceived as “too sensitive,” others may dismiss the concern, or reactions may be used against the person to reinforce stereotypes.

## **TOOLS**

- Notice the emotions that arise.
- Practice self-acceptance. Try to accept whatever reaction you have. You do not necessarily need to act on your feelings right away.
- Remember the “Catch-22” of microaggressions. Decide how you want to respond, whether that means having a conversation with the person; or choosing not to address it directly, and instead processing your experience with someone else that can be supportive.
- If you decide to have a conversation, remember to use “I” statements (“I feel...,” “I felt...”) and focus on the event, not the person.
- Talk to a friend or a trusted advisor.
- Bring up concerns or experienced microaggressions in **Talk Circle** and gain support from peers.
- Engage in a breathing exercise to relax. See the following website for instructions:  
<http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-management-breathing-exercises-for-relaxation>
- Distract yourself if you think that will help in the moment. Visit your favorite website, play a song that you like, daydream about a hobby that you enjoy, or take a walk.
- Do something creative to express your feelings about the experience (i.e. journaling, drawing, etc.)
- Consider engaging in activism on campus to address these issues.

## **RESOURCES**

- **Office of Institutional Equity:** Leads investigations into complaints of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. <http://www.montana.edu/equity/>
  - *Janell Barber, Equity Officer at 406-994-5720 or [janellb@montana.edu](mailto:janellb@montana.edu)*
- **American Indian Student Center (AISC)**
  - *Richard White, Director, 406.994.4880 or [richard.white5@montana.edu](mailto:richard.white5@montana.edu)*
  - *Francine Spang-Willis, Program coordinator, 406.994.5529 or [francine.spangwillis@montana.edu](mailto:francine.spangwillis@montana.edu)*
  - *Rita Sand, Academic Advisor at 406.994.3334 or [rsand@montana.edu](mailto:rsand@montana.edu)*
- **Counseling & Psychological Services:** Provides FREE and confidential counseling.
  - Located at 211 Swingle (above Student Health) 406.994.4531
- For more suggestions on how to address microaggressions, see the following:  
[http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/files/seminars/Tool\\_Interrupt\\_Microaggressions.pdf](http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/files/seminars/Tool_Interrupt_Microaggressions.pdf)

## **References**

Portman, J., Bui, T. T., Ogaz, J., & Treviño, J. (2009). Microaggressions in the classroom. University of Denver Center for Multicultural Excellence.

Sue, D.W. (2010). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. Retrieved from:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life>

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *American psychologist*, 62(4), 271.