

# MITIGATING MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE WORKPLACE





**Subtle, verbal or nonverbal exchanges that indicate prejudice. Microaggressions amount to 'put-downs' of systemically excluded people.**

# Common Microaggressions

## RACIALIZED PEOPLE

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- You're so exotic
- What sport did you play to get into this school?
- You aren't like other (insert race) people
- Is that your real hair, can I touch it?
- Are you a diversity hire?
- Are you the new cleaner?
- Do all your kids have the same father?
- You have really big eyes for an Asian person

## WOMEN

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- Love, dear, sweetheart
- Do you really need to work?
- Being spoken over
- Having ideas dismissed but then validated when a man gives the same idea
- You should smile more
- Try to be nicer

## 2SLGBTQIA+

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- That's so gay
- Who's the man and who's the woman here?
- Is your wife coming?
- When are you having the surgery?
- What did you look like before you transitioned?
- How can you be sure you're a lesbian if you haven't tried it with a man?

## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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- But you look so normal
- I'm really OCD about my files
- I'm so dyslexic today
- The way you've overcome your disability is so inspiring
- Turn a blind eye
- Falling on deaf ears
- Tone deaf

# Allies speak up

- “I’m wondering what led you to believe that?”
- “What do you mean by that? Why does their gender matter? Did I miss something?”
- I know you didn’t realize this, but when you (say comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because... Instead, you could... (different language or behavior.)”
- “There’s some history behind that expression you just used that you might not know about. It actually means \_\_\_\_\_, so replacing it with \_\_\_\_\_ would be great.”
- “I noticed that you said \_\_\_\_\_. I used to say that too, but then I learned \_\_\_\_\_.
- “I just recently learned a more inclusive way to say that I hope you also let me know if you have any suggestions on other language I can use that would also be more inclusive”

## COMMON REACTIONS

## COMMON RESPONSES

Invalidation and minimization of impact

- “This happens to everyone. Don’t let this ruin your day.”
- You're tough. I know you'll get through this.
- Don't think about it anymore.

Disbelief that it’s sexism; asking a lot of questions

- “Do you really think it was about gender, your sexual orientation?”
- “I’m sure they were stressed, and you just happened to be there.”
- “How did you approach them?”
- “Did you say something that could have been misinterpreted?”

Highlighting of innocent intentions

- “I’m sorry you feel that way; I don’t think that was their intention.”
- “They’re a great group of guys.”

## INTENTION

## RESPONSE

### **Pause before you speak – take a moment to just breathe**

Think about what emotion you're feeling right now: anxiety, insecurity, resistance, anger, shame?

- Make a mental note and name the emotion you are feeling before responding.
- Ask yourself, what is needed now?

### ***Acknowledge and validate***

- Use words that validate the hurt your colleague is experiencing.

- “You are upset and have reason to be. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”
- “It sounds like implicit bias and sexism.”
- “This is a hard issue to bring up. I appreciate you trusting me with your anger and sadness.”

### ***Let them know they are not alone***

- This is an act of shared humanity.
- Express your ongoing support.

- “I’m here to support you. We will explore how to respond together.”
- “You’re not alone. I have heard this from other women in the workplace before.”

**What if I'm the one who  
says the wrong thing?**

# **Boots & Sandals:** *how to handle mistakes*

*Adapted from Presley Pizzo*



# An ego-centric response looks like:

**Centering yourself:** “I can’t believe you think I’m a toe-stepper! I’m a good person!”

**Denial that others’ experiences are different from your own:** “I don’t mind when people step on my toes.”

**Derailing:** “Some people don’t even have toes, why aren’t we talking about them instead?”

**Refusal to center the impacted:** “All toes matter!”

**Tone policing:** “I’d move my foot if you’d ask me more nicely.”

**Denial that the problem is fixable:** “Toes getting stepped on is a fact of life. You’ll be better off when you accept that.”

**Victim blaming:** “You shouldn’t have been walking around people with boots!”

**Withdrawing:** “I thought you wanted my help, but I guess not. I’ll just go home.”

*Adapted from Presley Pizzo*

# An ally's response looks like:

**Centre the impacted:** "Are you okay?"

**Listen to their response and learn.** "Thanks for letting me know."

**Apologize for the impact, even though you didn't intend it:** "I'm sorry!"

**Stop the instance:** move your foot

**Stop the pattern:** be careful where you step in the future.

# Anatomy of an Apology

## Acknowledgement

this happened/bearing witness - this is particularly critical in the context of a world that gaslights individuals/communities into believing that their experiences of oppression are fragmented incidents and not part of a larger system that supports and enables violence and marginalization of their communities.

*Shared with permission from Rania El Mugammar*

# Anatomy of an Apology

## Emotional Uptake

creating space for folks to feel their feelings, without being policed on the appropriateness, validity, duration and intensity of their emotional response.

## Centre the Hurt

It's not about our feelings of guilt, but about the feelings and needs of those we have harmed. Those we've harmed shouldn't have to support us during an apology, nor should they have to coach or cheer for us.

*Shared with permission from Rania El Mugammar*

# Anatomy of an Apology

## **Accountability + Changed Behavior**

Taking ownership of our actions, naming and understanding them and changing the identified problematic behaviors, patterns, thoughts and words. Not providing irrelevant context/justification to minimize the impact of our actions.

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## **Divest From Forgiveness**

Invest in the labor of reconciliation, divorced from appeasing our feelings of guilt and focusing on healing and supporting those we've harmed. Apologize without forgiveness as a target, but healing, regardless of whether we're forgiven or not.



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