

Anti-Black Racism Microaggressions

What are Anti-Black Racism Microaggressions?

A microaggression is a subtle racist insult, be it verbal or through a gesture, directed toward people in the Black community (as well as other marginalized groups) in a number of circumstances, either knowingly or unknowingly. These insults can come in many forms: a security guard following a Black patron around a store; a person requesting a nickname for a Black person instead of learning to pronounce their name; a person telling a Black woman that she's "pretty for a Black girl." These are all examples of microaggressions. Each of these actions and comments subtly tell people in the Black community that they are different and don't belong in a White-privileged society.

It is important to note that the "micro" at the beginning of the word microaggression is not a measurement of the size or quality of these offences. It signals that this type of aggression takes place on the micro-level (i.e. between individuals) rather than the macro-level (i.e. institutions like George Brown College and social structures within, like classrooms, clubs, trade unions, and meeting rooms). This often makes microaggressions more difficult to recognize, pinpoint, or prove.

Microaggressions are problematic because they are often done with little awareness of the underlying meanings and negative effects of the interaction. When a Black, Indigenous or other racialized person experiences a microaggression, there is a residual feeling of being uncomfortable, or a feeling that they have been disrespected or attacked. Microaggressions can seem like small, isolated incidents, but when this type of aggression is experienced multiple times daily it can result in serious trauma known as racial trauma. For many Black people, dealing with racial trauma all day, every day is demoralizing, harmful, and exhausting.

Types of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can be broken down into three types:

- Microassault
 - o This type of microaggression is an explicit racist or discriminatory action or comment meant to hurt Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people. This type of microaggression is not innocent or unconscious, it is a deliberate, targeted attack, and typically includes racial slurs and derogatory actions.
- Microinsult
 - o This type of microaggression can be conscious or unconscious, but always has an underlying racist message for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people. These comments and actions are often informed by systemic racism in society and based on common racist stereotypes. If a White person were to tell a Black woman that they're "pretty for a Black girl," this would be a microinsult suggesting that this individual has approached the White standard of beauty enough to be acknowledged.
- Microinvalidation
 - o This type of microaggression is made up of communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a Black, Indigenous, and/or other racialized person. When people in the Black community are told that "I don't see color" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to minimize their racial and cultural experiences.

How to Combat Microaggressions

Confronting microaggressions may result in a defensive response, but it is important to actively combat racist behaviour when you are able. One way to address these types of racist comments is to ask for clarification on the comment and challenge the person to consider the impact of their words.

For example, if someone were to say, "our colleague doesn't act Black," ask what they mean. By asking this question, it forces the person to examine what they're saying. This challenge may raise their awareness that they are reinforcing the idea of what 'acting Black' means based on generalization and harmful stereotypes.