

# MICROAGGRESSIONS

## TOPIC OVERVIEW

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## AWARENESS

### What are microaggressions?

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue, 2010).

## UNDERSTANDING

### Key take-home messages.

- 1 Validate individuals who approach you when they have experienced a microaggression.**  
Your first reaction may be defensive or to explain away the situation. Instead ... listen, support, validate, and create change.
- 2 Microaggressions are impactful whether you mean them to be or not.**  
Microaggressions are often unintentional. Think about a time when you may have said something intended to be complimentary but could have actually been an insult, such as, “You are so articulate.”
- 3 Microaggressions evolve from stereotypes.**  
Recognize that societal and your own stereotypes contribute to unconscious bias and the resulting microaggressions.

## TRANSFORMATION

### Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients and community.

- 1** Self-reflection is a critical component in discovering microaggressions and gives insight into how your behavior and words affect others.
- 2** As a team, explore common microaggressions in the workplace. Read the article [“15 Things People Think Are Fine to Say at Work—but Are Actually Racist, Sexist, or Offensive.”](#) Next time you meet, share your thoughts.
- 3** If you think you have observed a microaggression to someone on your team, check in with the targeted person to make sure they are okay.
- 4** Read the article [“What Are Microaggressions? Their impact is anything but small”](#) to learn more about the three types of microaggressions (microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation) and common verbal and nonverbal microaggressions.

## TOPIC ESSAY

# Why Microaggressions Matter

### Microaggressions: What are they? Why do they matter? What can I do about them?

Over the last few years, the importance of discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion has been magnified. As individuals, we often ignore or choose not to discuss crucial topics such as this in the hopes that silence would make it better. Silence does not make it better; it just allows the harm being done to continue unabated. Therefore, gaining knowledge on a topic like microaggressions is important.

Microaggressions are the everyday, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue, 2010). I want to highlight the fact that microaggressions are both intentional and unintentional. Many, if not most, of the microaggressions an individual experiences are done unintentionally. No harm is meant by the person doing the microaggression, and yet, because of that individual's lack of awareness, they are creating harm. Think about it: How many times have you heard the phrase, "It was not my intent." Unfortunately, this phrase can sound like an excuse, not an apology, to the individual or group to whom it was directed. Other statements such as, "I apologize if you felt that I hurt you, that was not my intent," can be equally dismissive. Statements that misplace ownership of who caused the hurt can diminish and devalue the targeted individuals' or groups' experience; in fact, the hurt remains. When you shift your thinking from an intent to an impact lens, you position yourself to a growth mindset that goes beyond the appropriateness of an apology (Diaz, 2020). To that end, a more appropriate response could be, "I've had some time to reflect on how my words may have landed in a way that I did not intend, but more importantly, I recognize the impact it had on you. I want to apologize for the role I played. What can I do differently to ensure this does not happen again?"

Whenever I talk about or give a presentation about microaggressions, I am often asked for a few examples, and I have also been asked for a comprehensive list of all the microaggressions that exist. These questions come from a well-intentioned place. The individual asking for examples of all the microaggressions wants to study the list and make sure they do not commit any of these errors; the individual wants to be inclusive and make sure they are not harming others. This fact-based approach is common in the health sciences, including veterinary medicine. It makes sense why this is the case when we think about how we approach training our future health care professionals.

However, when it comes to topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, this approach does not work. Unfortunately, there is not and never will be a comprehensive list of microaggressions. Along our personal and professional journey, we will make some mistakes; the important part is acknowledging these mistakes when we are made aware of them, apologizing for the harm we have caused, and learning from these situations.

I do agree that examples are helpful in illuminating some of the forms that microaggressions can take. Some may be familiar to us; given our multiple intersecting identities, we may even recognize microaggressions that we have experienced. Microaggressions cut across all minoritized and marginalized identities: race, class, gender, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

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### Here are some examples of microaggressions and what they signal:

- When an African American person walks into an elevator, they notice the others in the elevator clutch their purses closer to them. This unconsciously signals to the individual entering the elevator that they are a threat. The belief is they want to steal the purse.
- An individual who is Asian American is having a conversation with a client. The client mentions to them that their English is so good and asks where they are from. The Asian American individual is from Wyoming. This signals that the Asian American individual is viewed as an outsider, something other than American—that they do not belong.
- As part of their interview to join a veterinary practice, an individual notices that all the restrooms have gendered signs (male or female) and no gender-neutral facilities exist. This signals to the individual that their identity is not considered here and if they choose to work here it may be a negative environment.
- A new employee notices that there is one coworker who always mentions to her that she should smile more because it looks good on her. This coworker only says this to female employees. This objectifies the female employees, creating an uncomfortable environment.

When taken individually each of these examples may seem harmless. But the fact that people continuously experience microaggressions leads to a cumulative harmful effect. One study published in 2020 found that Black adolescents surveyed over a two-week period experienced an average of five instances of racial discrimination each day (English et al., 2020).

Exacerbating this harmful impact is the fact that when individuals who experience microaggressions share their experience with others, they are often dismissed. It is common for individuals to hear “Oh, I know that person, I am sure they didn’t mean it that way,” or “I think you are just being too sensitive,” or “Well, I asked this other person who has the same identity as you and they didn’t feel it was a microaggression.”

All these comments serve to silence the individual who has expressed their discomfort. The next time they face a microaggression, they question their own reality and their sense of alienation is only increased. By silencing and ignoring a difficult conversation around microaggressions, there is no personal growth or professional development. The microaggressions persist, and a noninclusive climate is not improved, which leads to staff turnover and can ultimately affect patient care.

So, what can we as individuals do to address microaggressions? There are a variety of ways we can be influential in our spheres and the veterinary profession. Given the often implicit and unintentional nature of microaggressions, I believe we all must begin with self-reflection. One tool I have used throughout my career and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine is the Intercultural Development Inventory (<https://idiinventory.com/>). This is a great way to start the process of self-reflection and think about the messaging we are constantly exposed to in society and how it impacts us.

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**In addition to self-reflection, there are things we can all practice and keep in mind:**

1. Create a culture of open conversation in your workplace. This is critical for when difficult conversations emerge.
2. When individuals express experiencing a microaggression, make sure to listen and validate their experience. The first reaction for many individuals is to be defensive or explain away a situation. Do not do that. Listen, support, validate, and create change.

We all have a role to play in creating the inclusive and supportive environments we all want to see in veterinary medicine. Increased awareness of microaggressions and their impacts is one of the ways we can continue our progress. ■

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I serve as the assistant dean for diversity, equity and inclusion at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine. I have spent the last 15+ years serving in a variety of roles in higher education administration in Iowa and Wisconsin. These include roles in multicultural student affairs, pharmacy admissions, and MD/PhD training. In all my roles, I have brought my passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion topics in order to create more inclusive environments for all.

## RESOURCES

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