



Responding to Microaggressions and Unconscious Bias

There is not a single “best way” to respond when we witness a microaggression in an interaction between two people, or when we observe actions or hear comments that seem to demonstrate unconscious bias. For people whose identities are not directly targeted by the words or actions, we have a responsibility to take action in solidarity and find ways to use whatever privilege we have to take action and influence the person who did the harm. At times, that action may simply be calling out unacceptable behavior or naming the impact those words/actions had. **But particularly for allies working in solidarity, if we are committed to help shift another person’s thinking and behavior in the long term , we must take a few things into consideration, such as:**

What is my relationship with this person? To what extent do we know and trust one another, and how might that impact this conversation?

What might I need to consider about how this person may experience me, given who I am and who this person is (age, race, gender, sexuality, role, experience, etc.)?

How might I get some sense of permission or authentic agreement from the person to engage this issue (now or over time)?

What assumptions and beliefs am I holding about this person that might get in the way of a productive conversation? How can I hold on to some “grace” with them (connecting to empathy for who they are, not projecting my distress onto them, acknowledging that it will ultimately be their choice whether to make a change)?

How might I approach the conversation in a way that will actually get this person to open up to a new understanding and change their behavior?

Some suggested strategies and sample responses:

- Take a breath and take care of yourself. Avoid getting reactive, which will only increase the person’s defensiveness. Consider if now is the time to respond; if not, commit yourself to when you will return to the conversation.
- Consider getting permission: “Can we talk about what just happened?” or “What just happened didn’t sit right with me – are you open to talking about that?” or “Can I share a different perspective on what you said?”
- Clarify what was said to check your own assumptions. “I think I heard you say ____, is that right?”
- Be sure to focus specifically on the person’s exact actions or words they used, rather than who they are as a person. When people hear judgement or accusations about who they are (especially if called out in front of others), their defenses go up and they usually cannot take in new perspectives or learning.
- Draw out the speaker further to get more information: “Can you tell me more what you mean by ____?” or “What led you to say / believe ____?” or “What leads you to that conclusion?”
- Acknowledge the feelings the person may be having / express some empathy: “It seems like you’re feeling frustrated about ____” or “I can understand that you’d be upset if you felt disrespected when ____.”
- Whenever possible, reflect any positive intentions: “It sound like you were intending to express ____” or “I’m sure you didn’t mean to convey ____.”

- Clarify the difference between intent versus impact : “While you didn’t intend to convey _____ the words you used can send a message that _____” or “Even though your intention was _____, the person you were talking to may have experienced _____.”
- Share the impact it had on you: “When I hear things like that, I feel _____” or “That makes me think about _____ which is not ok / really upsets me.”
- Share your own experiences of saying or doing things that had an unintended impact: “I am saying this because I’ve had similar experiences - I used to think / say _____, and I learned that _____... It felt awful to realize that I had upset someone, but I over time I realized I needed to focus on making it right instead of just defending my intentions.”
- When relevant, challenge any stereotype that the person used or implied: “Actually, in my experience _____” or “I think that’s a stereotype - I’ve learned that _____” or “I know that you & I were not exposed to a lot of people / information / history like this, but there’s a lot more that we need to learn about _____”
- Appeal to the person’s empathy: “You and I may not have experienced _____, but imagine how this person might feel if they were regularly hearing things like _____?” or “How do you think you’d feel if you or someone close to you were regularly experiencing _____?”
- When possible, appeal to core values: “I know you are someone who cares a lot about _____. What I just heard doesn’t seem to live up to that, despite your intentions.”
- Consider connecting them to people and/or resources that may shift their perspective: “Have you spoken to _____ about this? I think you might appreciate what they have to say.” Or “This (video / podcast / article / book) had a big impact on me - I’d love to talk with you about it if you’re open to that.”

If you are receiving feedback about your own words or actions (someone expresses that they experienced a microaggression or heard bias in something you said or did), consider these suggestions:

- Take a breath and take care of yourself. Taking full breaths can help our bodies calm down and allow our brain to focus.
- Listen carefully. Don’t interrupt and don’t justify. Let the person share as much of their experience as they want to share and try to take it all in.
- If someone is expressing that they have been directly harmed by something you said or did, listen to them and believe them. While you may think of your intent/words/actions in a different way, their experience of being upset is their real experience. Focus on understanding the impact you had.
- Take responsibility: acknowledge and apologize for the negative impact you had. If you are clear about how you can make this right / avoid this / do better in the future, name that commitment.
- Particularly in interactions across differences of identity (race, gender, sexuality, culture, etc.), you may not understand why what you did was problematic; you have not experienced what it means to live in the world with another identity. Try to stay curious to learn more about what you don’t know - but don’t assume this person wants to educate you about it.
- Depending on the relationship and context, you might seek permission to talk more: “I want to be sure I’m fully understanding you. Are you open to talking more about this?” If they agree, start by asking clarifying questions - not challenging what they offered.
- Take time to sort out what you heard. Seek out people who you share some affinity with (similar identities to you) who may be able to offer helpful perspectives. Seek out people whom you trust who will not simply validate your position, someone with whom you can speak openly about what’s still confusing / challenging for you about what you heard and get some valuable insights.
- Continue to do your own work and learning about counteracting bias and microaggressions (online resources, books, articles, podcasts, etc.).