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**February 17, 2022**

## **Road Map Bulletin: Addressing Microaggressions in the Workplace**

Happy Thursday, Mount Sinai Community,

Last year, we wrote about Mount Sinai's policy on [racist patient or guest behavior](#), and it was one of our most-read newsletters to date. So this week we're expanding on the topic by examining how we can best address **microaggressions** at Mount Sinai.

Before we dig into how to handle microaggressions, however, we need to define them. Read more [here](#):

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*“A **microaggression** is a casual debasement of any marginalized or other non-dominant group. It can be verbal, behavioral, and environmental; whether intentional or unintentional, it can communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults. One particular point about microaggressions is that they do not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, they are glimpses of the internalized prejudices and bias that lurks beneath the surface of our public selves.”*

As **Vida Jong**, MPA, Senior Manager for Operations and Strategic Partnerships, Mount Sinai Employee Health Services, and a member of the Committee to Address Anti-Asian Bias and Racism, explained, “Some microaggressions are like a ‘backhanded compliment.’ Depending on what the microaggression is, people may not realize what they said is offensive—but that doesn’t change the negative impact it has. Other microaggressions can be purposefully passive-aggressive, but the individual may not see how their comment is rooted in bias or systemic racism and therefore how harmful it is.”

Microaggressions are rooted in stereotypes and are specific to certain identities and groups, examples include:

- Calling female doctors by their first name while referring to male doctors as “Dr.”
- Telling a person of color that their “English is so good”
- Telling Black people that they’re “very articulate” or “well-spoken”

It’s crucial to remember that microaggressions can be said by anyone and can be aimed at anyone and are not limited to race or ethnicity, but can extend to gender, sexuality, religion, age, nationality, and more. Since microaggressions are often intersectional—meaning they refer to overlapping identities—in their impact, we can only tackle microaggressions within the Mount Sinai community with an intersectional approach. That’s why **Devin Madden**, MPH, Program Manager, Office of Gender Equity in Science and Medicine, and **Ashley Michelle Fowler**, MEd, Administrative Program Manager, Center for Multicultural and Community Affairs, came together with an interdisciplinary team of representatives from across the institution to develop system-wide educational programming on microaggressions.

As Devin describes, “Since microaggressions are steeped in power differentials, we wanted to share a framework that felt universally accepted and was recognizable across the Health System.” The group identified the below ACTION framework, originally developed by Tasha Souza, PhD, of Boise State University, which provides guidance for addressing microaggressions in daily interactions. However, every situation is unique and each of us should feel empowered to find language that’s most comfortable.

## If you notice a microaggression, against a peer or patient, you can take



**Consider Asking**  
"Can you please explain what you meant by that?" This can be asked in a number of ways. Remember tone is everything.

**Consider This Tip**  
Curiosity may encourage conversation and reduce defensiveness.

**Consider Saying**  
"I noticed that you [...] and it made me pause."

**Consider Saying**  
"I am concerned that may be hurtful or misconstrued..."

**Consider Saying**  
"That comment makes me uncomfortable because..."

**Consider Saying**  
"Thanks so much for talking this through with me - we all have so much to keep learning, and I encourage you to stay as open as you were today."

The idea behind the ACTION method is for **observers of microaggressions, rather than the subjects of microaggressions**, to intervene. In other words, those on the receiving end of a microaggression shouldn't be responsible for then educating the offender—it's a shared responsibility for the rest of our community to stand up for someone who is targeted.

"We're trying to build a community of upstanders not bystanders. If someone says something to me or treats me in a certain way, and it seems to be because of my gender, for example, I hope that someone else can support me in educating that individual," Devin said. She also cautioned, however, that the focus should be on progress, not attacking anyone. "We also acknowledge everyone's likely to mess up at some point, so we need to emphasize calling others in, not calling each other out, to create an environment of mutual trust and accountability."

At the end of the day, however, the ultimate responsibility for educating someone who commits a microaggression falls upon that individual themselves.

## If you've committed a microaggression:

Resist defending yourself | Ask or consider what you can do | Acknowledge your impact  
Keep educating yourself | Apologize without caveats

### Learn More:



Office of  
Gender  
Equity:

[icahn.mssm.edu/about/gender-equity](http://icahn.mssm.edu/about/gender-equity)



Office for  
Diversity and  
Inclusion's  
Education  
and Training:

[mountsinai.org/about/diversity/education-training](http://mountsinai.org/about/diversity/education-training)



United in  
Solidarity  
Resource  
Guide:

[tinyurl.com/unitedinsolidarity](http://tinyurl.com/unitedinsolidarity)



Health Equity  
Resource  
Collection:

[tinyurl.com/HealthEquityRC](http://tinyurl.com/HealthEquityRC)

“For those confronted with committing the microaggression, I would ask them to first look internally and question why they said something about that group or person in the first place,” said Vida. “Why did you ask that particular person that question? Why did you make that comment? Was the reason based in stereotype, bias, or deviation from the dominant culture? Reflect upon the thoughts behind your comments.”

Microaggressions, though they may seem minor compared to more explicit bigotry, are crucial to address because of their cumulative impact. Microaggressions aren't singular—people with marginalized identities, especially those with intersecting marginalized identities, often face an onslaught of these everyday occurrences and that harm cannot be understated.

To set up a department-wide training on microaggressions and learn more about the ACTION method, reach out to [genderequity@mountsinai.org](mailto:genderequity@mountsinai.org). If you'd like to educate yourself further click [here](#).

Lastly, we want to acknowledge the recent string of violent and hateful events and their impact on our city and nation. This is both an intensely mournful and frightening time for all of us—especially people of color, religious groups who are targeted by hate, and members of underrepresented minority groups, among many others. The entire Mount Sinai family offers our unconditional support to everyone impacted.

And please join us for one of our upcoming events.

All the best,  
Angela & Shawn

## Upcoming Events in February

- **Decolonizing Global Health Education**—Tomorrow, February 18, at noon, learn about the best practices in decolonizing global health education. Register [here](#).
- **Chats for Change: White Supremacy Culture Characteristics: Denial and Defensiveness**—on Tuesday, February 22, at noon, join a discussion on how white supremacy culture supports and promotes denial and defensiveness, thus encouraging silence. The conversation will investigate how these qualities lead to disconnection and brainstorm how we can reconnect with ourselves and others. Register [here](#).

Road Map for Action

Past Bulletins