

Microaggressions at WRV

Microaggression: the kinds of remarks, questions, or actions that are painful because they have to do with a person's membership in a group that's discriminated against or subject to stereotypes. A key part of what makes them so disconcerting is that they happen casually, frequently, and often without any harm intended, in everyday life.

Microaggressions do real harm: research has shown they can cause mental and physical health problems, and can make an environment more hostile and less affirming

Not responding to a microaggression does real harm too: research shows that when someone (particularly a person with power or privilege) leaves a microaggression unaddressed, it can do just as much damage as the comment itself.

Examples of microaggressions from WRV projects:

- From a leader to a Latina participant: "I can't pronounce your name. I'm going to give you an English name instead."
- From a leader to multiple female volunteers: "You're too pretty to be doing this hard work."
- From a leader to an Asian participant born and raised in the US: "You speak English so well."
- In response to a non-white volunteer joining a table of white volunteers: "Looks like the diversity quota is filled!"
- From a staff member to a group of volunteers: "I need several strong guys over here."
- Any joke that is based upon someone's identity
- Any instance where someone minimizes the ability of a woman to contribute to the work
- Any instance where someone assumes that one person can speak for all others based on their identity (i.e. "tell me, why don't more Black people come on WRV projects?")
- From a passerby to an adult working with Latinx youth: "Is this a work release program?"

Responding to microaggressions makes a real difference! Research shows that lack of response by a person in an authority position can do more damage than the initial comment itself.

Here's how to do it:

- Respond promptly. Don't wait until several hours later. Remember, the incident may be doing real harm to the person who experienced it.
- You don't have to make a big deal in front of a group. You can pull both people aside, speak to them together or separately, respond casually, etc. based on your understanding of the situation.
- However, if you do feel confident responding in the same group within which the comment was made—go for it. That way everyone who witnessed the harmful comment is also witness to the response and resolution. They are now part of the solution instead of being bystanders or participants in the problem.
- It's totally fine to ask the person who experienced the microaggression how you can support them, but remember: that person might deal with comments like this all the time. Your role is to take the burden off them by intervening in some way yourself.
- If you're nervous about confrontation, remember: the person speaking may not even realize that what they said is problematic. You are helping them learn from their mistake, not calling them a bad person.
- The most important thing to do is respond in some way, so figure out what is comfortable for you, and then do it!

But what do I say??

One simple way to respond on a WRV event to any comment or joke that is based upon a person's identity is to say, "We don't make jokes at WRV that are based on someone's identity." This doesn't attack anyone's intentions, but simply reminds them of the rules, similarly to what you'd say if they took their gloves off or were using a tool improperly.

Other approaches for responding to microaggressions:

Approach	Examples
Inquire	What did you mean by this? Why do you think that? What makes you ask that/say that?
Paraphrase/Reflect	I'm hearing you say ___ but it sounds like you're saying ___. It sounds like you think ___. Can you give me some examples?
Reframe	Is there another way to look at this? I wonder what message this sends. Would you say this to a white male? How would you feel if this happened to you?
I statements	I felt ___ when you said ___ because ___. I was upset
Impact	(I don't think you meant it, but...) let's consider the impact on ___ when you said ___.
Separate	That could be perceived as a racist comment (instead of "you're racist").
Revisit if needed	**Research indicates that leaving a microaggression unaddressed can do just as much damage as the comment itself.

What if you get called out for a microaggression or realize that you said something offensive?

First, take a breath. You might feel defensive, but remember that being called out is an indication of trust—the person calling you out thinks you can do better.

Don't make it about you. Explaining why you said something isn't helpful. Your words alone aren't the problem—it's that they are part of a pattern of behavior that is based on centuries of oppression and marginalization.

Apologize. That's it. Experts say that overdoing the apology—going on and on about how bad you feel and how you're not a racist—actually turns the topic back to you.

Just be sincere: thank them for the feedback, tell them your truly sorry for what you said and that you hurt them (not "if" you hurt them), and then learn from the moment—don't use that word or tell that joke again.