

HANDOUT ...**What are Microaggressions and How Can They Be a Form of Dating Violence?****MICROAGGRESSIONS**

Microaggressions are subtle acts of discrimination, intentional or not, against someone from a marginalized group. They are thinly veiled instances of racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression. A microaggression can be an insult, an off-handed comment, a gesture, or another slight that communicates a derogatory view of a targeted group of people that the user often believes is complimentary.

EXAMPLES :

- “You speak English really well!”
- “Who wears the pants in your relationship?”
- “You don’t ‘look transgender’...you look like a real woman”
- “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”
- “Where are you *really* from?”
- Referring to people as “normal” vs. “not normal” (as relates to neurodiversity, ability, and other types of differences)
- “Do you really pray 5 times per day?”
- “Can I touch your hair?”
- “All lives matter.”
- Denying a person’s experience by questioning the validity of their story.
- Disregarding religious or cultural traditions (for example, inviting someone to dinner who observes Ramadan)

These examples include stereotypes, which are generalizations made about groups of people, victim blaming, and minimizing the value of one’s identity. These are not genuine compliments because they express that the individual and people like them only have value if they align with the dominant identity group, in other words, if they align with whiteness, masculinity, Christianity, and so on.

These examples may seem minor to someone who has never endured microaggressions, but it’s important to understand that microaggressions can have a collective and harmful impact on a person’s psyche and experience in the world.

HOW DO MICROAGGRESSIONS IMPACT RELATIONSHIPS? ¹

Oppression in all its forms – sexism, racism, classism, ableism, transmisogyny, homophobia, and so on – creates and promotes barriers to equity, respect, and mutuality, all key components of a healthy relationship. It relies on social structures wherein one group has power and access to resources at the expense of other groups. Oppression interrupts our capacity to be whole and healthy in relationships and in community, especially when it comes to our bodies, sex, and power.

All people have the right to determine and define for themselves what healthy relationships look like and oppression acts as a barrier to achieving that autonomy. Microaggressions minimize people’s lived experience of oppression and create a power imbalance within interpersonal relationships.

On campus, microaggressions can create a hostile and unwelcoming environment for students. Within relationships, microaggressions degrade trust, sabotage intimacy, and often result in one person withdrawing or shutting down, especially if exposed to repeated slights or insults from their partner.

¹ Adapted from Adkison-Stevens, C. & Timmons, V. (2018). *Prevention through liberation: Theory and practice of anti-oppression as primary prevention of sexual and domestic violence*. Oregon Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence. https://www.ocadsv.org/sites/default/files/resource_pub/Prevention_Through_Liberation_-_Paper.pdf

HANDOUT...**What are Microaggressions and How Can They Be a Form of Dating Violence?** (continued)**HOW TO UNLEARN YOUR OWN BIASES:**^{2,3}

- Respect people's lived experiences. The people who know the most about any form of oppression are those who are directly affected by it. Their experience should be affirmed and valued over the opinions of people who don't experience it.
- Be prepared to make mistakes and be ready to apologize, work on it, and move on. Understand the big picture and let that motivate you towards action rather than getting stuck in guilt.
- Commit to learning and listening, especially from people experiencing oppression.
- Acknowledge the impact of your actions even if your intentions aren't to harm others.
- Take actions to change your behavior.

WAYS TO RESPOND IF YOU WITNESS A MICROAGGRESSION:

There is no one perfect way to respond when interrupting a microaggression. Find a way that works best for you and feels safest for you and your friend. There are many factors that might inform how you interrupt a microaggression including, but not limited to, not feeling prepared, how well you know the partner, and/or feeling like you may be targeted because of your own identities.

- Be brief and direct: "That sounds homophobic."
- Voice your values: "I don't want to comment on someone's appearance like that."
- Use "I" statements: "I believe that is offensive."
- Ask for clarity: "Did you really mean to say that?" or "What do you mean by that?"
- Promote more respectful behaviors: "We should respect people's stories/experiences, don't you think?"

² Adapted from Oregon Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence. (n.d.). *Working definition of allyship: The handout*. https://www.ocadsv.org/sites/default/files/resource_pub/allyshipdefinition_handout.pdf

³ Adapted from Oregon Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence. (2018). *Toolkit for interrupting oppression*. https://www.ocadsv.org/sites/default/files/resource_pub/ocadsv_toolkit-for-interrupting-oppression_web.pdf