

# HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES



## The Many Faces of Micro-Aggression

*Have you ever had a paper cut that kept getting your attention?*

No matter what you are doing, you keep going back and focusing on this little cut and the small but pulsing pain. Micro-aggressions are very similar. They are seemingly minor comments, actions, or environmental shames, whether intentional or unintentional, that stick with you and are hard to ignore.

The reason they are hard to ignore is that they communicate in subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults. Those who inflict micro-aggressions are often unaware that they have done anything to harm another person.

Micro-aggressions are symptoms of unconscious bias that exists in our culture through stereotypes and are often times reinforced by the media.

Sometimes micro-aggressions start off with what seems like a compliment — you're really smart — followed by a negative jab. So the message behind "you're really smart" is that you are the exception for women. Because they can have this two-part message, often you are left speechless because you aren't

exactly sure what was said. You're thinking, "Wait—what was that?!" And then you find yourself stewing because you didn't have a chance to confront the person who said it.

### Here are some examples of micro-aggressions:

"You're lucky to be black—so easy to get into college."

"You must be so happy that you look white."

"Where are you from? No, really, where are you from?"

"You're really pretty for a dark-skinned girl."

"You don't speak Spanish?"

"You don't act like a normal black man."

"You're really smart for a woman."

"You aren't gay, you just haven't met the right man."

Micro-aggressions can communicate that you "don't belong," that you are different from the "in group."

Comments like these — "You're lucky to be black, it's so easy to get into college"; "You must be so happy that you look white"; "Where are you from, no really, where are you from?" — carry a

behind-the-scenes message that you don't belong to the group. You got into college but you really shouldn't be there. You look white and therefore can pass as a group member, but you aren't really a legitimate member. You look Chinese so you couldn't possibly be American by birth.

Many people do not speak up when they experience a micro-aggression. This is especially true when micro-aggressions happen within a work environment. You may be afraid to say something because you will be accused of "playing the race card" or be seen as the "angry woman," or you might even lose your job — it just seems like it is more trouble than it's worth.

But there are long-term consequences of micro-aggressions. They contribute to building stress, which is toxic to your body, because these comments set off a threat response much like when you are physically threatened. This results in increased levels of stress hormones which create wear and tear on your body, and can sometimes lead to things like hypertension and diabetes. They also get in the way of you performing at your best.



### What can you do if you hear a micro-aggression?

It can be as simple as saying, "Ouch" or asking for more explanation: "Can you repeat that? I'm not sure I caught what you just said. What were you saying?" This forces the individual to declare their intent. So, you may hear, "You're lucky to be black, it's so easy to get into college." And you respond with, "I'm sorry. I am not sure what you mean by that comment. Can you explain?"

Any of us can be surprised to find that we have just said a micro-aggression. That's good! Being aware is the first step. We need to hold each other accountable! By doing this we can help each other realize the many ways that unconscious bias creeps into our thoughts and conversation.

## microaggressions: How to IDENTIFY and CORRECT

TUESDAY, JUNE 16

5:30-7:30PM

ASHEVILLE CITY SCHOOLS

CENTRAL OFFICE:

85 MOUNTAIN STREET

**SPEAKERS: LISA EBY, MS (BIOSTATISTICS), MSW, SPHR**  
Director of Human Resources, and Communication  
Buncombe County Health and Human Services

**JACQUELYN HALLUM, MBA, MHA**  
Director, Health Careers and Diversity Education  
Mountain Area Health Education Center

**MICHELE ASHLEY, Transformational Coach**

### OBJECTIVES:

1. Define the concept of micro-aggressions
2. Identify forms of micro-aggressions
3. Utilize strategies to decrease micro-aggressions

Join us for  
dinner and a  
discussion!

Attendance  
is free!

PLEASE LET US KNOW THAT  
YOU WILL BE COMING!  
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Co-Sponsored by ACS Parent U, MAHEC, Buncombe County Health & Human Services, Diversity Engagement Coalition

