

# MICROAGGRESSIONS AND SELF-ESTEEM: FOUR CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

**Microaggressions** are a subtle and unconscious form of discrimination experienced in brief, everyday exchanges that send negative messages about a group experiencing marginalization. These exchanges negatively impact youth's overall wellbeing and are detrimental to their **self-esteem** – the beliefs and attitudes they hold about their worth and abilities.



## **01. Microaggressions do not refer to isolated incidents but to everyday encounters.**

They involve exchanges between people who are influenced by differences in power and privilege. Racialized youth are often the target of microaggressions. For example, someone may tell a non-white youth that their English is “good” – even when English is that young person’s dominant language. Microaggressions can also be experienced by trans, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary youth. For example, someone may continue to use the wrong pronouns for a young person even after they have shared their correct pronouns.

## **02. Youth may internalize the degrading messages that microaggressions send.**

Since microaggressions are small interactions that can combine, over time, to convey the message “You don’t belong, you’re not the norm,” youth may start to believe this is true, impacting how they view themselves and understand the world around them. Lower self-esteem can then limit their sense of future possibilities.

## **03. Experiencing microaggressions can take a toll on youth wellbeing.**

Youth may contend with difficult emotions and chronic stress, which can compromise mental health and lead to poorer sleep quality, lower academic achievement/engagement levels, and substance use or other potentially harmful coping behaviours.

#### 04. Support from youth workers can mitigate the effects of microaggressions.

Youth workers can promote value in diversity by modelling inclusion and acceptance, and create safe spaces in which youth feel affirmed – and in which microaggressions can be named, interrupted, and refuted as they occur. In doing so, youth workers can support youth to share, understand, cope with, and respond to microaggressions and experiences of everyday discrimination. This work of allyship and mentorship can have many positive outcomes for youth, including empowerment and academic success, particularly for racialized young people, contributing to improved self-esteem.

## REFERENCES

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