

Confronting Anti-Black Microaggressions: Strategies for Black Youth and Non-Black Allies



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

The cumulative effect of microaggressions on Black people has been described as ‘death by a thousand cuts’. This Evidence Brief summarizes strategies for responding to anti-Black microaggressions for Black youth and non-Black allies, as well as what to do when one is called-in for harmful words or behaviours.

TWO KEY MESSAGES

01. The cumulative effect of microaggressions on Black people has been described as ‘death by a thousand cuts’.

Anti-Black microaggressions are daily, sometimes unintentional, “slights, indignities, put-downs, and insults” towards Black people.^{1,2} These everyday insults and slights, which may seem small in the moment, affect the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of Black youth, families, and communities.

Even subtle experiences of racism lead to elevated levels of depression and stress for people of colour;³ exposure to racial microaggressions has even been linked to suicidal ideation.⁴ Microaggressions affect the wellbeing of Black people even if they choose to numb themselves to them or ignore them; experiencing “the spectrum of racism — from microaggressions to systemic oppression to hate violence, may negatively affect people whether someone is aware of it at all.”²

02. Combatting anti-Black microaggressions is a collective responsibility.

Microaggressions are a complicated form of anti-Black racism to confront for those

targeted. One of the reasons anti-Black microaggressions are so difficult to call out is their seemingly innocent nature. Anti-Black microaggressions can sometimes even seem complimentary before you unpack the assumptions that underpin them (such as telling a Black person that they are “so articulate”). So when Black people do decide to confront anti-Black microaggressions, they experience **racial gaslighting** – being told they are overreacting, being too sensitive, or experiencing a role reversal, in which Black people are framed as being abusive or aggressive for calling out harmful, subtly racist comments. It can be too emotionally exhausting to call out every microaggression because they happen so frequently.

White people and other non-Black allies have a responsibility to challenge anti-Black microaggressions and other racially abusive behaviour wherever it presents itself, whether it is in practice, in the workplace, or in their social circles and daily interactions.

The emotional labour of confronting anti-Black microaggressions should not rest solely on Black people.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Responding to Anti-Black Microaggressions: Strategies for Black Youth

01. Find an appropriate time and place to call out the microaggression.

Microaggressions might happen when it's inappropriate to call them out – for example, in a work meeting. Calling out a microaggression publicly might lead to defensiveness and hostility rather than to a teachable moment – an opportunity to call someone in by making them aware of the impacts of their words or actions. Take note of the microaggression and follow up with it later, when you can privately discuss why the interaction was harmful.

02. Objectively describe the microaggression and ask clarifying questions.

Start by objectively describing the harmful interaction. Sometimes just asking someone who committed a microaggression for more information or clarification can reveal to the person the bias behind their comments or actions.

For example, if a colleague points out that you, as a Black person, are “so articulate,” ask them some clarifying questions so they can reflect on their comment:

“Why do you feel the need to highlight that I am articulate?”

“Did you not expect me to be articulate? Why is that?”

“Do you understand how that comment could be interpreted?”

03. Explain the impact the microaggression had on you.

When a microaggression seems unintentional, educating the perpetrator without attacking them can help them reflect on their behaviour and do better in the future. A good way to approach the conversation could be, “I know you meant well, but that comment is hurtful because...” or “I know this wasn't your intention, but this comment made me feel bad because...” Avoid making sweeping attacks on the perpetrator's general character or name-calling because that causes defensiveness rather than creating a moment for learning and growth.

04. If the person who enacted the microaggression is not receptive, seek outside support.

When calling someone in for perpetrating an anti-Black microaggression, the conversation might not always go as anticipated. The person might get defensive or completely dismiss your concerns. If the intended teaching moment with the person is not happening, accept it and move on to seeking outside support. If this is happening in the workplace and is repetitive and distressing, consider contacting your supervisor, human resources, or a union representative. For people on the receiving end of anti-Black microaggressions, doing something as simple as discussing your experiences with other Black folks can be healing and comforting.

Responding to Anti-Black Microaggressions: Strategies for Non-Black Allies

01. Avoid saviour complexes.

If you are a non-Black ally speaking out against an anti-Black microaggression, speak for yourself rather than for the Black young person who is the target of the microaggression. Speaking over a Black person is, in and of itself, a microaggression, as it can be dehumanizing to have someone speak on your behalf.² Instead of saying, “You hurt her feelings,” try, “Here’s why I’m offended, upset or hurt.”²

02. Validate and support the person who experienced the microaggression and explicitly name the racist microaggression.

After calling out a microaggression, validate and support the person who was on the receiving end. Be sure to name that what that person experienced was a microaggression and racism, as Black people experiencing microaggressions can dismiss their own experiences. Even just having someone else recognize that a comment is a form of racism can be therapeutic and validating.² This affirmation can provide the person who has experienced the microaggression “with a language to describe the experience and the realization that they’re not crazy.”²

What to Do When You Are Called-In for Committing a Microaggression

01. Don’t be on the defensive.

Accepting criticism is always difficult, especially when being hurtful is not your intention. Avoid making dismissive comments like, “I was just making a joke” or “It’s not even that big of a deal.” Listen with empathy and strive to

understand the nuances of why your comment was hurtful, as opposed to invalidating the feelings of the person calling you in.

02. Acknowledge your impact.

Remember that **intention** is not the same as **impact**. Although you may have made a comment with good intentions, your comment caused hurt. Acknowledge the impact of your comment and the pain it caused.

03. Apologize and do better.

Apologize to the person who received the microaggression and vow to yourself to do better moving forward. Take some time to educate yourself about anti-Black microaggressions and anti-Black racism in general through resources like books, articles, or podcasts. YouthREX’s *Centering Black Youth Wellbeing: A Certificate on Combatting Anti-Black Racism* or *Call-In-Cards for Anti-Black Racism Action* – can provide a place to start.

ENDNOTES

1. Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). [Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders](#). *American Psychologist*, 74(1), 128–142.
2. Yoon, H. (2020, March 3). [How to respond to microaggressions](#). *New York Times*.
3. Torino, G. (2017, November 10). [How racism and microaggressions lead to worse health](#). *USC Center for Health Journalism*.
4. O’Keefe, V. M., Wingate, L. R., Cole, A. B., Hollingsworth, D. W., & Tucker, R. P. (2015, October). [Seemingly harmless racial communications are not so harmless: Racial microaggressions lead to suicidal ideation by way of depression symptoms](#). *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 45(5), 567-576.