

# So, What IS an Anti-Black Microaggression? 50 Examples from Black Youth



Anti-Black microaggressions are daily, sometimes unintentional, slights, indignities, put-downs, and insults towards Black people.<sup>1</sup> They can be complicated to combat because they are subtle and can seem inoffensive, or even complimentary, on the surface.

Experiencing microaggressions has been described as “death by a thousand cuts”<sup>1</sup> because of their incremental, damaging effects on the physical and mental health of Black youth.

*Anti-Black microaggressions permeate various facets of the daily lives of Black youth – in random interactions in workplaces, public spaces, educational institutions, healthcare settings, interactions with police, and even gatherings with friends and family.*

## 50 Examples of Anti-Black Microaggressions from Black Youth:<sup>2</sup>

### IN WORKPLACES:

1. “I once cried at work because my own bosses told me I was only there because I was a diversity hire.”
2. “My straight white cis male manager tried to equate his lived experiences with mine, by telling me that he is an immigrant because he was born in Europe. Our conversation was about my not getting the same number of shifts as my white co-workers.”
3. “While working at the summer camp, I was the only Black and female manager. Though I did not experience overt discrimination, I was held to a higher standard and criticized more heavily if I made a mistake. When I would try to address instances of sexism or passive-aggressive remarks related to my race, I would be told not to make everything about gender and race.”
4. Comments that imply that Black people are intellectually inferior. For example, saying, “Wow, you are actually so articulate and well-spoken!” when a Black person is communicating clearly.
5. “Co-workers constantly discuss my hair, skin colour, and whether I tan or not.”
6. The notion that Black hairstyles (dreadlocks, twists, braids, cornrows, etc.) are not “professional.”






7. Assuming a person of colour at work is a cleaning staff member, delivery person, etc.
8. Black women being seen as “aggressive” when being confident or assertive.
9. Not trying to pronounce a Black person’s name when it is unfamiliar or shortening a long name without asking if you can.
10. Implying that a Black person’s success is because of affirmative action or other diversity initiatives and not because of their own merit. The idea that Black people are given unfair benefits because of their race.
11. A customer or client not believing that a Black person is in a senior or manager role: “Who’s actually in charge here? Can I speak to the real manager?”
12. Comments from co-workers and bosses that perpetuate the narrative that Black people are not ‘true Canadians’ and that Black people are perpetual foreigners: “Where are you from? No, where are you really from?”
13. “I have had many experiences in my previous job where my concerns around anti-Black racism were not taken seriously. My direct supervisor would often gaslight me and even filed a complaint against me when I spoke up about discrimination and bullying. That, coupled with bad experiences with police, general anti-Blackness, and consistent racist events in the news, is often overwhelming.”
14. “Once, when I worked as a server at a restaurant, we had a new manager who insisted that I did not handle the cash and till. ...I was instructed to greet customers, take their orders, and serve them and when it was time to render their bill, leave the change on the table or let my manager in question handle it. I was also the only Black employee at the restaurant which further othered me.”
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### **IN PUBLIC SPACES:**

16. “I’m Black. A store owner asked if I wanted to be a basketball, football player or a rap star. He was shocked when I said programming.”
17. “I have constantly been racially profiled and treated differently due to the fact that I’m Black. I’ve had staff follow me around in stores I’ve frequented, been refused entry into a store’s washroom – even though a lighter, white-passing friend of mine was granted access minutes earlier – and I’ve been told or shown by men that they don’t date Black women or women my complexion or darker.”

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18. “Once, I needed to use the washroom and entered a Michael’s craft store. I asked an employee to use the restroom, and she said no. A few moments later, the same employee let a customer of a white complexion into the restroom. I’m not one to jump to conclusions, but that situation made me realize that racism is still a big issue.”
  19. Black people’s experiences of anti-Black racism being invalidated: “Stop making everything about race!”
  20. Nonverbal communication that shows fear of being near a Black person. For example, avoiding sitting next to a Black passenger on the subway.
  21. A white person clutching their purse or crossing the road when they see a Black youth, especially a young Black man.
  22. Commenting that Black people who display positive characteristics, like intelligence or kindness, are the exception of their race: “You’re one of the good ones!” or “You are not like most Black people.”
  23. Pathologizing communication styles that are different from white/dominant culture. For example, asking a Black person, “Why are you so loud?” if they are talking animatedly in public.
  24. “As a Black person we are likely to be considered a threat, especially by people who don’t know us. We tend to be overlooked.”

### **IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:**

25. “My white teacher assumed I was travelling to my home country to get married at the age of 16.”
26. A teacher disciplining Black youth more harshly than non-Black peers for similar behaviours, leading to increased rates of detentions or suspensions.
27. Black youth enduring racial jokes or comments from classmates that go unaddressed by teachers or school staff.
28. “I’ve had teachers talking about the history of racism, saying that it was a myth about how bad Black people were treated during slavery, and how, of course, slavery is wrong, but they weren’t actually treated that badly.”<sup>3</sup>
29. “My experiences of microaggressions in school are endless. I am often targeted and seen as somebody who is stereotypically not supposed to do well.”
30. Eurocentric school curricula; science and math courses with no mention of Black thinkers; only white authors and texts featured in literature courses; Black people’s contributions to Canadian history not mentioned.

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31. “So the curriculum is Eurocentric, so just being made to feel like I didn’t exist. I remember when I was in school, and I didn’t exist at all in terms of, like, you know, Blackness didn’t exist. And it was only when I was in biology that I actually saw myself because they can’t deny that I have a body, that I have a reproductive system.”
  32. Black students being dismissed or questioned by teachers if they want to pursue academically challenging opportunities: “Are you sure you want to apply to the International Baccalaureate program? You know it’s really difficult, right?”
  33. “One of the youth who I work with has now found a strong interest in cosmology after being introduced to Star Talk, hosted by scientist and educator Neil deGrasse Tyson. The simple act of seeing positive representation of your people is empowering, especially in a system designed to promote negative aspects constantly.”

### **IN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS:**

34. There is a stereotype that Black people are ‘stronger’ than others and that they don’t experience as much pain. Medical professionals undertreat Black patients for pain or medical conditions due to such racial biases.
35. “I was sick with a severe infection at the hospital, and the nurse kept telling me I was being overdramatic and overplaying my symptoms. Turns out I was severely sick and needed to be admitted immediately. I felt she was saying these things to me because I am Black, and she thought I was seeking prescription drugs or medication.”
36. Black youth enduring assumptions about substance use, criminal behaviour, or any other stereotypes based on race by healthcare professionals.
37. “Being a woman of colour, I constantly experience discrimination by healthcare workers. I have endometriosis, and I went to the hospital experiencing severe pain. The doctor didn’t take my concerns seriously, and I ended up having one of my cysts erupt.”
38. Black communities facing stigma surrounding mental health issues within their respective communities, leading to reluctance in seeking help.
39. “I went to an optician appointment once, and my doctor, who I had been seeing for the past six years, verbally berated me for sitting in the front office. He confused me for another Black patient he had just seen minutes ago and was confused as to why I was still there. I haven’t returned to his office.”
40. Individuals calling the police when a Black person is experiencing a mental health crisis.

## IN INTERACTIONS WITH THE POLICE:

41. “As for discrimination, it is not a surprise, I am Black and it’s natural (unfortunately) that racist comments or discrimination will be thrown our way, I’ve been questioned about where I live in my own building’s lobby by an officer, and been called slurs by random individuals. It’s unfair and it sucks.”
42. “Being stopped by police when walking around my own neighbourhood as a result of racial profiling.”
43. “I’ve had a police officer not take my complaint seriously, accuse me of wasting his time until my white roommate came downstairs to back up my claim.”
44. “I am Black and I was at Woodbine Beach with my friends (also Black), hanging out near the rocks. Two police officers on bikes came over to us to ask us about an incident of a stabbing that happened the night before and demanded to take down our information.”
45. “Police officers often stop my friends and I because we are Black and apparently look ‘suspicious’ or they just so happen to be looking for people who look like us.”

## IN GATHERINGS WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY:

46. Black youth being tokenized by non-Black friends to perpetuate the myth of colour-blindness. For example, “My best friend is Black, how can I be racist?”
47. Black youth being told they are not “Black enough” for having interests or personality traits that are unique or uncommon.
48. Expectations from peers to be good at things that Black people are stereotyped as talented in, including singing, dancing, sports, etc.
49. Black youth being fetishized or exoticized by their non-Black peers because of their race.
50. Colourism based on skin tone and Eurocentric beauty standards: “You are pretty for a Black girl!” or “You’re really pretty for a dark-skinned girl.”

## ENDNOTES

1. Yoon, H. (2020, March 3). [How to respond to microaggressions](#). *New York Times*.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, examples are summarized from Black youth participants in two community-engaged research projects by YouthREX: *Ontario Youth Sector Compass* and *Centering Black Youth Wellbeing: Beyond Anti-Black Racism Training to Transformational Action*.
3. Raza, A. (2022, April 13). [Being Black in School: Peel students open up about the racism they face in the classroom](#). *CBC News*.