



MICROAGGRESSIONS: OFFERING MEANINGFUL APOLOGIES

You care about others and try not to use hurtful language or make people feel unwelcome. That includes trying to avoid microaggressions, which are words or actions that offend people or reinforce negative stereotypes or power dynamics.

Microaggressions can stem from mistaken assumptions. Or they may be, for example, remarks about someone's name, clothes, hair, accent, or cultural practices. They may be unintentional, and they often reflect biases that are unconscious.

Because of this, and despite our efforts, any of us might occasionally say or do something that offends someone. And although being told that you've done so doesn't feel good, there's another way to think about it: It's an indication of trust. Whether it's the receiver of the microaggression or someone who witnessed the interaction, when someone starts such a conversation, they want to be honest with you, and they believe that you can learn from what happened.

Knowing how to respond to the situation can help you repair or even strengthen relationships. You will likely want to apologize to the person or people who were offended, and if someone else told you about it, you may want to apologize to them, too. In either case, you should: (1) address the harmful comment or behavior, (2) acknowledge the impact it had, and (3) commit to doing better. Here are some other suggestions for apologizing for a microaggression.

DO ...	AVOID ...	OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER
Believe that what you said or did caused someone to feel hurt or offended	Telling the other person that they're wrong	Start with the assumption that the other person is right. Also remember that people from marginalized groups have experience identifying microaggressions.
Take a breath and let the other person talk	Getting defensive	Having said something offensive doesn't mean you're a bad person. Although it can be hard, try to replace any defensiveness with gratitude. Try saying, "Thank you for trusting me enough to talk to me about it." This kind of response can help significantly to defuse a tense situation.

DO ...	AVOID ...	OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER
Listen thoughtfully and without judgment	Making excuses or trying to prove that you're a good person	Ultimately, you want to relieve the distress you caused and reestablish trust. Consider their comments seriously and agree that there is an issue and it should be addressed. Try saying, "I'm sorry I did that. It was hurtful," or "I'm sorry that you had to deal with that. You deserve better."
Realize that the impact matters more than the intent	Saying that you had good intentions or meant no harm	By focusing on the impact of your words or actions, you prioritize the feelings of people from marginalized groups, who experience microaggressions frequently. Their perspectives should be heard and validated.
Validate the other person's feelings	Interrupting	Be willing to feel uncomfortable after you make a mistake. It's important to let the other person lead the conversation and say all that they want to. After they finish, try repeating what you heard them say to show that you understood.
Thank them for telling you	Saying "I'm sorry if you felt offended"	Using the words <i>if you</i> weakens the apology and undercuts its sincerity. Try saying, "I care about creating an inclusive environment, and I want to improve. Thank you for telling me how that made you feel."
Offer a sincere but simple apology	Overdoing it	It's common to want to apologize profusely if someone says that you hurt them. But apologizing too much or talking about how bad you feel can make them feel obligated to make <i>you</i> feel better. Keep your initial response short. Try saying, "Thank you for that feedback, even though it's hard to hear. I won't use that word in the future."
Learn more on your own if you don't understand	Expecting the other person to educate you	Don't force the other person into a long conversation or challenge them to prove anything to you. If you don't fully understand why what you said or did caused offense, treat it as an opportunity to learn. Attend an event about the topic or read books or articles about it.
Consider following up	Staying away from the person	After some time has passed, contact the person to express gratitude for their honesty and effort. Try saying, "Our discussion influenced me. I could have gone on not knowing, but I understand better now. Thank you for saying something."
Keep learning and trying to do better	Giving up	Recognize that actively taking steps to avoid perpetuating racism, sexism, and other discrimination or prejudice is hard work. One conversation cannot erase all our unconscious biases. Instead, it's an ongoing process.