

What are microaggressions?

“WELL, YOU SHOULDN’T WEAR RED LIPSTICK ANYWAY. On your lips, you’d look like a clown.”

Jennifer said this to me at the end of the lunch period in our middle school. She was leaning against the wall, like a cool girl from television. Jennifer had a horizontally striped shirt that was all the rage in the early ’90s and slightly slouchy jeans that would only in later years be called “mom jeans” but at the time were very “in.” She had skin that I’d seen in romantic novels referred to as “peaches and cream.” Her auburn hair was in a stylish bob. And on her lips was a beautiful shade of red lipstick.

My mom had just allowed me to begin wearing lipstick the beginning of that seventh-grade year. But with all of my mom’s lectures on the importance of “natural” looking makeup, I knew without asking that I would not be able to leave my house with a bright red shade on my lips. In all honesty, I’d

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never really thought about wearing red lipstick before, but seeing my too-cool classmate donning the shade informed me that I had been missing out on all that makeup had to offer.

I had walked over to Jennifer, pulled by her beauty. I tugged my yellow jacket that I used to hide my belly a little tighter over my body. My too-tight jeans made zipping noises and my chubby thighs rubbed together. I patted down the top of my relaxed hair with an inch of puffy roots. Jennifer was everything I was not, but I loved her lipstick, so we finally had something in common.

“I really like that lipstick,” I said, trying to sound like I wasn’t nervous, like Jennifer and I talked every day, “I wish my mom would let me wear a color like that.”

Jennifer looked at me, smiled briefly, and then said, “Well, you shouldn’t wear red lipstick anyway. On your lips, you’d look like a clown.”

I broke into a cold sweat immediately. “Oh, yeah, heheh,” I tried to laugh, “I guess you’re right. My big lips.”

I pinched my lips together, trying to draw them into my mouth. “Ok, see ya,” I said with faked nonchalance and turned and walked away, patting my hair and tightening my jacket once again.

I didn’t wear red lipstick until after I graduated high school. And not because of my mom.

I patted my hair all of the time because of all of the times my hair had been referred to as “poufy.” Nothing bad was meant by it, nobody was trying to hurt. It was just an acknowledgement that in a time where people were literally coating their strands in silicone, my hair’s volume was a noticeable and unpleasant contrast.

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My hair and my lips were not the only part of me that was too much. I had taken on quite a babyish voice a few years earlier, after all of the jokes about how my loudness was so “typical for a black girl”—I didn’t know what that meant, because I was the only black girl at my school, but I knew it wasn’t good. My butt was also too big, that was made very clear with references to hip-hop songs glorifying large butts that were often recited to me by smiling classmates.

I would be having a good day, lost in my imagination, and bam—I’d be hit with a comment that would remind me that I was not allowed to get comfortable. I couldn’t walk comfortably, I couldn’t talk comfortably, I couldn’t sit without patting my hair, I couldn’t smile without worrying about how large my lips looked.

In spite of all of this, I did really love school. I was a bright kid who enjoyed learning. I was in the advanced program in middle school and finished the last two years of high school at the local community college to get a head start on college credit. I had been obsessed with getting into a good college. By ninth grade, I had an entire row on my bookshelf dedicated to college brochures. I wasn’t the only one, other kids in the advanced classes were just as obsessed with college as I was.

At first, my eyes would light up when kids would start talking about college. Finally, something we all had in common. After hanging around the periphery of such talk for a few weeks, I finally decided to join in. I began rattling off the colleges that I had hoped to go to when a student cut me off and said, “I mean, you don’t have to try that hard anyway do you? You’re black, you don’t even have to do well

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in school to get into college. You don’t even have to be in this class.”

He looked at me matter-of-factly when he said this, no malice in his eyes. The other kids in the group just sort of nodded to themselves as if this kid had said something as plainly true as “the earth is round.” And although it hadn’t been explicitly said, the message was clear, “You don’t belong here.” Even in this group of nerds, this group of people who loved the same boring books and random facts and all raced to be the first to answer the same questions in school as me, I didn’t belong. Because I was black.

I would like to say that this is when I stopped caring what other people think, that this was when I stopped trying to fit in. But I was a fifteen-year-old girl, and I was so lonely. So I kept trying. I kept trying to make friends and build community and every time I thought I’d made progress, someone would deflate all of the air out of my dream.

But as painful as it was, I didn’t know that it was wrong. I didn’t know that I wasn’t supposed to be treated this way. I was pretty sure that I was the problem. Because nobody came to my defense, hell, nobody batted an eye when these things were said to me. They weren’t a big deal, just small comments, little jokes. I shouldn’t be so sensitive. It was all in my head. If I just found a way to have less things wrong with me, these bothersome comments would stop. So I smiled less, ate less, laughed less, and spoke in a whisper.

My senior year I had been invited to a scholarship conference at a local university for promising students of color. I was very nervous. By then, almost all group social interaction sent me into a spiral of anxiety and depression—and I didn’t

know any of these kids at the conference. What if I fit in even less than I did at school? I almost didn't go, but the lure of a possible scholarship helped strengthen my resolve.

I arrived at the hotel conference room. Inside there were hundreds of black and brown students. More kids of color than I'd ever previously seen combined. I was immediately overwhelmed by the noise. Kids were laughing in loud, open-mouthed guffaws. Everybody was using their outdoor voice. People were slapping each other on the arm as they talked. Everybody looked like old friends. I looked at the long tables that students were seated at, like a school cafeteria. My stomach clenched. I hated school cafeterias. Nothing lets you know that you are going to die alone like when you try to find a seat in a school cafeteria and everyone avoids eye contact like you are walking flatulence. I edged closer to the tables and scanned the room, trying to look for open seats without making eye contact, so that nobody would have the chance to reject me by looking away.

After a few moments I heard a voice next to me, but it didn't really register. Then I heard it again.

"Hey! Come on. Are you going to sit or what?"

She was talking to me. I sat down gratefully next to her. She introduced herself and asked my name. "Ijeoma," I answered quietly.

"What?" she yelled over the din of the room.

I was going to have to use my real voice in here. "Ijeoma," I answered again, loudly.

One of the college program administrators began his welcoming speech. After a few minutes of rules and expectations, along with a congratulation for our current and future aca-

ademic success, the administrator finally said the words that three hundred black and brown kids had been waiting for him to say.

"We have pizza for everyone."

There was an immediate dash to the table piled high with pizza boxes behind the administrators. Kids advanced upon that pizza like there was a winning lottery ticket at the bottom of every slice. But I didn't. Because I was a fat kid. I wasn't just a fat kid; I was a fat black kid. And I knew that rushing to eat the pizza that I so desperately wanted would confirm what was insinuated the many times I'd heard people say, "well at least you're black, they think fat women are attractive." What hadn't been said, but had been meant was, "It's not okay to be fat, but it's the most we can expect from a black girl."

I was so hungry. I hadn't eaten all day. I was just as hungry as every other kid cramming entire slices of pepperoni pizza into their mouths. The pizza smelled so good. I looked at all my options and worked out a plan. Vegetarian pizza. I would grab a single slice of vegetarian pizza. Then, even though I'd still be a fat black girl with pizza, I'd look like I was at least trying not to be. I walked over to the vegetarian pizza, there was no rush to these boxes. I opened a box and looked for a reasonable slice—one big enough so that I wouldn't pass out from low blood sugar within the hour, and one small enough to let people know that I already understood I wasn't supposed to be enjoying it.

As I reached for a piece, the girl who had invited me to sit next to her reached for a slice next to it. Then she drew her hand back as if it had bit her.

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“Salad pizza?” she looked up at a nearby friend and shouted, “Girl look. They got salad pizza over here. Ha! I’m not eating salad pizza.”

She walked off toward the pepperoni. Another kid shook his head and chuckled, “Salad pizza,” to himself.

I closed the lid on the box, walked over to the pepperoni pizza, and grabbed two giant slices. And I ate, in public, without fear, for the first time in years.

Not once in the two days I was at the conference did anybody make fun of my name. Not once in the two-day conference did anybody even glance at my hair. Not once in the two-day conference was I aware of the loudness of my voice or the size of my ass. Not once in the two-day conference did anybody question the academic achievements that had brought me there—we were all there because we were smart kids who had worked very hard. For two days I got to feel like the majority of my classmates had felt almost every day, like a complete human being.

I don’t know how to describe what those two days were like for me except to say that I hadn’t known before then that there was so much air to breathe.

YOU KNOW THE HYPERCRITICAL PARENT IN THE MOVIES? The mom or dad who finds a way to cut you to the quick right when you are feeling happy or proud or comfortable? “Nice to see you’re finally trying,” or “That’s a lovely dress. I can’t even see how much weight you gained.” The remark that seems harmless on the surface? The small sting that comes out of nowhere and is repeated over and over, for

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your entire life? That is what racial microaggressions are like, except instead of a passive-aggressive parent, it’s the entire world, in all aspects of your life, and very rarely is it said with any misguided love.

Microaggressions are small daily insults and indignities perpetrated against marginalized or oppressed people because of their affiliation with that marginalized or oppressed group, and here we are going to talk about racial microaggressions—insults and indignities perpetrated against people of color. But microaggressions are more than just annoyances. The cumulative effect of these constant reminders that you are “less than” does real psychological damage. Regular exposure to microaggressions causes a person of color to feel isolated and invalidated. The inability to predict where and when a microaggression may occur leads to hypervigilance, which can then lead to anxiety disorders and depression. Studies have shown that people subjected to higher levels of microaggressions are more likely to exhibit the mental and physical symptoms of depression.¹

As harmful as microaggressions can be, they are very hard to address in real life. Why? Because they are very hard to see.

Microaggressions are small (hence, the “micro”) and can be easily explained away. It is very easy to dismiss a small offense as a misunderstanding or simple mistake.

Microaggressions are cumulative. On their own, each microaggression doesn’t seem like a big deal. But just like one random bee sting might not be a big deal, a few random bee stings every day of your life will have a definite impact on the quality of your life, and your overall relationship with bees.

Microaggressions are perpetrated by many different people. Because each microaggression is just one sting perpetrated by a different person, it is hard to address with each individual person without (1) becoming very exhausted, and (2) being written off as hypersensitive.

Many people do not consciously know that they are perpetrating a microaggression against someone. Much of our oppressive actions are done in complete ignorance of their effect, or subconsciously—where we aren't fully aware of why we are acting aggressively toward someone. This is often the case with microaggressions. Rarely does somebody perpetrating one say to themselves, "I'm going to find a small way to hurt this person."

Having established that microaggressions are hard to see, let's take a look at some of the ways in which they can show up in everyday conversations for people of color.

"Are you the first person in your family to graduate from college?"

"Are you an affirmative action hire?"

"Wow, you speak English really well."

"You aren't like other black people."

"I thought Asian people eat a lot of rice."

"Why do black people give their kids such funny names?"

"That's so ghetto."

"Is that your real hair? Can I touch it?"

"You listen to opera? I thought you were black."

"Wow, you're so articulate."

"Your name is too difficult for me. Do you have a nickname?"

"Where are you from? No . . . I mean, where are your parents from? I mean . . . where is your name from?"

"Is the baby-daddy in the picture?"

"You have really big eyes for an Asian person."

"Why are you complaining? I thought Chinese people loved homework."

"Welcome to America."

"Do your kids all have the same dad?"

"You don't sound black."

"Are you the maid?"

"Excuse me, this is the first-class area."

"Is this a green card marriage?"

"You're so exotic."

"You have such a chip on your shoulder."

"Are you the nanny?"

"That fiery Latin blood."

"Did you grow up in a teepee?"

"Are you visiting this neighborhood?"

"Your accent is adorable."

Microaggressions aren't always delivered in words. It's the woman who grabs her purse as you walk by. The store clerk following you around to see if you need "help." The person speaking loudly and slowly to you because you probably don't understand English. The person locking their car doors as you walk past their vehicle. The high-end sales clerks who assume that you didn't come to shop. The fellow customers who assume you are an employee. The people who decide to "take the next elevator instead." The professor who asks to check your sources, and only *your* sources, "just to be sure." The kids whose parents say that they can't come play with your

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kid. The not-so-random random security checks at airports. The crowded bus where nobody will sit next to you. The cab that won't stop for you.

For nonwhites, racial microaggressions find a way into every part of every day.

Microaggressions are constant reminders that you don't belong, that you are less than, that you are not worthy of the same respect that white people are afforded. They keep you off balance, keep you distracted, and keep you defensive. They keep you from enjoying an outing on the town or a day at the office.

Microaggressions are a serious problem beyond the emotional and physical effects they have on the person they are perpetrated against. They have much broader social implications. They normalize racism. They make racist assumptions a part of everyday life. The assumption that a black father isn't in the picture reinforces an image of irresponsible black men that keeps them from being hired for jobs. The assumption that a Latinx woman doesn't speak good English keeps her from a promotion. The assumption that a child of color's parents wouldn't have a college degree encourages guidance counselors to set lower goals for that child. The assumption that black people are "angry" prevents black people from being taken seriously when airing legitimate grievances. These microaggressions help hold the system of White Supremacy together, because if we didn't have all these little ways to separate and dehumanize people, we'd empathize with them more fully, and then we'd have to really care about the system that is crushing them.

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WHEN SOMEBODY HAS PERPETRATED A MICROAGGRESSION against you, it can be hard to address. There is no guaranteed method for success that will make somebody realize what they are doing and stop, but here are a few strategies that work at least part of the time.

- **State what actually happened.** Some things just need to be called what they are, and microaggressions are definitely among those things. "You just assumed that I don't speak English." Say it directly. What is happening to you is real and you have every right to name it.
- **Ask some uncomfortable questions.** Because a lot of microaggressions are perpetrated with subconscious motivation, questioning the action can force someone to really examine their motives. Two of my favorites are "Why did you say that?" and "I don't get it. Please clarify."
- **Ask some more uncomfortable questions.** If the person you are talking to becomes flustered or insists they meant nothing by it, ask, "Is this something you would have said to a white person?" or "How exactly was I supposed to take what you just said?"
- **Reinforce that good intentions are not the point.** "You may not have meant to offend me, but you did. And this happens to people of color all the time. If you do not mean to offend, you will stop doing this."
- **Remember, you are not crazy and you have every right to bring this up.** "I can see this is making you uncomfortable, but this is a real problem that needs to be addressed."

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If you witness racial microaggressions against someone else, you should strongly consider speaking out as well—especially if you are a white person. The strategies above will also work when confronting microaggressions against other people, with a few minor tweaks to ensure that you aren't making this about—well, you. Also, please take the lead of the person of color who is being directly harmed by the microaggression. If it seems like they do not want the issue addressed, do not decide to come to their rescue anyway—people of color have very good reasons for why they choose to speak out and why they choose not to, and you don't want to remove that agency from them. It is also important to make sure that when confronting microaggressions against others, you are not doing so in a way that will place the person of color you are defending at greater risk or will increase the burden on them. Don't make enemies for them—help when you are reasonably confident that you can do some good. And if that person of color is already speaking out and looks like they could use some support, offer it! It's a horrible feeling to speak out against microaggressions in a room full of white people and be met with nothing but hostility or silence.

As a person of color, you don't have to call out every microaggression against you, but you have the right to call out each and every one that you choose to. Do not let people convince you that you are being oversensitive, that you are being disruptive or divisive. What is harmful and divisive are these acts of aggression against people of color that are allowed to happen constantly, without consequence. What is harmful and divisive is the expectation that people of color would just accept abuse. While sometimes these conversations about mi-

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croaggressions can be very healthy and lead to a pleasant resolution, where a well-meaning person genuinely listens and acknowledges the pain they've caused, often, the person you are talking with will refuse to see what you are saying and will become defensive. And that's okay. Even that is progress.

Because these harmful actions should not be comfortable. And if you get called out enough times, you'll stop, if only to be able to go about your day without argument. And eventually, for many people, it does sink in—maybe not the first time, or the fifth time, but eventually. It is not your job as a person of color to educate people on their racist actions, please remember that, but it is always your right to stand up for yourself when you choose to.

If you have been called out for a racist microaggression, and you want to understand and you do not want to hurt people of color, here are some tips:

- **Pause.** It is very easy to be overwhelmed with emotions when you are called out. Before you respond at all, pause and catch your breath and remember that your goal is to understand and to have a better relationship with the person you are talking to.
- **Ask yourself: “Do I really know why I said/did that?”** Think for a moment—why did you choose to make that comment? Why did you clutch at your purse? If you can't think of a good reason, this is a good sign that you should examine this more in yourself.
- **Ask yourself: “Would I have said this to somebody of my race? Is it something I say to people of my race?”** If it's a comment that is specific to that race (say, assuming

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that a Chinese American doesn't like "American" food), ask yourself if you think of and voice similar stereotypes in your everyday interactions with other white people. When a white person orders Chinese, do you say, "But I thought you only ate hot dogs!"?

- **Ask yourself if you were feeling threatened or uncomfortable in the situation, and then ask yourself why.** Often, microaggressions are a defense mechanism when people are feeling racial tension. You're hanging out with your buddies and then a black friend comes and joins a previously all-white table. That discomfort might cause you to act inappropriately, acknowledging that the mood has been changed because someone "different" who doesn't quite belong has joined. But instead of investigating your own biases and prejudice that make you uncomfortable, you take it out on the person who joined by making the difference their problem with a racially insensitive joke or reference. Sometimes, you feel challenged by a person of color and your defense is to "knock them down a peg or two" and you do that by referencing their race in a negative or isolating manner—you don't know that's why when you do it, but if you look back at your emotions and see that feeling of threat, you will see that you made a choice to respond in a racially oppressive way and you need to examine why.
- **Don't force people to acknowledge your good intentions.** What matters is that somebody was hurt. That should be the primary focus. The fact that you hurt someone doesn't mean that you are a horrible person, but the fact that you meant well doesn't absolve you of guilt. Do

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not make this about your ego. If you truly meant well, then you will continue to mean well and make understanding what just happened your priority.

- **Remember: it's not just this one incident.** This incident is the continuation of a long history of microaggressions for people of color. Racial trauma is cumulative, and you cannot expect a person of color to react to each situation the way that you would have encountered it for the first time. It may not seem fair that you would take some of the blame for what has happened in the past, but what is truly unfair is the fact that people of color have to endure this every day. The privilege you enjoy in not having to constantly suffer these indignities requires that you at least take responsibility for how your actions may be adding to them and the pain that causes.
- **Research further on your own time.** Take whatever knowledge the person confronting you is willing to give gratefully, but do not then demand that they give you a free 101 session on microaggressions. Trust me, whatever it is you've done, it's been done before, and a quick Google search will help you understand further.
- **Apologize.** You've done something that hurt another human being. Even if you don't fully understand why or how, you should apologize. It is the decent thing to do when you respect people. You don't have to totally "get it" to know that you don't want to continue doing something that hurts people.

Talking about microaggressions is hard. It's hard for the person constantly having to bring up the abuses against them,

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and it's hard for the person constantly feeling like they are doing something wrong. But if you want this to stop—if you want the deluge of little hurts against people of color to stop, if you want the normalization of racism to stop—you have to have these conversations. When it comes to racial oppression, it really is the little things that count.

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Why are our students so angry?

WHEN MY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD SON IS NERVOUS ABOUT something, he often moves silently back and forth at the doorway to my bedroom, where I do most of my writing. If I don't notice him within a few seconds, he'll very lightly knock. When he's not nervous, he just bursts right in with no pretense of manners. We are not usually a house that knocks. But when he's nervous, he knocks.

That evening, I looked up at the sound of a hesitant little knock at my doorway and saw the little brown face of my worried boy.

"Mom?" he said, barely audibly.

I smiled warmly, "Come sit down, baby, tell me what's up."

My son sat at the end of my bed and fidgeted for a moment before saying in an almost scared voice, "Mom, I don't want to go to my assembly at school tomorrow."