

Stopping Harm

Restoring Relationship

Responding to Racial Microaggressions and Oppression in Unitarian Universalism

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WHAT ARE MICROAGGRESSIONS?

A term coined by psychologist Dr. Derald Wing Sue, microaggressions are comments or behaviors that “other” or demean someone because of their racial identity. They are often unintentional, but can cause serious psychological and spiritual harm over time—the effect known as “death by a thousand paper cuts.”

A Few Common Microaggressions in UU Spaces:

- “Where are you really from?”
- “You must be new to Unitarian Universalism.”
- “You speak English so well!”
- “Welcome! Do you want to join the Racial Justice Team?”
- “Ooh, I just have to touch your child’s hair.”

NOTE: A comment experienced by one person as a microaggression may not impact another person in the same way. Rather than commenting about someone or making assumptions about their experience, ask open-ended questions that invite people to tell you about themselves and what is important to them.

DOs And DON'Ts for Interrupting Microaggressions (for White Allies)

- **DO** build relationships with people of color to develop trust.
- **DO** practice approaches to interrupting before you're in a real-life situation.
- **DO** take cues from the target, rather than “playing the hero.”
- **DO** focus on the impact, rather than the intent, of the microaggression.
- **DON'T** accuse the speaker of being a bad person; **DO** focus on behavior and why it was problematic.
- **DON'T** forget to ask the target how they're doing, and what they need.

Possible Ally Responses to Microaggressions

- “Ouch. Those words are really hurtful.”
- “I don't know what you mean by that [offensive joke/remark.] Could you explain?”
- “I know that comment made me really uncomfortable. Are you okay, [person being targeted]?”
- “I'm sure you didn't mean to cause harm, but I need you to know that your words are problematic.”

WISDOM: WHEN TIMES GET TOUGH for People of Color*

We are all born into systems of white supremacy, yet our ancestors gifted us with the strength of their survival. Consider using the following practices to build on a legacy of resilience and audacious hope:

Self-Care. Get in touch with spiritual practices and sources of life that refill your cup, affirm your humanity, make you feel whole, and give you integrity. Protect and use those practices and spaces regularly.

Gather your people. Activate a small group of trusted friends who will take your call and give you honest and loving feedback.

Refuse either/or thinking. Strengthen UU values of interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit in everything you do. Build and celebrate your web of life.

Deepen your multi-cultural self! Live into the advantages of code-switching, allowing you to function in oppressive environments while maintaining a sense of self-worth.

Be strategic with social media. Social media is great for organizing, but not a good alternative for working through personal challenges. Rely on your trusted people.

Notice privilege. Think about the intersections of identity in your life. When are parts of your identity rewarded? Untangle and own the complicity of your privilege (e.g., gender, able-bodied, class, age, education, etc.).

Understand your patterns of internalized oppression. When in your life do behaviors such as avoidance and denial of conflict, deflecting responsibility, learned powerlessness, anger toward others in your racial/ethnic group appear? What cultural toxins have you internalized?

Explore your ancestral story. Call upon ancestral wisdom stories about resilience, creativity, pride, and excellence. How do those traits exhibit themselves in your personal and spiritual lives?

Celebrate! Don't let racial oppression steal your joy. When you feel defeated, practice gratitude. Show loving kindness. Be wildly generous. Celebrate community. Make art. Laugh. Sing loud. Dance. Restore your soul.

*“People of Color” is an imperfect term, in this case, referring to people whose racial/ethnic background, language, nationality, and/or religious tradition is routinely marginalized and subjected to questions of authenticity and integrity.

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