

Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

Session 3: Responding to Microaggressions in the Workplace

Purpose: This session offers exercises for Helpers to practice accurate empathy that supports maintaining better boundaries.



FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Have your phone or a timer ready to keep time during the exercises in this session.

While the groups work together and share scenarios, walk around the room and check in to ensure everyone is feeling safe and heard. Remind the group that this exercise is not to dive into the microaggressions but to practice how to respond when they occur.

If you notice that a group isn't talking or getting overly amplified, check in and redirect the group to work on the responses.

Starting a Session

- ▶ **Note:** Throughout this workbook we use the terms “Helper” to describe professionals working in the behavioral healthcare field, often in community-based settings, who are supporting individuals in addressing substance use, mental health, or co-occurring conditions. At times, we use the term “Helpee” to describe the individuals the Helper is working with. We chose to do this so that the lessons in the workbook can be used by a wide variety of professionals who live, work, and play in the same community of the people they serve.
- ▶ **Prepare yourself for the meeting:** Take some time to review and think about the session purpose. Do you have any examples or useful stories to share on the topic?
- ▶ **Prepare the room for the meeting:** Arrive 20-30 minutes early to arrange the room. If possible, put chairs in a circle large enough so everyone can easily find a seat. Have pens and paper available just in case someone wants to take notes.
- ▶ **Start the meeting:** As people arrive, be sure to make eye contact and say hello, greeting them by name if you've met before. Start the meeting on time or within 5 minutes of the designated start time. A simple “Let's get started” or “It's 5 minutes after the hour, why don't we begin the meeting” works great.
- ▶ **Give introductions and information:** Introduce yourself briefly, the overall purpose of the session series and the purpose of the session.

FACILITATOR:



Summarize (10 minutes): Summarize (10 minutes): In this session, we will focus on microaggressions experienced by Helpers in the workplace (especially those with lived experience) and discuss how we can respond in ways that can support a shift in workplace culture.

Let's discuss some definitions:

Microaggressions: Brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership. Microaggressions FEEL as if an aspect of yourself or your identity wasn't valued or respected.

Types and Forms of Microaggressions¹

- ▶ **Microassaults:** Include more traditional acts of overt and intentional acts or communications of discrimination.

Example: As a Helper, not being given access to information about the people you work with because of the belief that Helpers can't be trusted with confidential information.

- ▶ **Microinsults:** Largely unintentional behaviors or verbal expressions that convey insensitivity or demean a person based on a marginalized group identity.

Example: A clinician says to another colleague, "Let's face it, all addicts lie and manipulate."

- ▶ **Microinvalidation:** May be verbal comments or behaviors that deny or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a marginalized target group.

Example: In team meetings, Helpers are not asked for their input when discussing cases.

- ▶ **Microaffirmations:** Acknowledging the contributions of those who are being dismissed or ignored. In other words, give credit to show that you hear and value your coworkers.

Identify thoughts and behaviors that can contribute to relationship tension. For example, resist the impulse to jump in and "fix" someone, which can increase defensiveness. Instead, practice using reflective listening to echo back what you're hearing. Our goal isn't to endorse microaggressions, but rather to adopt a positive perspective and approach situations with curiosity, recognizing that microaggressions are often unintentional.

Introspection (5 minutes): Think about a situation where you or a coworker experienced a microaggression at work related to your role. Was it a microassault, microinvalidation, or microinsult? How did you or the person respond? How did the person who committed the microaggression receive the response? What assumptions were you making about the person who committed the microaggression?



Exercise (6-8 minutes): Prepare the group to get into groups of three. Provide instructions for the group.

Instructions: In a group of 3, each person takes a turn sharing a microaggression that they or a coworker experienced, along with details of how the situation unfolded. Do your best to use scenarios related to the Helper role. Try to avoid judging or getting sidetracked processing the scenarios. We'll take about 6-8 minutes to share in small groups.



Exercise (6-8 minutes): Have participants stay in their groups of three.

Instructions: Once everyone has shared, stay in your small groups and write some responses using the formats below. We'll spend about 6-8 minutes crafting responses.

(From Nadal, 2014, pp. 71-76)²

- I know you didn't realize this, but when you _____ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because _____. Instead, you could _____ (different language or behavior) or What would you think about us coming up with another way to do that/express that?
- I am really curious about why you said _____ and want to better understand.
- I am not sure if you're aware, but I'm receiving what you said like this _____. Could you tell me more about the intention behind what you said?
- What you just said about _____ didn't sit right with me. Are you open to talking about it?
- I think I heard you say _____. Is that right?
- Would you be willing to say more about what you meant when you said _____?
- While you didn't intend to convey _____, the words you used can send a message that _____
- Even though your intention was _____, the person you were talking to may have experienced _____. What do you think?



Exercise (5 minutes): Have participants stay in their groups of three.

Instructions: Once you've crafted 2-3 responses as a small group, take turns practicing saying the responses with each other.

Remember to try to assume positive intent (when appropriate) and approach the situation with genuine curiosity. We can express genuine curiosity through tone and body language in addition to the words we choose.

We'll spend about 5 minutes practicing or role-playing our responses in our small groups. While it may feel inauthentic or awkward saying these sentences out loud to each other, it is helpful to practice conversations that may be stressful or complex. Take time to really think about how you FEEL when you are in a situation where you are experiencing a microaggression and how it will FEEL when you respond with the response you created.



Debrief as a large group (15 minutes):

Ensure each triad can share 1-2 scenarios along with their crafted responses.

What did you notice about the responses you created with your group? How might these responses be received in your workplace?



Session Debrief: Discuss ways to address workplace microaggressions and conflict experienced in the Helper role.

Did anyone come up with a response structure that isn't included above? Are you willing to share with the large group?

- ▶ When experiencing or witnessing a microaggression, pause, take a breath, and avoid getting reactive. Decide if this is the right time to respond.
- ▶ Ask for clarification as a way of checking your own assumptions.
- ▶ Give information, share your own experience, and/or offer alternative perspectives.
- ▶ Discuss how to decide if and when you should bring a situation to a supervisor or human resource department.

¹ Firmin, R. L., Mao, S., Bellamy, C. D., & Davidson, L. (2019). Peer support specialists' experiences of microaggressions. *Psychological services, 16*(3), 456.

² Nadal, K. L. (2014). A guide to responding to microaggressions. In *CUNY Forum* (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 71-76).