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“Given a rich environment, learning becomes like the air – it’s in and around us.”

-Sandra Dodd

Microaggressions: What are they and how can we address them?

A safe and respectful learning environment is paramount to the success of our learners. However, subtle comments and events may threaten the condition of a learning environment without one even knowing. Whether in the classroom, lecture hall, or clinical environment, microaggressions may happen without us recognizing their occurrence or impact. Microaggression is a term defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group.”¹ They are the everyday insults, snubs, or slights that can be conveyed automatically, unconsciously, or intentionally and communicate “hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.”²

Within medical education, microaggressions take many different forms such as consistently calling on a white learner before a person of color or statements like “you’re too young to be a doctor” by patients and family. Assumptions about resources, knowledge, or personal activities may seem harmless but can considerably impact our learners.² While microaggressions have been common in health professions education for some time, the awareness and importance of addressing them has only recently begun to receive attention.³ Below are some steps that have been identified in the literature that we can take to identify, address, and ideally eliminate microaggressions from our learning environments.

Reflect on occurrences of microaggressions within your learning environment

Remember that microaggressions are brief, subtle, and may occur daily. They can take the form of verbal or nonverbal interactions. A good way to identify microaggressions is to engage in direct observation to witness and note events.

Identify the impact they have on your learners

Disengagement, lower evaluation scores, poor physical and mental health, decreased performance, and lack of confidence are all potential adverse impacts of microaggressions.

Respond to instances of microaggression

Address instances of microaggression by first clarifying intent and meaning behind the words or behaviors and then helping the aggressor to see the impact.

Take responsibility for creating a positive environment free of microaggressions

Remember to be intentional with your own comments and actions. Set the standard of respect, listening, and transparency with your learners. Sharing examples of microaggressions and their potential impact (including frustration and impacts in self-esteem) on others may help learners to reflect on their own actions and words. Engaging in dialogue about biases (conscious and unconscious) is a meaningful way to address the concept of microaggressions with your learners.

It’s always important that we are careful about our assumptions and remember that as educators, we need to recognize and address microaggressions within our learning environments. Being knowledgeable about the form and impact of microaggressions allows us to engage in meaningful conversations about bias in health professions education. Microaggressions can even be hidden in humor, so it’s important to even be aware of how comical commentary is used within your team.

To continue the conversation on microaggressions, our office will be offering an Education Grand Rounds session in the coming months that will help us to look at the impact of and opportunities for addressing incidents of microaggressions. Stay tuned!

-Mariah Rudd

References:

1. Sue DW (2010). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Wiley. pp. xvi. ISBN 978-0-470-49140-9.
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3. Wheeler, D. J., Zapata, J., Davis, D., & Chou, C. (2018). Twelve tips for responding to microaggressions and overt discrimination: When the patient offends the learner. *Medical teacher*, 1-6.