Addressing Microaggressions in the Learning Environment

In May 2019, the FREE newsletter highlighted the topic of microaggressions and their impact on learning environments. The importance of recognizing and addressing microaggressions in education and healthcare settings has emerged as a critical issue. Microaggressions can be subtle insults (verbal or nonverbal) that occur daily in various contexts. They can be categorized as statements, actions, or incidents that are particularly pervasive for women and URM students.1

Recent conversations around microaggressions and strategies to address them have been fostered by the increasing recognition that such behavior can significantly affect the learning experiences of students and healthcare professionals. Microaggressions can occur with no ill intention or no awareness of the underlying meaning.2 In a recent study, most microaggressions were reported to be verbal. Torres, M. B., Salles, A., & Cochran, A. (2019). Recognizing and reacting to microaggressions in medicine and surgery. JAMA Internal Medicine, 179(1), 1-8.

Microaggressions are defined as subtle insults (either verbal or nonverbal) that occur daily in various contexts. They are often unintentional and may not be perceived as harmful by the perpetrator. However, they can have a significant impact on the targets of these behaviors, affecting their confidence, performance, and mental health. Microaggressions can also create a climate of fear and anxiety, which can hinder learning and contribute to a negative learning environment.3

Microaggressions can be categorized as statements, actions, or incidents that target individuals in a hostile or negative way based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, or other personal attributes. Microaggressions are often subtle and may go unnoticed by those who are not affected by them. They can be intentional or unintentional, and they can occur in various contexts, such as the classroom, clinic, or workplace.

If you witness a microaggression, or have a student report an incident, work to identify the microaggression and determine the appropriate response. Microaggressions and microinterventions can be used to address and mitigate the impact of these behaviors. Microinterventions can be implemented through the use of microaffirmations (small acts that validate learner feelings and experiences, and talking things out after an incident).3

Microaggressions can be addressed through intentional, reflective, and constructive ways, faculty can contribute to change that will foster inclusion, establishing high expectations for all students in the learning environment, and appropriate manner. Before taking action, take time to ensure the safety and security of all individuals involved. Faculty can work to create a positive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and respected. It is important to listen to the recipient to validate their experience and to ensure that they feel heard and understood.

In May 2019, the FREE newsletter highlighted the topic of microaggressions and a few action steps. The newsletter emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing microaggressions in education and healthcare settings. Microaggressions can be addressed through intentional, reflective, and constructive ways, faculty can contribute to change that will foster inclusion, establishing high expectations for all students in the learning environment, and appropriate manner. Before taking action, take time to ensure the safety and security of all individuals involved. Faculty can work to create a positive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and respected. It is important to listen to the recipient to validate their experience and to ensure that they feel heard and understood.

Microaggressions can be addressed through intentional, reflective, and constructive ways, faculty can contribute to change that will foster inclusion, establishing high expectations for all students in the learning environment, and appropriate manner. Before taking action, take time to ensure the safety and security of all individuals involved. Faculty can work to create a positive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and respected. It is important to listen to the recipient to validate their experience and to ensure that they feel heard and understood.