September 2023

Oseh Shalom

עושה שלום במרומיו...

MICROAGGRESSIONS: WHAT ARE THEY? HOW CAN THEY BE PREVENTED? WHAT IF…?

A central goal of Reconstructing Judaism's current Strategic Plan is to "join and lead Jewish efforts to dismantle systemic racism and advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Reconstructionist movement." Our **R**acial **D**iversity, **E**quity, and **I**nclusion Committee is charged with exploring RDEI: how it presents at Oseh Shalom and how to better integrate its values and practices in our congregation. Integrating RDEI into the lives of our congregation is an ongoing and life-long process. As a starting point, we focus in this handout on the concept of microaggressions to heighten awareness at Oseh Shalom.

Microaggressions—defined

Microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, put-downs, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned people who may be unaware of their impact.

Microaggressions are reflections of implicit bias or prejudicial beliefs and attitudes beyond the level of conscious awareness. Social psychologists have studied implicit bias for decades, along with the role it plays in human behavior. Almost any marginalized group can be the object of microaggressions. Racial, gender, LGBTQ+ and disability microaggressions occur daily toward these groups.

Here's the thing about Microaggressive experiences

- It may be accidental or intentional. It IS a form of discrimination.
- Microaggressions are often not done on purpose and often committed by well-meaning people who are unaware of their impact. Unfortunately, people who regularly experience them may feel unwelcome, alienated, or unsafe in the spaces where they belong. Over time, they can be extremely painful.
- People who don't belong to specific groups are often unaware that these microaggressions are happening.

Examples of Microaggressions

Jews of Color (JOC) are often asked how they are Jewish and when or why they converted to Judaism – questions that incorrectly assume that all JOC are converts. They may be told that they don't "look Jewish" or hear statements of surprise, i.e., "I can't believe you know this much about Judaism!"

People with disabilities (including physical, cognitive, & psychological) often encounter false assumptions about what they can or cannot do as a result of their disability; their needs for accommodations aren't always taken into consideration; and they may receive unsolicited, anecdotal "advice" from people without disabilities.

LGBTQ+ Jews are often addressed with incorrect gender pronouns; their partners may be mistaken for blood relatives or platonic friends; they may be asked intimate questions about their personal lives (i.e. "When did you come out?" or "My cousin is trans, too; is it true that ___?"); "I wouldn't want a gay spiritual leader." "See how open we are? We have a gay couple in our congregation." "Gays can get married now so quit complaining."

People in interfaith families are often asked "how Jewish" they and their families are, and whether they intend to raise their children as Jews.

What we can do: MICROAFFIRMATIONS

If the negative impact of microaggressions often goes unnoticed by those who use them, then one solution is to not only become more aware of the negative ways in which we interact with our communities, but to also invoke positivity instead.

This is where microaffirmations come into play.

"[Microaffirmations are] *apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed."—MIT Professor Dr. Mary Rowe.*

Examples of MICROAFFIRMATIONS

Microaffirmations can include simply telling community members on the margins that you're glad to see them, asking whether they enjoyed the event you both attended, and putting yourself out there both as a resource and as a friend in the community.

It's even as simple as having conversations that don't implicitly focus on their ethnicity, culture, disability status, or gender/sexual identity, or religious affiliation. Microaffirmations also include questioning people when they perform microaggressions, with the intent of helping them understand the impact of their words and to make better choices going forward.

> Questions or Comments? Send email to Oseh-RDEI@oseh-shalom.org

(Our thanks to: Rabbi Sandra Lawson, Director of Racial Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at Reconstructing Judaism; *ReformJudaism.org*: Microaggressions vs. Microaffirmations - Welcoming Others at the Micro Level by C.E. Harrison; *Scientific American*: "Microaggressions: Death by a Thousand Cuts'', March 30, 2021)