

BIAS

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

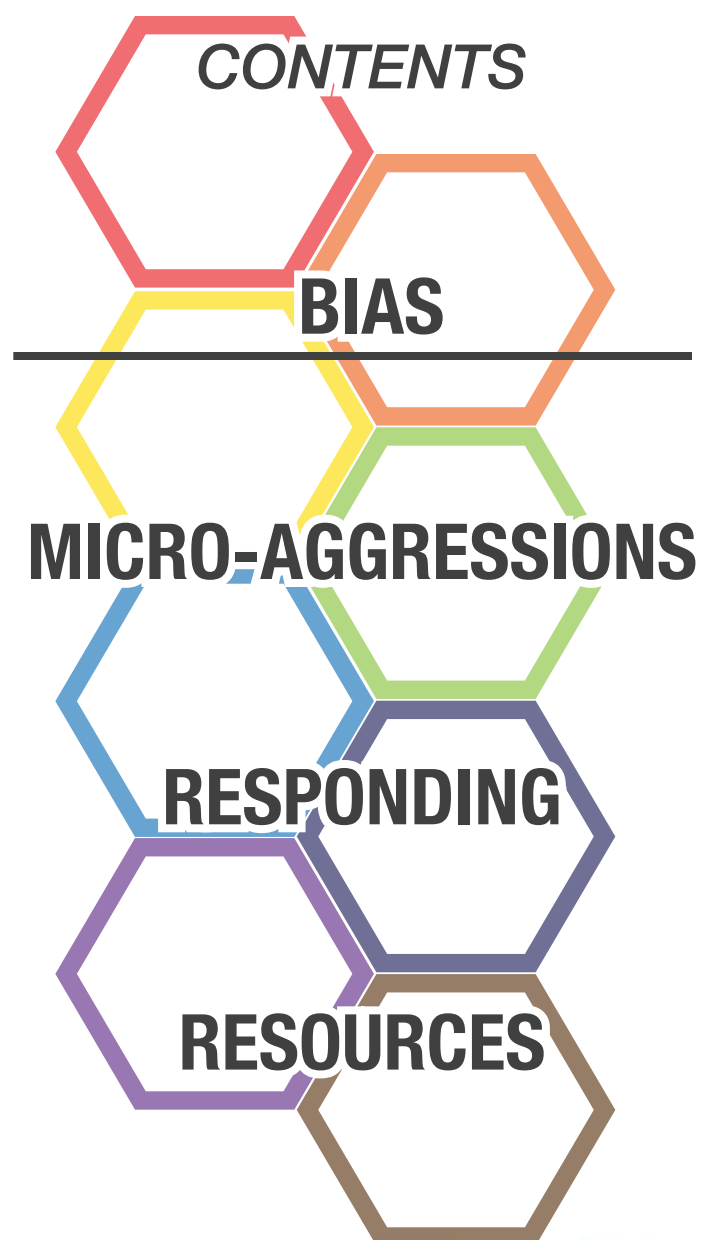
RESPONDING

RESOURCES

**Use this
Anti-Bias Action Guide
with the companion
Anti-Bias Action Learning Plan
to help launch or refresh
your practice of Anti-Racism.**

Edited by Don Shearer





Maya Angelou

Bias is usually considered to be unfair as it confers arbitrary advantages and disadvantages on individuals and groups based on prejudice.

Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about others that individuals construct beneath their own conscious awareness, as part of the processes of perceiving sensations and making meaning in the world.

Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about themselves and other identity groups; these beliefs trigger biases that inform the selection of options in decision making and taking action.

Unconscious bias is far more prevalent than conscious prejudice and, when challenged, can trigger behavior incompatible with one's conscious or stated values, even to the point of irrational or pathological action.



We are living in extraordinary times of increasing awareness and change that challenge us to acknowledge, name, and dismantle the historic, and ongoing, systemic bias, prejudice, and racial supremacy that has been woven into the fabric of our nation, and that is now recognized as a health crisis and an obstacle to equitable society.

Part of that awareness is manifest in increased push-back from racism deniers and racism skeptics (sometimes called “white fragility”). We see this pushback in the form of attempted legislative restrictions on teaching Critical Racial Theory in schools, in denying tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the author of the 1619 Project documenting the history of enslavement in the colonies and the U.S., and in individual micro-aggressions from supposed allies.

White people must be accountable for the responsibility and work of educating themselves on the history of race in the U.S., how white privilege is based on that history, and what actions must be taken to go beyond mere allyship to the proactive abolition of racial, and other forms of, oppression.



White people invented and sustain the construct of race and now must locate themselves on the white identify spectrum - a journey of a lifetime.

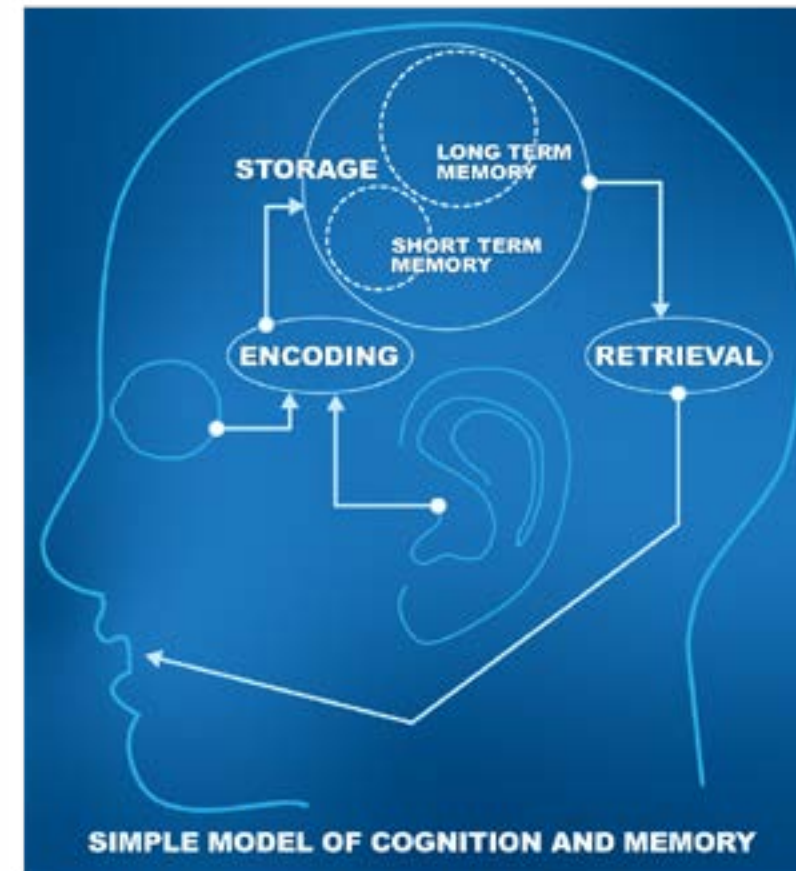




TRIGGERING BIAS

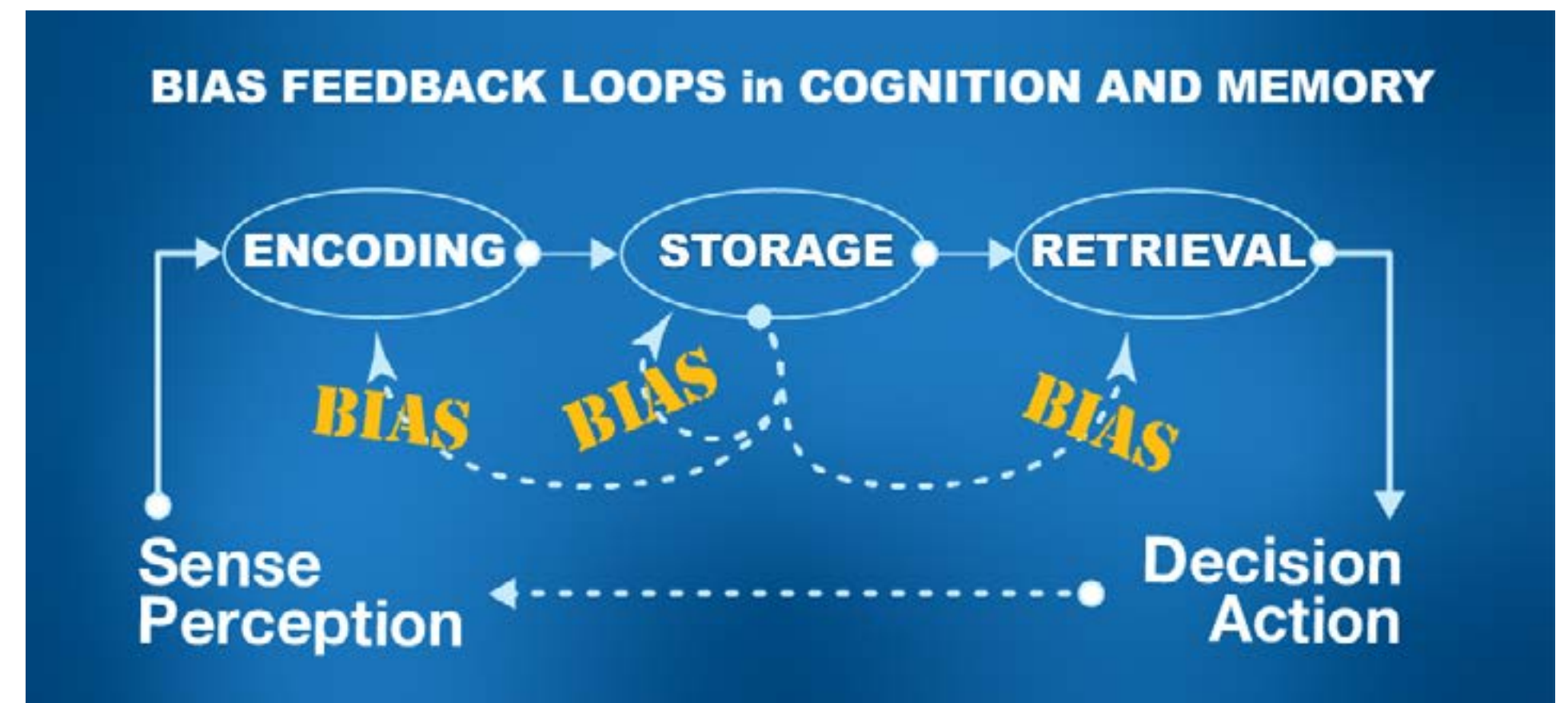


Bias lives in memory and emotion.

A simple model of memory and cognition - the process of sensing, remembering, planning, making decisions, taking action, and creating meaning in the world - can be represented with three main parts:



- 
- Encoding: Incoming sense perceptions are encoded into brain signals.
 - Memory: information is “worked” in short term memory and selectively stored in long term memory.
 - Retrieval: Memories are selectively retrieved, from long term into short term memory, as drivers of thoughts and actions.
- 
- SIMPLE MODEL OF COGNITION AND MEMORY



- At input, Bias causes perceptual prioritization and impacts what is encoded, and what is ignored.
- Bias further increases consolidation of what is remembered and how it is remembered and stored.
- During the retrieval of memories, bias heightens the sense of recollection and “correctness” of selected ideas.





TYPES OF BIAS



Biases are individual mental constructs informed by social stereotypes.

Biases are based on each individual's unique memories, and are also informed by social stereotypes shared within identified groups of which the individual is a member.

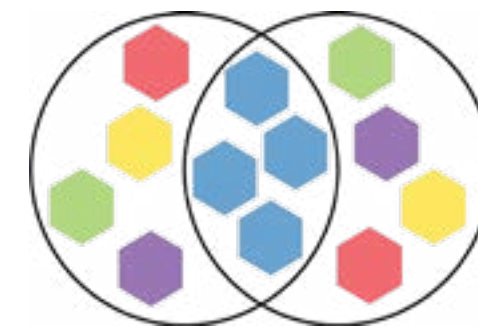
These shared stereotypes are also encoded into memory, and are given regular reinforcement through group interactions and media consumption.

Biases are triggered in real time, based on the situation, to reinforce held beliefs.

Many specific types of biases have been identified by numerous authors and commentators; all share some core characteristics:

- Are informed by held prejudices.
- May result in either positive or negative consequences for those impacted (impact may be made through intentional or unintentional exclusion as well as inclusion in decisions and actions).
- May result in irrational or pathological behavior if the challenge to held beliefs is perceived to be of significant threat.

Here's a short list of commonly documented types of biases.



Affinity Bias: People are more likely to support or believe someone within their own social group than an outsider. This bias tends to remove objectivity from any sort of selection or hiring process, as we tend to favor those we personally know and want to help.



Halo (or Horns) Bias: The tendency to allow a single perceived characteristic of a person, business, or organization to influence - positively or negatively - our overall impression of the person or entity, ignoring other possibly counter-indicating characteristics.



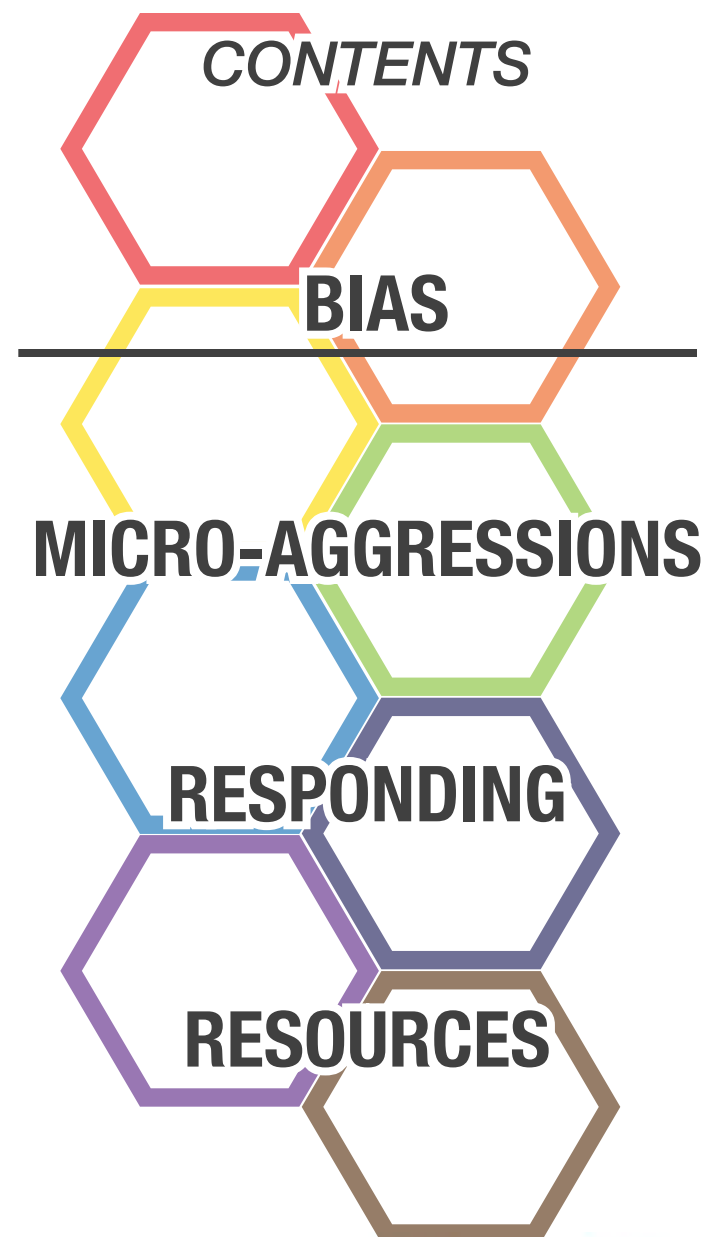
Perception Bias: The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that makes it difficult to make an objective judgement about individual members of those groups.



Confirmation Bias: This type of bias refers to the tendency to seek out information that supports something you already believe, and is a particularly pernicious subset of cognitive bias.



Group Think Bias: In many cases, people end up engaging in group think when they fear that their objections might disrupt the harmony of the group or suspect that their ideas might cause other members to reject them. Decision-making in these conditions is likely to be based on uncritical, unobjective emotions.





WHAT IS A MICRO-AGGRESSION?



Micro-aggressions defined:

“Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental actions (whether intentional or unintentional) that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward members of oppressed or targeted groups including: People of Color, women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI) persons, persons with different abilities, and religious minorities.”

The sources (perpetrators) of these actions may be well-intentioned people, yet their words and actions are often driven by unconscious biases based on white supremacy conditioning, ingrained over their life times through the repetitive impact of myths and prejudices spread and perpetuated through media and social interactions. Education, self-awareness, and intentional action are required to disrupt the pipeline of unconscious bias (thought) to hurtful actions (word and deed).



“ I can remember there were periods of my life when I probably couldn’t go 20 minutes without thinking something about my race. It never left me. I was always aware of limitations and dangers it posed. ”

Chester M. Pierce, M.D.

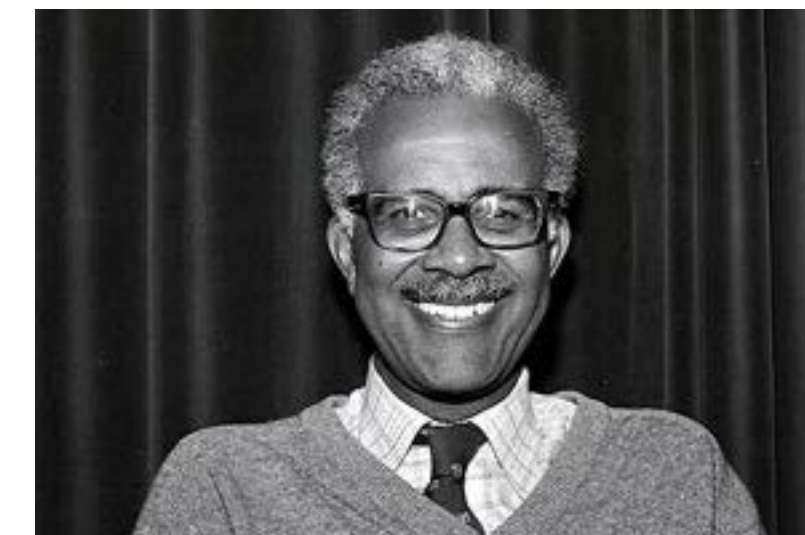
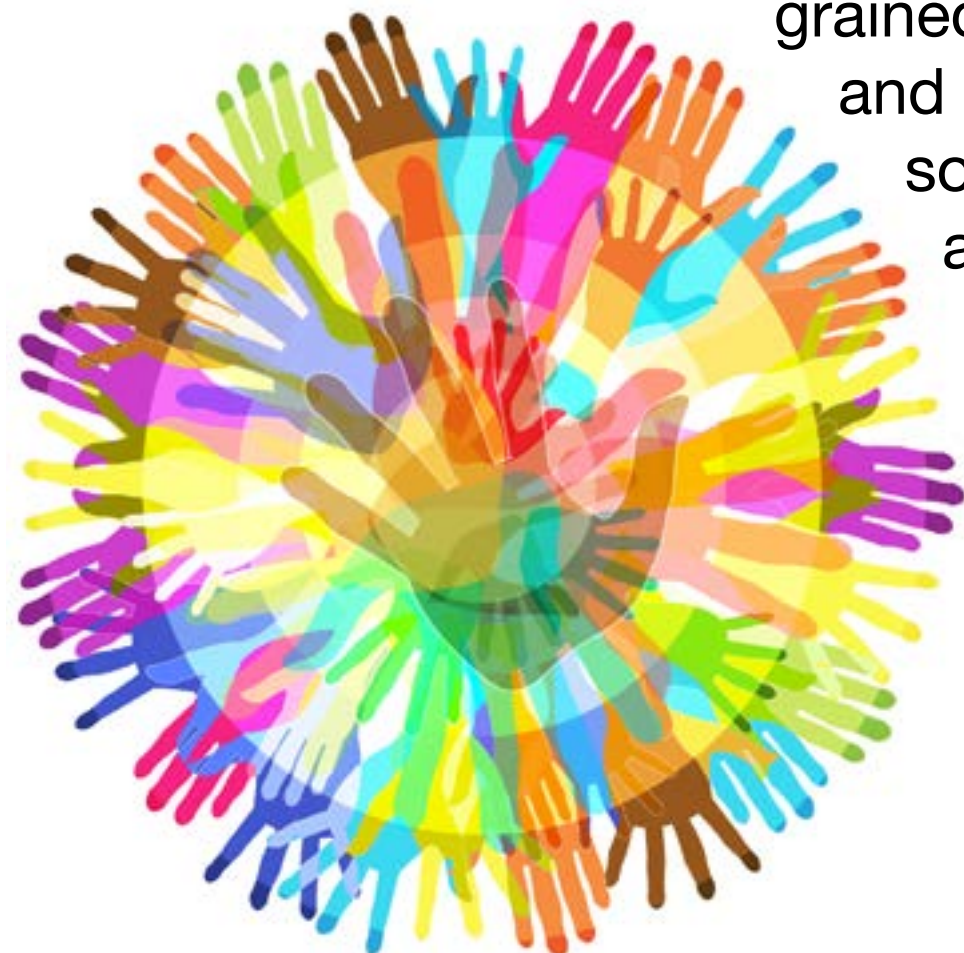
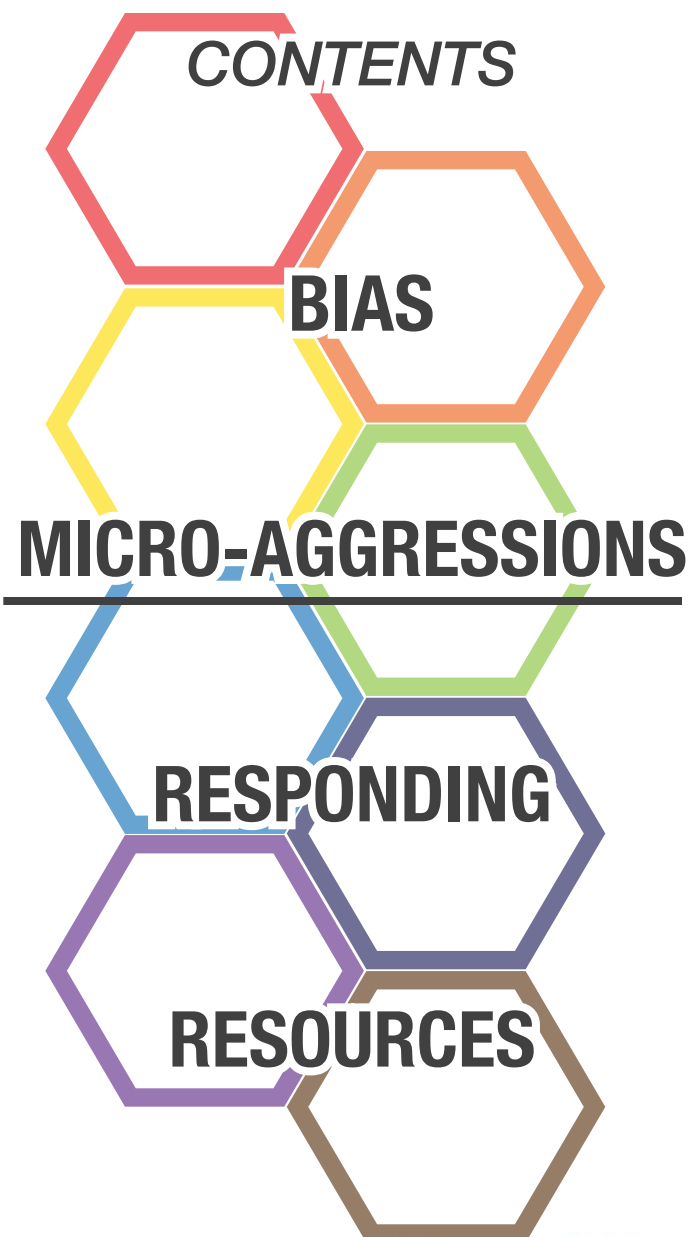


Photo: Chester M. Pierce, © Harvard University

“Micro-aggressions,” is a term first coined by psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe insults and dismissals, which he regularly observed, inflicted by non-Black Americans on African Americans.





TYPES OF MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

ASSAULTS - INSULTS - INVALIDATIONS



Three types of micro-aggressions:

MICRO-ASSAULTS

Overt forms of discrimination in which actors deliberately behave in discriminatory ways, but do not intend to offend someone or may think that their actions are not noticed or harmful. These types of experiences are similar to the “old-fashioned” discrimination that existed in earlier times, but different in that people may not openly proclaim their biases.

MICRO-INSULTS

Statements or behaviors in which individuals unintentionally or unconsciously communicate discriminatory messages to members of target groups. For example, a person might tell an Asian American that she or he “speaks good English” as a compliment. Instances like these can be especially upsetting to Asian Americans who do not speak any other language besides English, or whose families have been in the US for generations.

MICRO-INVALIDATIONS

Verbal statements that deny, negate, or undermine the realities of members of various target groups. For example, when a white person tells a person of color that racism does not exist, she or he is invalidating and denying the person of color’s racial reality, and the reality of discrimination in people’s lives.



*“It’s death
by a thousand
cuts.”*

*All these seemingly small events
accumulate over time
and can leave you just as bloody
as if someone had stabbed you.”*

Dr. Derald Wing Sue



INTERSECTIONAL AGGRESSIONS



MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

Individuals who are “othered” - members of an oppressed group identified as being outside of the dominant culture because of race, gender, sexual, or religious identity - may experience a variety of aggressions depending on their perceived identity and the prejudices of the perpetrators. Many experience oppression at the intersection of multiple prejudices.

Alien in Your Own Land

Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners.

Ascription of Intelligence

Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person based on their perceived race or other characteristic.

Pathologizing Cultural Values

Notion that the values and communication styles of people of color are abnormal.

Criminalization

Presumed to be a criminal, dangerous, or deviant, based on race.

RACIAL

GENDER

INTERSECTIONAL

RELIGIOUS

LGBTQ+

Sexual Objectification

Women’s bodies are allowed to be sexualized.

Exoticization - Fetishization

Making someone an object of sexual desire based on some aspect of their identity.

Assumptions of Traditional Gender Roles

Assumptions that women must uphold traditional gender roles.

Myth of Meritocracy

Assertions that race plays a minor role in life success.

Erasure and Appropriation

Assertions of “color blindness.” Denial of personal racism or one’s role in its perpetuation.



HARMFUL THEMES & MESSAGES



THEMES	EXAMPLE MICRO-AGGRESSIONS	HARMFUL MESSAGES BEING SENT
Alien in One's Own Land / Exoticization	When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born	You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country. Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.
Ascription of Intelligence	Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender	People of color are generally not as intelligent as whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science. It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skill
Color Blindness/ Erasure of Lived Experience	Statements that indicate that a white person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.	Assimilate to the dominant culture. Denying the significance of a person of color's racial/ethnic experience and history. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
Criminalization	A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal / you are poor / you do not belong. You are dangerous.
Denial of Individual Racism, Sexism, Heterosexism	A statement made when bias is denied.	I could never be racist because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you. Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.
Pathologizing Cultural Values & Communication Styles	The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant white culture are "ideal" or "normal".	Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.



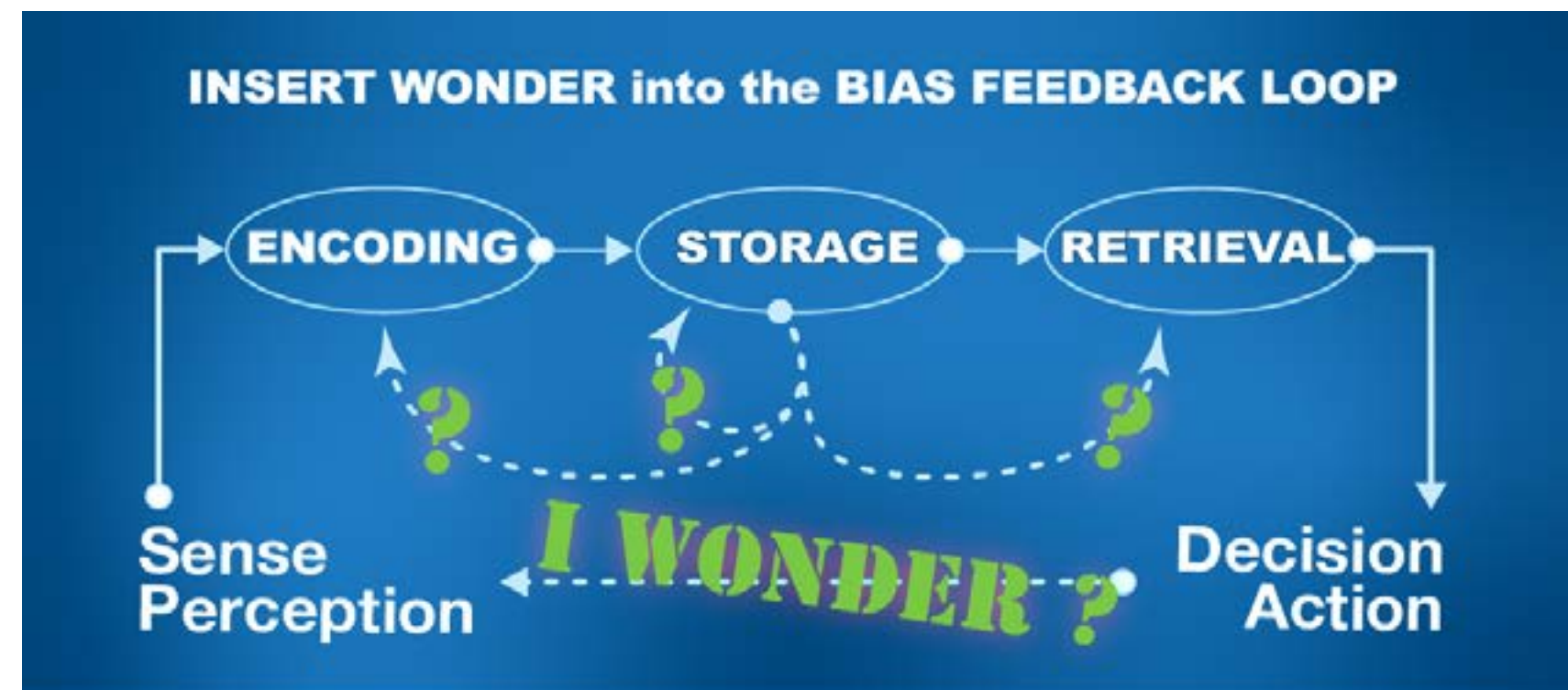
INSERT “WONDER”



Slow down, ask questions, prepare to reveal and counter bias and aggression.

If Bias is unconscious, how can we detect and effectively discuss and transform it to eliminate aggressions in our relationships, and biases and prejudices in our decision-making?

Slow down. Go to wonder. Ask questions.



Critical reflection is a technique for expanding your perspectives on interactions with others. It's an opportunity to detect and account for bias in your decision-making and actions.

- **Encoding:** I wonder why that choice is the first thing that occurs to me? What might be missing from this picture?
- **Storage** (Remembering): What is it about her that makes her so memorable to me? Why is that important?
- **Retrieval:** Am I forgetting other options? Am I aware of all options? I wonder what might be the consequences of omission or non-consideration?

Preparation for engaging bias and aggression

Recent polls reveal that approximately half the white population in the U.S. asserts that historic and contemporary racism do not exist as significant and ongoing factors in the disparities between white and Black life conditions and opportunities (such as average wealth, political power, life expectancy, access to education and healthcare), and that white people experience racism as much or more than Black people.

This kind of racism denial and skepticism may seem insensitive, or irrational and in bad faith, and can trigger white allies into responding to that skepticism in ways that are not effective, and that may “backfire.”

The “Backfire Effect” describes what happens when people - such as racism deniers and skeptics - are confronted with facts that challenge their views, and they find some rationale for dismissing the challenging information (such as calling information “fake news”).

Preparation for effectively engaging racism skeptics, and countering bias, begins with reflecting on your own feelings and awareness of your physical state and emotions:

- What are the things that you should pay attention to and do to maximize effective listening and reflection?
- What are the decisions and actions you should try to avoid making so that you can remain effective?
- What are situational factors and conditions outside of your control that may impact your effectiveness?



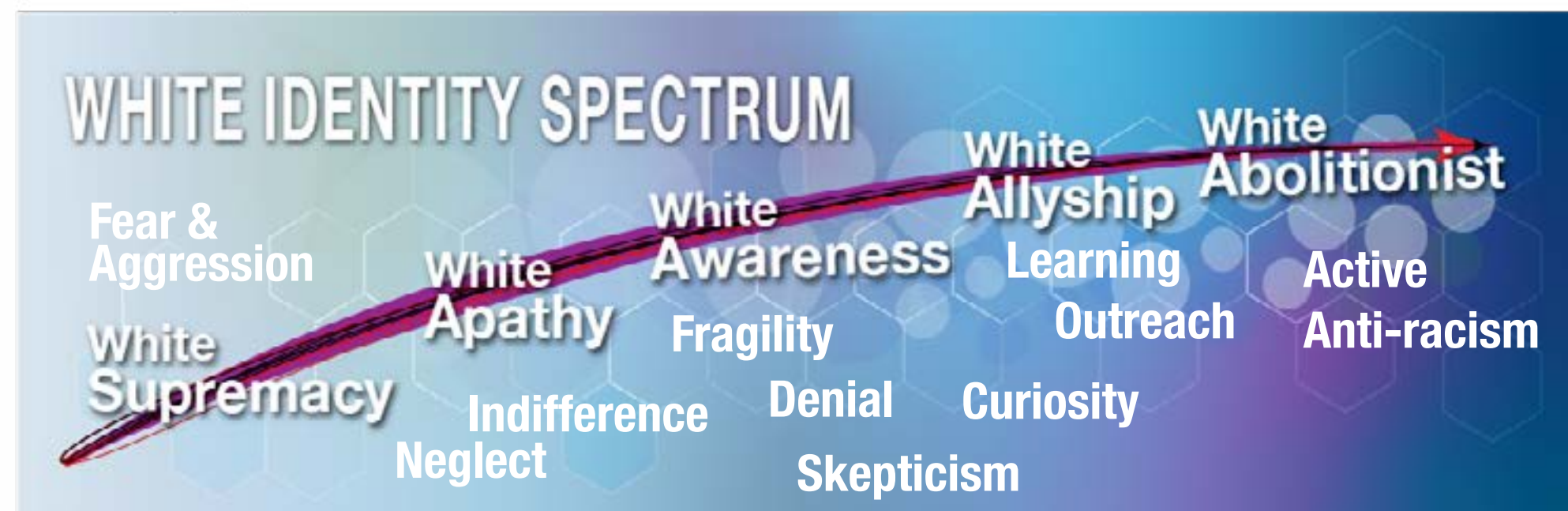
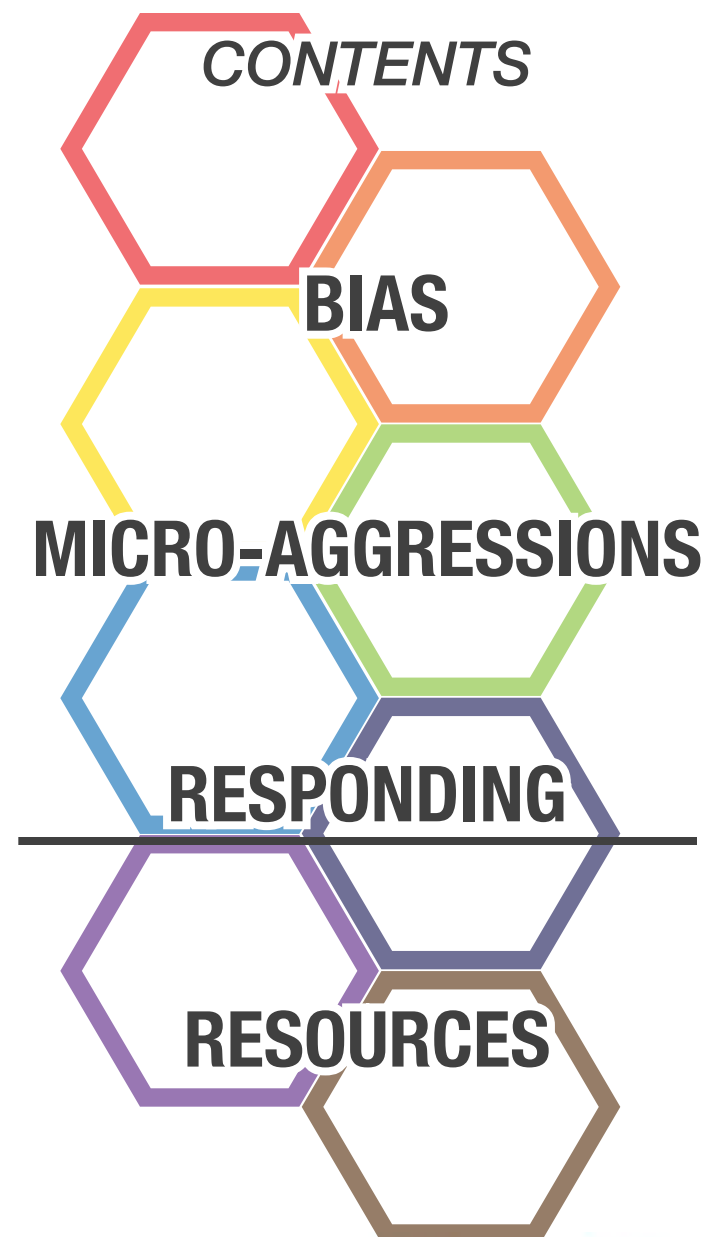


THE WORK OF ALLIES



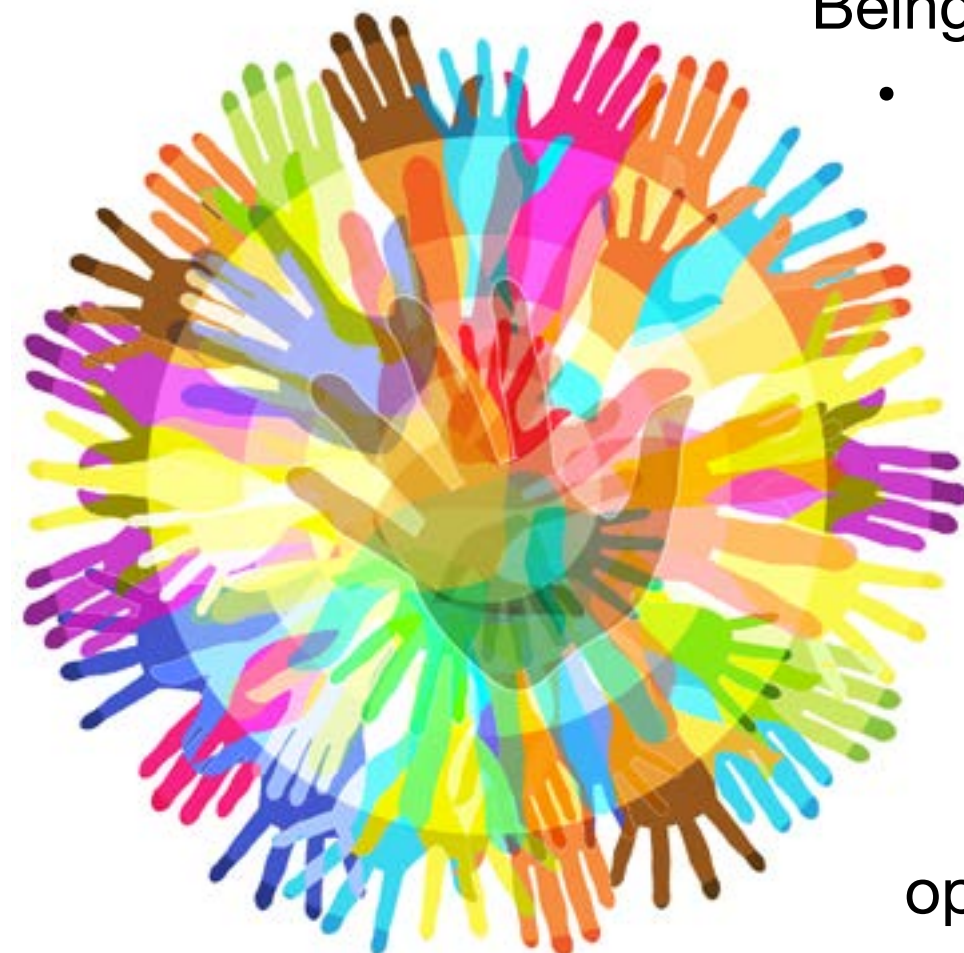
The work of allyship is:

- **Important** - an ally is a relationship of trust.
- **Possibly difficult** - experiencing bias and aggression against POC allies is traumatic and may also trigger white fragility in white allies.
- **Emergent & Transformational** - the work is ongoing over the journey of your lifetime.



Being an ally means:

- Being aware of - and intentional - in your own journey of white identity awareness and anti-racist development.
- Being accountable for your own learning and development.
- Being accountable for your own actions and mistakes.
- Not putting the responsibility of your education on the shoulders of oppressed people.
- Not expecting oppressed people to comfort your emotions.
- Being aware of the impact of your privilege on you and others, and using it to call out bias and eliminate aggression and oppression.



I don't want your love and light if it doesn't come with solidarity and action. I have no interest in passive empathy.

Rachel Cargle

If you present as white, this is your journey. You are unique, yet no more exceptional than anyone else. You may experience denial, fragility, shame or guilt as you learn more about the oppressive history of race in the U.S., and reflect on the foundations of your own privilege and perhaps past events in your life. Move forward.

Inaction, out of fear of making mistakes, or being seen as “racist” provides support for oppression. We all make mistakes. If you make a mistake, apologize, don’t make it about your feelings, ask what you can do to repair the other person and your relationship with them, learn from it, move on and do better. Take action.



RESPONDING > WHAT OCCURED?



When you think you observe a micro-aggression, be ready to ask yourself these questions:

1. Did this micro-aggression really occur?
2. Should I respond to this micro-aggression?
3. How should I respond to this micro-aggression?



Did this microaggression really occur?

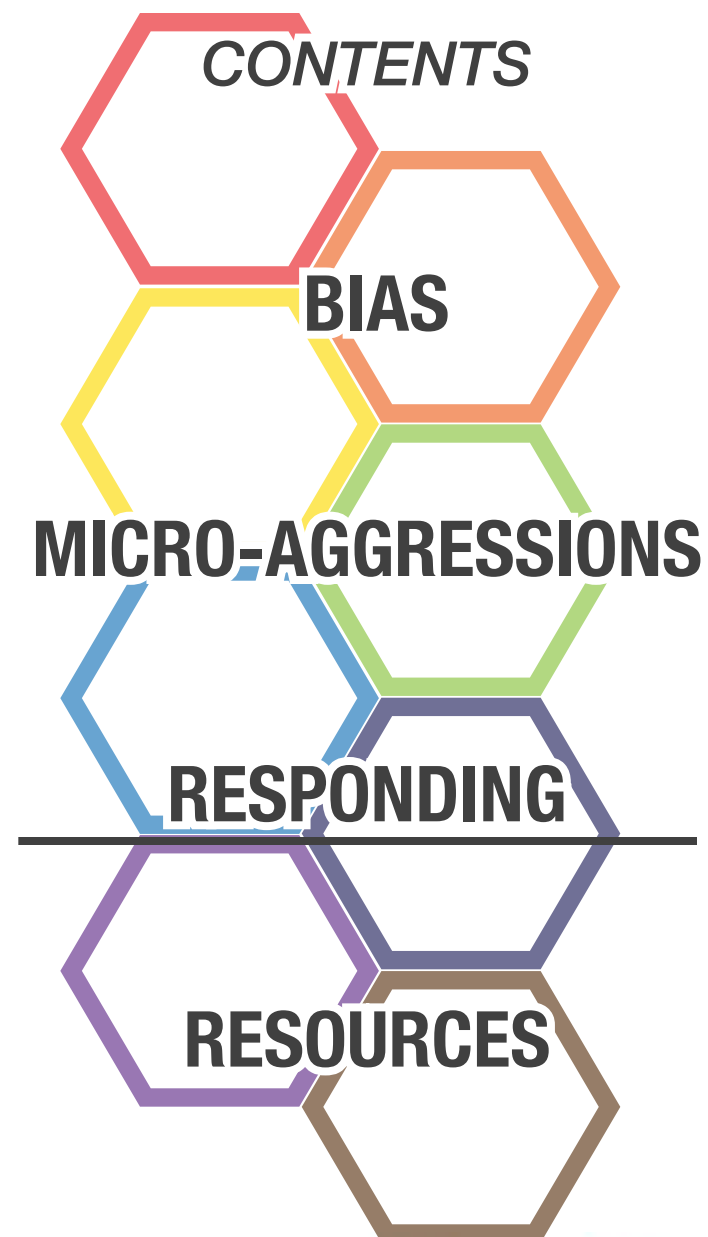
It is not uncommon for the targets and witnesses of aggressions to be stunned when abuses are perpetrated, especially when perpetrated by people who are presumed friends or allies.

In these moments of awkwardness it is common to question whether one has heard what they think they heard, and to feel uncomfortable about navigating possible conflict.

Acknowledge to yourself how the aggression makes you feel.

Accept your feelings.

Take a breath.





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RESPONDING > IS IT SAFE?

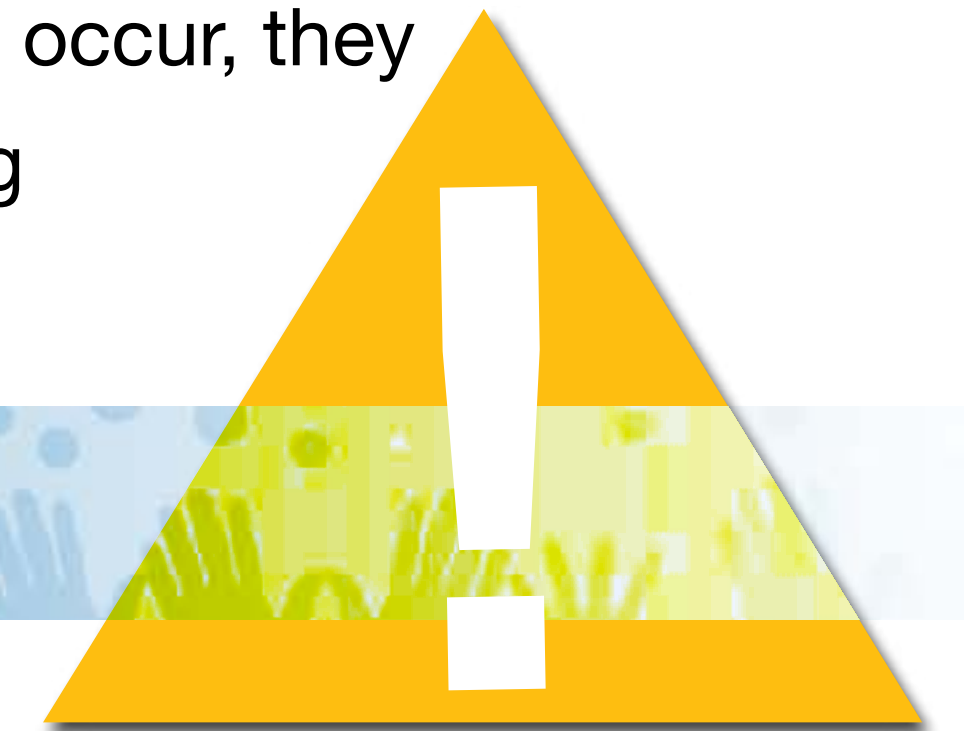


Should I respond to this microaggression?

If an individual is certain (or moderately certain) that a microaggression did in fact occur, they must consider the context, and the potential risks or consequences of responding or not responding.

Do I feel safe?

If I respond, could my physical safety, or the safety of others, be in danger?
Your first concern must be that you are safe from physical or emotional abuse of any kind.



IF you DO NOT feel safe: Seek Help.

Consider various environments. Some locations are accessible to people who may be abusive or disruptive because of political issues, substance abuse, or health or psychological issues.

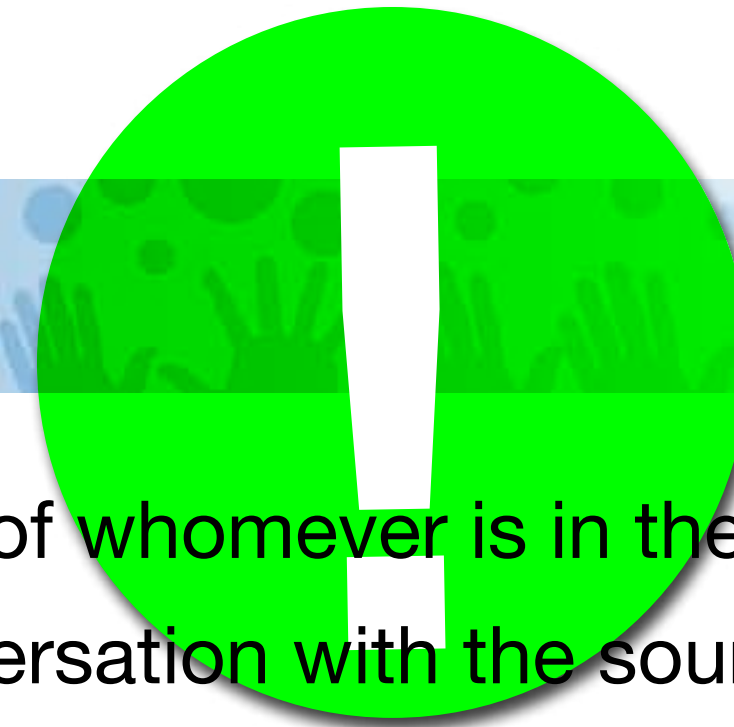


RESPONDING > CONSIDER CONTEXT



IF you DO feel physically safe

Call It OUT or Call It IN?



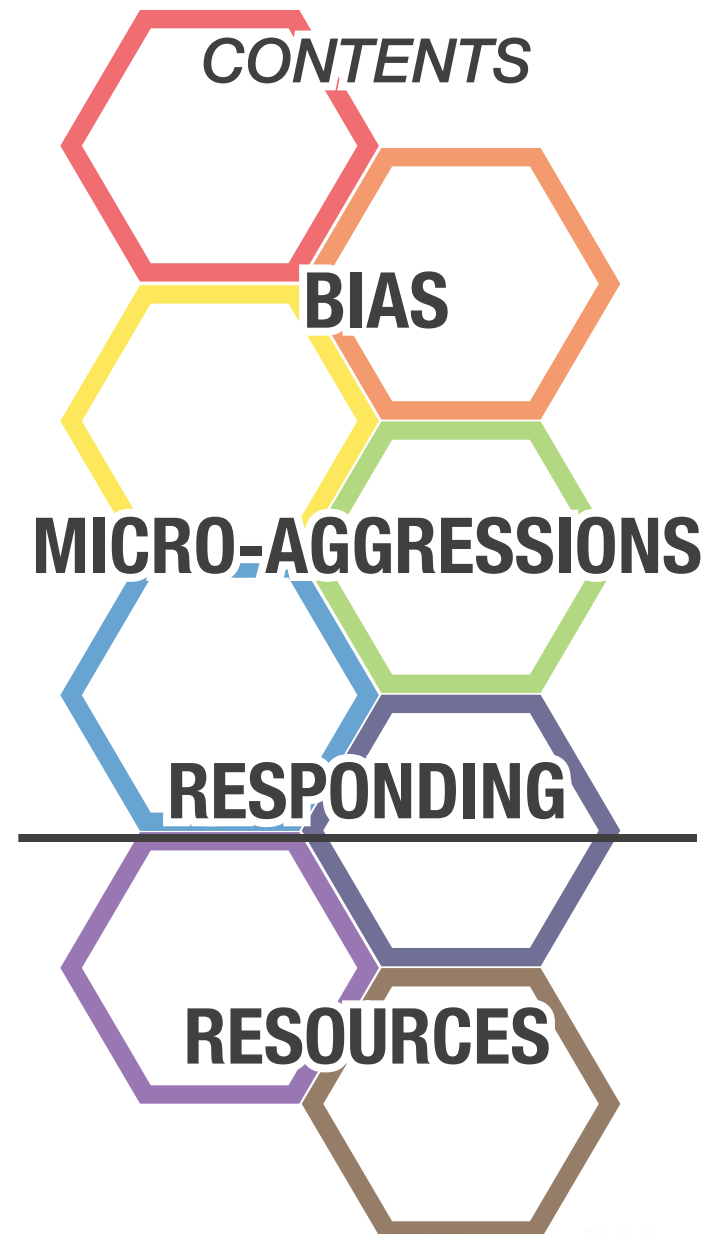
Calling It Out means to interrupt the conversation immediately, in front of whomever is in the vicinity, identify the micro-aggression you just observed, and then have a constructive conversation with the source to acknowledge the harm and begin healing. We're calling out the action, and the harm, not the person.

Calling It In means to follow up with the person one-on-one, or in a smaller group, to have confidential conversation with the source of the aggression about the harm caused, and opportunities for healing and learning.

Consider the context: What is your relationship with source of the aggression?

If you must or want to sustain a positive, functional relationship in an organization or community with the aggressor, what can you do?

- If I respond, will the person become defensive and will this lead to an argument?
- If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person (e.g., coworker, family member, etc.)?
- If I don't respond, will I regret it; will it convey the idea that the behavior is acceptable?





RESPONDING > CRUCIAL CONVERSATION



Whether you call the aggression out or in depends on the preceding decisions, especially, your desired relationship with aggressing person.

If you and the aggressor are members of a community or organization that require you to reconcile differences and misunderstandings in order to align with the tenets and culture of the community, then some sort of further conversation is required to disrupt and heal from the aggression, and to guard against any future recurrence of the trauma.

Either approach requires a crucial conversation in which you and the source:

- Talk about the aggression not the aggressor.
- Communicate what you observed and your feelings about it.
- Clarify their intention behind their actions and words.
- Recognize the aggression and commit to positive change and sustaining right relations in alignment with the community's covenant or standards.
- Identify a path to healing.



The voices of allies can be heard even more powerfully than those of the people directly targeted by micro-aggressions, because it is common that the microaggressor dismisses the victim as biased or over-sensitive.



RESPONDING > MODELING BEHAVIOR



Speak For Yourself.

Don't try to speak on behalf of the person who is the target of a micro-aggression since doing so can itself be a form of micro-aggression.

Attempting to speak on behalf of another can be unintentionally dehumanizing.

Instead of saying, "You hurt her feelings," it's best to say, "Here's why I'm offended, upset or hurt."

It is also a good idea to stay away from being sarcastic, snide, mocking or arrogant (even though this can be very tempting).

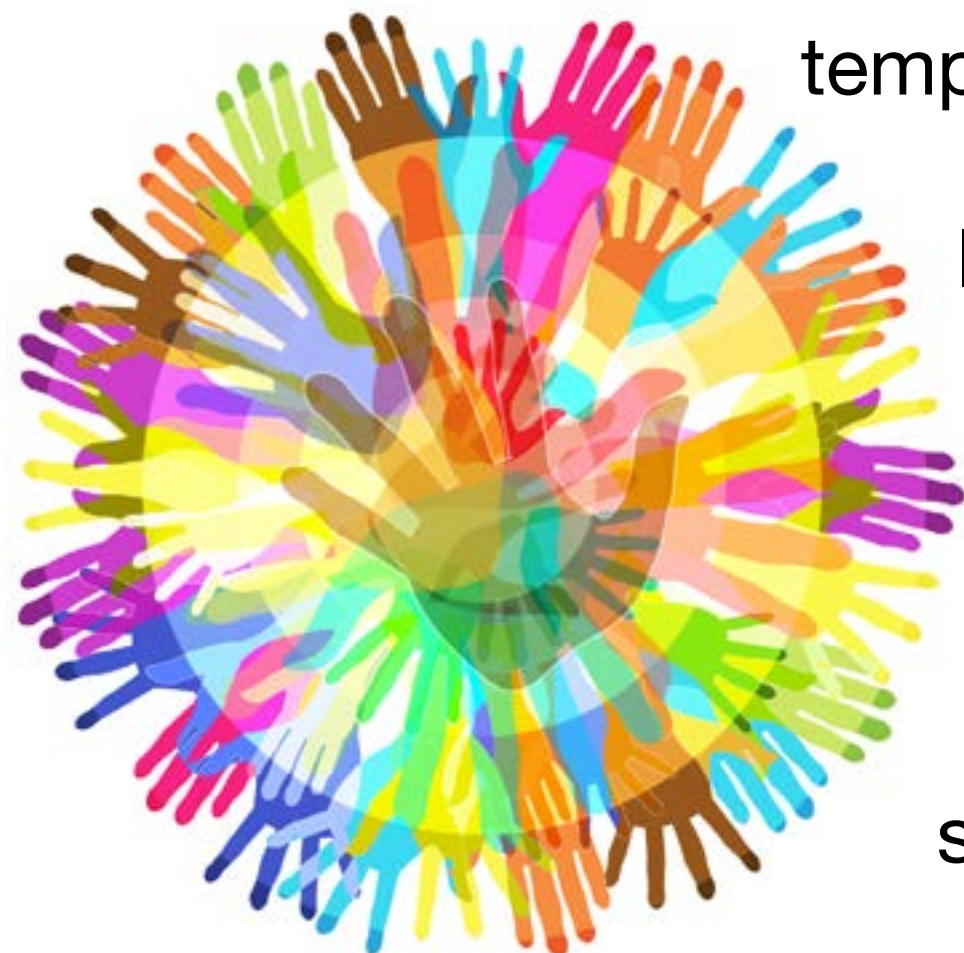
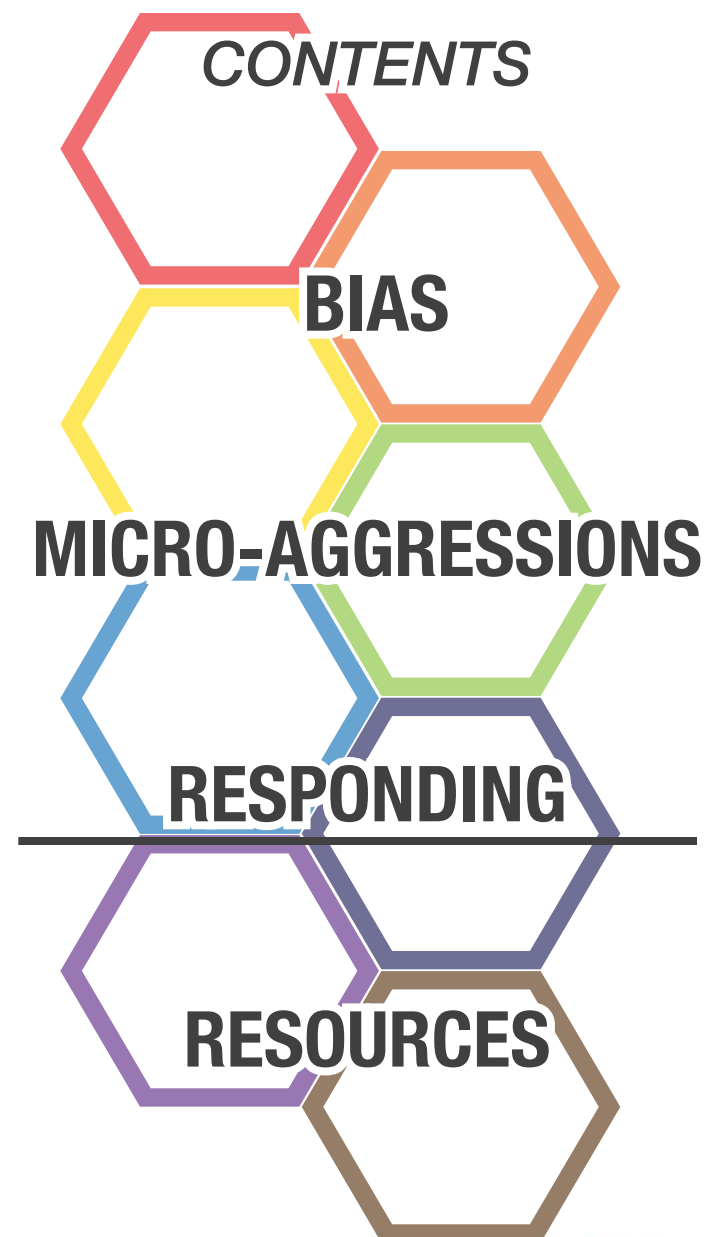
In a congregational, educational, or business organization, the goal of calling out microaggressions is education and positive culture.

It's not about winning a point or making someone feel bad or wrong. It's about helping them understand something from a different perspective.

“We must understand that we are only experts on our own lives; we cannot have expertise related to another person's way of being.”

Anonymous

We must recognize that it is yet another form of aggression to demand that persons of color “control their emotions,” in response to micro-aggressions, for the sake of white comfort. It is oppressive to demand that targeted individuals are not “over-emotional” or angry” in response to abuses.

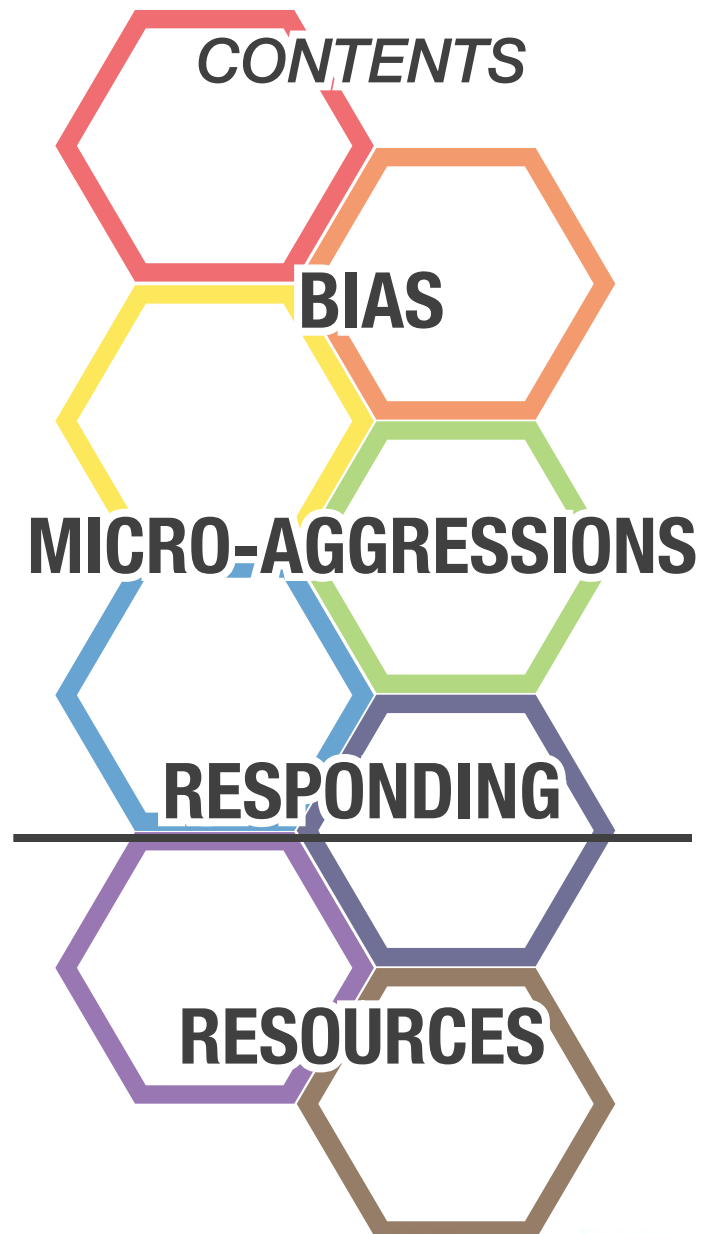




RESPONDING > CONSIDERATIONS



Here are additional considerations to help guide your crucial conversations:



- Talk about the aggression not the aggressor.
- Presume the aggressor acted from unconscious bias, and make an attempt to help the source to surface and disrupt that bias.
- Restate or paraphrase what you heard.
- Ask for clarification and more information.
- Acknowledge, without validating, the feelings behind the statement.
- Separate intent from impact, while acknowledging the impact.
- Share your own process - your journey.
- Express your feelings.
- Challenge stereotypes.
- Appeal to values and principles.
- Promote empathy.
- Remind folks of the policies and agreements of the organization or congregation of which all are a part.
- Ask for positive change.





SELF-CARE & HEALING

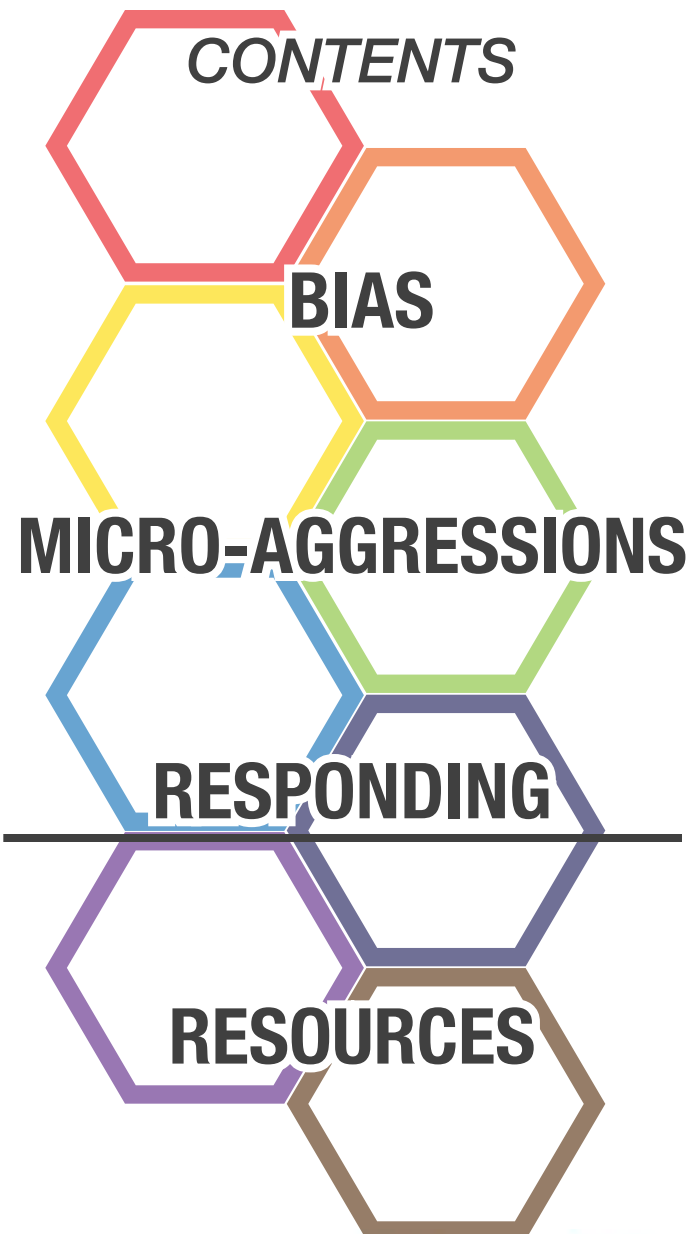
Micro-aggressions cause real harm.

Allies should also be conscious of their own self-care and healing.

Types of support can include organizational support (e.g., if someone experiences micro-aggressions at a workplace, employees can contact Human Resources or their Employee Assistance Program; a congregation may have Pastoral Care or a “Right Relationship” team that responds to needs for community support and positive intervention).

Individuals can also seek social support (e.g., talking to your loved ones or peers with similar identities who can validate your experiences).

Processing one’s emotions is also important because micro-aggressions have been known to lead to an array of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and trauma.

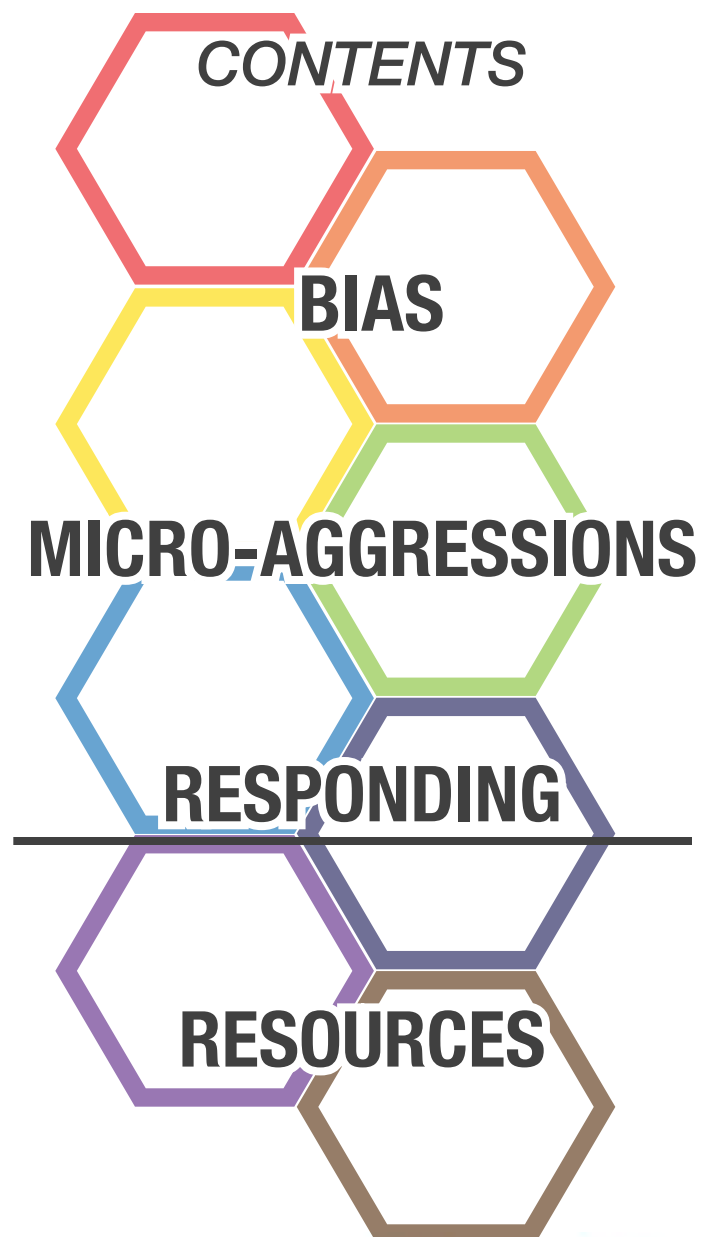




DID I CAUSE HARM?



What if you realize you've committed, or if someone accuses you of committing, a micro-aggression?



- Try not to be defensive.
- Take stock of your feelings, thoughts and behaviors, whether it's fear of appearing racist, anger about being confronted, or attempts to minimize the situation.
- Presume that the person feels at risk in sharing this information.
- Acknowledge the other person's hurt, and apologize to them.
- On your own, reflect on where the micro-aggression came from and how you can avoid similar mistakes in the future.
- Take responsibility for increasing your understanding of your own privileges and prejudices.
- Commit to a practice of anti-racism.





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