

## Crossroads to Reinforcing Cycles in Relationships

Crossroads	Reinforcing Cycle	Outcome
<p><b>ATTACK</b>, react or defend:</p> <p>You express what you are feeling or how you are experiencing what was just said in the form of a complaint or-attack-in a way that is criticizing or retaliatory. Hot buttons are usually pushed.</p>	<p>Turns the other person into an enemy and often triggers an adversarial cycle. Each person has a comeback that one-ups the other person or shuts the other down when stung too badly by their words. Neither person feels heard by the other.</p>	<p>Turns each other into enemies</p>
<p><b>AVOID</b>, withdraw or downplay:</p> <p>You keep your thoughts to yourself, change the subject, or minimize what is said to avoid having a courageous conversation. The conversation is over.</p>	<p>Turns the other person into a stranger who never really gets to know you or how you experience the world. Often triggers a withdrawn cycle. Each person avoids saying what they really feel.</p>	<p>Turns each other into strangers</p>
<p><b>ENGAGE</b>, confide or listen:</p> <p>You bring the person in for an honest conversation about-how you are experiencing what they have said. You also take in and believe what they are trying to tell you. Ask questions that probe deeper into the experiences they had that led them to their ideas.</p>	<p>Turns the other person into an ally, triggering an empathic collaborative cycle.</p>	<p>Turns each other into allies</p>

Adapted from Daniel B. Wile, Ph.D. *Collaborative Couples Therapy: Turning Fights into Intimate Conversations* (2009).

**Note:** When confiding, build a platform aka meta level, acknowledge what person has said in a way that shows you understand, ask questions that help the person think about how his or her experiences have influenced the way he or she sees the world. Important to keep the norms in the center of the conversation: Listen for understanding, expect and accept non-closure, speak your truth, stay engaged, experience discomfort, take risks, and no fixing.



Allison's Comment White Woman	Janet's Response African American Woman
<p><b>Attack:</b> Why does the conversation always have to center around race? I was poor growing up and I made it. I'm tired of hearing excuses for why someone isn't successful. If you work hard you can succeed.</p>	<p><b>Attack:</b> Yeah, well that's easy for you to say coming from a place of White privilege! People don't necessarily know that you were poor. They don't treat you like you're inferior the moment they see you!</p> <p><b>Avoid:</b> Eyes rolling, side bar conversation <i>can you believe what she just said</i> or saves thoughts for a person of color.</p> <p><b>Engage:</b> Yes, I worry about that too. Poverty is a serious issue. It sounds like you are feeling frustrated that your experiences are left out of the conversation and don't count. I certainly don't want this conversation to become the oppression Olympics, where we try to one up each other and no one gets heard. I don't know if you intended this but when you you're your tired of people making excuses I felt myself become angry and defenses. Maybe we could hear each other better and understand one another's experiences by starting with some of the institutional barriers you faced growing up poor and then I will share mine.</p> <p><b>What other conversation stems might you use?</b></p>
<p><b>Avoid:</b> I treat all people the same regardless of their race. Talking about racial differences just divides us. We should talk about our similarities not our differences.</p>	<p><b>Attack:</b> First of all, the fact that you treat everyone the same (if that's even possible) is part of the problem! Second of all, you may think talking about race divides us but it's actually not talking about race that divides us. That's just like White people to try and skirt around the issue of race and talk about something else so that they don't have to take responsibility for their White privilege!</p> <p><b>Avoid:</b> All of the issues; sexual orientation, ability, gender, class, race, etc are important. It's hard to know what to talk about so maybe its better if we don't talk about any of them.</p> <p><b>Engage:</b> Recognizing that we have more in common than we do differences is important. Can you say a little more about your concern that having conversations around our differences will divide us? It sounds like your worried it will effect our relationship. I'd like to try and understand where you are coming from and how you see things.</p> <p><b>What other conversation stems might you use?</b></p>
<p><b>Engage:</b> I'm embarrassed and a little afraid to say this because I'm not sure how people will respond, but I've always struggled with understanding how race matters. I guess it's hard for me as a White woman who grew up poor to understand how a person's race holds them back. I don't feel like being White has helped me to get ahead. I need you to help me understand where you are coming from with this.</p>	<p><b>Attack:</b> A person's race doesn't hold them back, it's the views others have of them because of their race and the way they are treated that holds them back!</p> <p><b>Avoid:</b> Well, don't worry it's difficult for a lot of people to understand.</p> <p><b>Engage:</b> I appreciate your willingness to try to understand. This is a difficult issue that requires intentionality to understand. I know that for me I've had to attend a lot of workshops, read, and engage in a lot of conversations to be able to see beyond my own experiences. I feel heard when you are willing to take risks and engage in courageous conversations. Tell me more about your experience growing up so I can better understand where you are coming from in all this.</p> <p><b>What other conversation stems might you use?</b></p>

**Discuss in Your Group**

- How you are feeling. Where those feelings come from?
- Do you respond briefly, in depth or ignore it?
- If you respond, what might you say?
- What are some things you need to avoid saying or doing?



# Racial Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<b>Alien in Own Land</b> When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born.	Asking an Asian co-worker, "Where are from? No, where are you <i>really</i> from?"  Telling an American born Latino they speak such good English.	You are not American.
<b>Ascription of Intelligence</b> Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.	A co-worker responds with surprise when an Asian American talks about struggling with math in high school.  A career counselor asking a Black or Latino student, "Do you think you're ready for college?"	All Asians are smart and good at math.  It is unusual for people of color to succeed.
<b>Color Blindness</b> Statements which indicate that a person does not want to acknowledge race.	When a staff member of color attempts to discuss being the only person of color on staff and feeling alienated and dismissed by her co-workers, a staff member says, "Do you think you're being a little too sensitive? We should emphasize similarities, not people's differences."  When a staff member confides in a colleague that he thinks another staff person is treating him badly because of his race, the colleague replies "I don't think "Mike" would do something like that. He seems to treat everyone the same regardless of race."	Race and culture are not important variables that affect people's lives.  Your racial experiences are not valid.
<b>Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status</b> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.	Blacks and Latino staff are consistently asked to show identification while their white colleagues are not.	You are a criminal.
<b>Denial of Individual Racism</b> A statement made when whites renounce their racial biases.	A new hire asks her supervisor if race is addressed in the organization. The supervisor replies, "Race does not affect the way we work with one another. We treat everyone the same."  A staff brings up racism with her manager. She replies, "I totally understand. As a woman, I face discrimination too."	Your racial/ethnic experience is not important.  Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression.
<b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in succeeding in career advancement or education.	A school counselor tells a Black student, "If you work hard, you can succeed like everyone else."  When a staff member of color complains about being passed over for promotion, his colleague replies, "Maybe if you work harder you'll get promoted next time."	People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.  If you don't succeed, you have only yourself to blame (blaming the victim).

# Racial Microaggressions

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<p><b>Pathologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles</b> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/white culture are ideal.</p>	<p>A Black man speaks loudly with affect when engaging in discussion with co-workers. One of the co-workers complains to her supervisor saying she is fearful and sees his behavior as inappropriate.</p> <p>A student of Asian or Native American descent has trouble maintaining eye contact with his supervisor. The supervisor assumes he is being defiant.</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.</p> <p>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>
<p><b>Second-Class Citizen</b> Occurs when a white person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.</p>	<p>White staff members get called on more often and are more frequently asked their opinions in staff meetings.</p> <p>A white person is served first by the office staff when a person of color arrives before them.</p>	<p>Whites are more valued than people of color.</p> <p>White students are more valued than students of color.</p>
<p><b>Environmental Microaggressions</b> Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on a systemic level.</p>	<p>The magazines in the lobby and pictures on the wall are geared towards white dominant culture.</p> <p>White people are the protagonists of all of the required reading in class.</p>	<p>You don't belong/Only white people can succeed.</p> <p>You are an outsider/You don't exist.</p>

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Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., Esquilin, M., Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. American Psychologist. 2007 vol.62, No. 4

## Learning Conversation Stems

The following phrases and questions can help you engage people in courageous conversations. Make them your own and think about what you might add to this list.

**In order for this to work it's important that you...**

1. Try and connect with the other persons' feelings and needs.
2. Show you are sincerely interested in him/her. Not a technique.
3. Focus on contributing to their well being. Try and see the beauty in them.
4. Meet them where they are at.
5. Stay with it.

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

**Agent** (The person who offended)

1. What impact have my actions had on you?
2. It seems like you might be having an emotional reaction to what I just said and I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage me in conversation around it.
3. How did what I just say impact you? I notice that you seem upset by it.
4. Can you say a little more about why you're so frustrated with me?
5. Were you reacting to something I did or said?
6. What was it that I said that caused your reaction?
7. Will you let me/us in on your thoughts?
8. I'm trying to understand these issues better, can you say more about...
9. I'm trying my best to grasp what you're saying but it's difficult for me given how new I am to these conversations, could you give another example of what you mean by...
10. I'm so nervous having these conversations because I worry what you will think of me but I will do my best to stay in it. Are you saying that...?
11. Let me see if I'm hearing you right, you're saying that...
12. I'm truly sorry for having offended you. I had no idea that my words had those subtle implications. Have I ever said anything like that before that has offended you?
13. I'm trying to listen for understanding but I'm struggling to fully understand how... would you say more about that?
14. Can I start over?
15. Thank you for taking the risk to share your thoughts about how my words impacted you, is there something else I should be aware of?
16. \_\_\_\_\_
17. \_\_\_\_\_

***If you are the target of a microaggression and at first attacked or avoided the conversation and now want to engage it's important that you...***

- 1. Work not to keep the enemy image. Don't insult or educate.*
- 2. Try and connect with the other person.*
- 3. What are the needs of the other person? Why did they say or do what they did?*
- 4. Don't punish, shame, blame or guilt them into understanding*
- 5. Meet them where they are at.*
- 6. Move beyond a place of rightness and wrongness.*

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

**Target** (The person who was offended)

1. Would you be open to hearing how I experienced what you said?
2. Would you be open to hearing how I heard it?
3. I would like to tell you how your words impacted me but I'm worried you'll become defensive. When you said... I felt...
4. I'm having an emotional reaction to what you just said and I'm wondering if you would be willing to engage me in conversation around it.
5. What would it mean to you if that (racism, power, privilege, oppression) is still happening?
6. What are some of your thoughts about what is going on with... (Describe something having to do with racism, power, privilege)?
7. It would help me understand if you could share an example of...
8. Help me to better understand why you feel that way. Can you be more specific about how you came to believe...?
9. I want to better understand your perspective. Would you give me an example of when your whiteness (for example) worked against you?
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_

**Both**

1. Shift from, "I understand" to "Can you help me understand . . .?"
2. Tell me more . . .
3. Can you say a little more about how you see things?
4. What information might you have that I don't?
5. How do you see it differently?
6. How are you feeling about all of this?
7. Say more about why this is important to you?
8. I'm wondering if it's possible to . . .
9. I'm wondering if it would make sense . . .

10. I need you to help me understand where you are coming from on this.
11. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each reacted to that conversation and whether there's a better way we could address these issues.
12. What do you mean when you say...?
13. I think I heard you say... (paraphrase) Did I understand that correctly?
14. I'm feeling (anxious, concerned, etc) about having this conversation and how we're going to work together in the future. I'm also hopeful that we can trust each other enough to have difficult conversations. How are you feeling?
15. I know there are power dynamics in our relationship. How do you think that is/will influence our conversation?
16. I'm wondering whether we could talk about how we each reacted to that conversation and whether there's a better way we could address these issues.
17. I'm hoping we can have a "courageous conversation" about what happened earlier because... (Name what's important about your relationship with that person).
18. What's going on for you right now?
19. I noticed (name non verbal communication that occurred) when... I said/asked.... Can we talk about what was going on for you in that moment?
20. \_\_\_\_\_
21. \_\_\_\_\_

## What to Talk About

### Explore where each story comes from

"My reactions here probably have a lot to do with my previous experiences. . ."

"I've had some really bad experiences before trying to having these conversations and so it's difficult for me to..."

### Share the impact on you

"I don't know whether you intended this, but I felt extremely uncomfortable when . . ."

"I know you didn't mean it this way but when you said... it made me think/feel..."

### Take responsibility for your contribution

"There are a number of things I've done that have made this situation harder. . ."

"I'm not sure how, but I feel like I may have disrespected you in some way. I feel the tension between us; can we talk about it? I'm trying to become more consciously competent when working with diverse groups of people."

### Describe feelings

"I'm anxious about bringing this up, but at the same time, it's important to me that we talk about it. . ."

"I'm not sure why, but I'm feeling uncomfortable right now with what was just said, can we stop for a minute and talk about it?"

### Reflect on the identity issues

"I think the reason this subject hooks me is that I don't like thinking of myself as someone who. . ."

"It's hard for me to hear that what I'm saying is racist. I have always thought of myself as someone who..."

### Name the elephant in the room

I'm wondering how you feel about having a White (therapist, teacher, etc) explore this issue with you. I imagine that if I was in your shoes I would be concerned about whether or not someone like me would understand your experiences.

*To make the structure of a difficult conversation visible, we need to understand not only what is said, but also what is not said. We need to understand what the people involved are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other.*

*In a difficult conversation, this is usually where the real action is.*

↪ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Sheila Heen in *Difficult Conversations*

Adapted from Stone, D., et. al. (1999). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.