

COLLABORATIVE Practice Tips

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A monthly bulletin from the CP Cal Practice Excellence Committee

The Practice Excellence Committee is pleased to offer tips to help you increase your Collaborative cases and achieve *practice excellence*.

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Understanding Reactions and Responding Effectively to Microaggressions

Part II

Derived in part from notes from presentation by Lindsey Davis, PhD on 10/10/22

Hosted by Virtual Divorce California.

There are Cognitive, Emotional, Physical & Mental Health responses to microaggressions. Language and nonverbal behaviors can impact the receiver, the observer, and those who commit microaggression.

Cognitive Responses to Microaggressions: The situation in which a microaggression has occurred is often ambiguous, complex and nuanced. In the aftermath of microaggression, one is often not fully engaged in the present moment due to the multitude of thoughts that can arise, such as self-doubt and/or second guessing oneself, i.e., “Did that just happen?” “How do I handle this?” “Will it be worth the effort?” “What could happen if I address that?” “How do I clean this up?”

People of marginalized groups are often cautious and reluctant to raise issues of concern regarding race, gender, age, etc. They experience a legitimate fear of potential consequences for speaking up. They are often dismissed, invalidated, and can be blamed for being overly sensitive, reactive, or aggressive.

Emotional Responses: No matter who experiences microaggression, feelings of discomfort, anxiety and frustration typically abound. Those who repeatedly experience microaggression often have “**battle fatigue**” and can become emotionally exhausted over time. How to respond can be challenging. Not responding is still a choice that affirms and/or maintains the discriminatory status quo.

Physical and Mental Health Problems: Research has found a connection to mental health problems for those who experience microaggression, which can resemble PTSD symptoms. Exposure to microaggression can cause what is referred to as small “t” trauma, similar to one’s experience in a court room, classroom and/or workplace. Below are examples of some of the mental health issues connected to the experience of microaggression:

1. Increases in short term / long term **toxic stress** and/or **anxiety**.
2. Increases in **depression** with symptoms such as **hopelessness** and/or **helplessness** and higher rates of **suicidal ideation**.
3. **Internalized distress** from “isms” and “phobias”, such as agism, sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia (fear of anyone different) can create **more worry** because an expectation has been internalized via repeated exposure of societal perceptions and/or attitudes related to a person’s identity.
4. **Emotional numbing** can occur when there is repeated microaggression. At a certain point the recognition of microaggression can “turn off” to relieve the anxiety and distress. Side effects are similar to dissociation associated with trauma.

How Can We Respond When We’ve Committed Microaggression?

If we’ve made a mistake, the most important thing to focus on is taking responsibility. To take responsibility, we must **distinguish** between

our **intentions** and the **impact** on the recipient.

As stated in Part I, microaggression is not typically intentional but is perceived as hurtful or insulting. It is the RECIPIENT (the person feeling the impact) who determines that a microaggression has occurred, not the doer or the speaker.

Respond to the Actual Impact:

1. Acknowledge the offending behavior, i.e., the statement, the act, or the gesture.

“When I said _____, I realize that it was thoughtless of me.”

2. State how behavior was hurtful to the recipient and express remorse.

“What I said was insensitive and I can see that it caused you to feel _____ and _____. I am so sorry.”

3. Make amends. Tell the receiver what you will do to make things right. You might have to ask the receiver what you can do.

“Is there anything I can do to make this right?”

4. Discuss your commitment to not repeat the behavior.

Do not make statements that dilute, minimize, or take refuge in your “intentions”. We are responsible for the outcome even if it was not intentional. Rarely do we *intentionally* get into a car accident; yet we still do damage, and we are **still responsible for the impact**.

People find it painful and difficult to apologize; they fear it might mean something terrible about themselves, *which often is not the case at all*. We are not terrible people because we initiated microaggression. It is inevitable. The key is recognizing, taking responsibility, repairing any adverse impact, and learning from our experience.

From the PEC:

What Else Do You Want?

Now that we’re back to sometimes meeting with potential referral sources in person (yay!) let’s tune up our networking skills. Yes, you do want more Collaborative clients, and that is the reason for the meeting. Your potential referral source wants clients as well, and you may be able to send some their way in the future. Once you’ve established this...and ten minutes have gone by and there’s still plenty of coffee in your cup...it’s time to talk about other things. So, come prepared. What else are you looking for? What questions can

you ask to get to other things they need?

Being helpful in other areas is a relationship-builder, and great networkers are always looking to connect people to resources on a variety of levels. The estate attorney I met with recently was able to find out the owner of an abandoned building I'm thinking of buying! The couples therapist I had lunch with was able to connect me with a potential employee for my husband's business...in Florida! But it's not just about me! I had some powerful marketing tips for the therapist, and since it turned out the attorney was a huge Porsche fan, brought him some of my husband's Porsche art for the bare walls in his office. Win-win! Which is what we get when we expand our thinking, dig deeper, think of what we really need and become curious about what the other needs as well. Oh. Yes. This is SHOWING what a great mediator you are, too.



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