

# CITY OF MADISON

## Say What?

### Module 3: Responding to Subtle Acts of Exclusion

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**“Subtle acts of exclusion” are words or actions that spring from conscious or unconscious bias.**

Every subtle act of exclusion has an individual or group “subject,” who may or may not be present. The person who commits the subtle act of exclusion is the “initiator.” Observers who speak up for the target of bias are “allies.” Those who remain silent are “bystanders.” (From the book, [Subtle Acts of Exclusion](#) by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran.)

Messages subtle acts of exclusion can communicate:

“You are invisible.”

“You don’t belong.”

“You are a threat.”

“You don’t matter.”

“You are not normal – less than.”

“You are a burden.”

“You are not a whole human.”

“You are a curiosity.”

“You are a joke.”

Ways you can respond, as the subject or an observer:

#### Asking for clarification

- “Could you say more about what you mean by that?”
- “How have you come to think that?”
- “I don’t get it—can you explain the joke?”

#### Expressing concern without blame

- “When you \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior), I felt \_\_\_\_\_ (feeling) because \_\_\_\_\_. Instead you could \_\_\_\_\_ (suggest different language or behavior.)”
- **Example:** “When you referred to us as ‘ladies,’ I felt concerned because that term doesn’t include everyone in our group. In the future, we could say ‘team’ or something like that to be inclusive of all genders.”

#### Sharing your own process

- “I noticed that you \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say the same thing, until I learned \_\_\_\_\_. Now I \_\_\_\_\_ (suggest different language or behavior.)”
- **Example:** “I noticed that you called that process ‘crazy-making.’ I used to say the word ‘crazy’ all the time, but then I learned how hurtful that term is for people who struggle with mental illness... Now when I want to call something ‘crazy,’ I try to say ‘That’s wild’ or ‘that’s unbelievable!’”

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Ways to apologize, as the initiator:

Listen	Actually Apologize	Correct yourself/ Commit to change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listen to understand and empathize</li><li>• Don't interrupt</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid wobble words and phrases-- "I'm sorry" is a complete sentence.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If you can make a correction, do so immediately.</li><li>• If you cannot, show you understand.</li></ul>

Apology examples:

- “Apologies, [**correct yourself.**]”  
(For pronoun blunders a quick correction is the way to go!)
- “Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I am sorry and I will do better.”

## Employee Resources

[Prohibited Harassment & Discrimination Policy](#) outlines a process for reporting and investigation of workplace harassment, discrimination, and retaliation.

[Employee Assistance Program](#) provides personalized counseling and referral services for all City of Madison employees and their family members.

[MAC/WIC Peer Advisors](#) provide confidential support on a wide spectrum of issues in the workplace, and especially center on the experiences and concerns of employees of color and marginalized genders.

## Extend your Learning

[Subtle Acts of Exclusion: How to Understand, Identify, and Stop Microaggressions](#) by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran. This book was a resource used by the teams developing this training.

[Medium.com/TMI-Consulting-Inc-](#) Articles on subtle acts of exclusion and other topics, by the publishers of the *Subtle Acts of Exclusion* book

[PracticeWithPronouns.com](#)- An excellent resource for practicing pronouns that are unfamiliar to you.

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## Breakout Scenario #1

Take a minute or two to introduce yourselves to each other: names, pronouns (optional), and department.

We recommend that one person share their screen with this handout and read these instructions out loud. **Choose who will voice the narrator, Lee, and Adriana and read the scenario below out loud.**

**Narrator:** Adriana (she/her) has rheumatoid arthritis. She's experiencing an arthritis flare and working from home. She's on a video call with her co-worker, Lee (he/him), who is currently in the office.

**Lee:** "You're working from home again?"

**Adriana:** "Yep."

**Lee:** "How did you get approval to do that?"

**Adriana:** "Well.... It's an accommodation for my disability."

**Lee:** "Disability? But you don't look sick."

For this scenario (links take you to different sections of this handout):

- What was/were the subtle acts of exclusion?
- What message(s) did this communicate to Adriana? ([Potential messages subtle acts of exclusion communicate](#))
- Practice and role play responding as Adriana. ([Ideas for responding](#))
- Practice and role play apologizing as Lee ([How to apologize](#))
- Rotate so everyone has an opportunity to practice responding and apologizing. (Saying "pass" is an option if you don't want to respond to a particular scenario.)

**Note:** In real life, it is not likely that you will get an immediate, sincere apology when you respond to a subtle act of exclusion. We are role playing it this way so everyone gets practice both responding and apologizing.

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## Breakout Scenario #2

**Choose who will voice the narrator, Jeff, and Janelle and read the scenario below out loud.**

**Narrator:** It's Janelle's (she/her) first day as part of a maintenance crew with the City of Madison. She has just been introduced to Jeffrey (he/him), her leadworker.

**Jeff:** "Great to have you on the team! We could really use the extra help after Jose retired."

**Janelle:** "Thanks. I wasn't sure I would get it, and am so happy to be here."

**Jeff:** "Well, make sure you work hard. We don't get a lot of women here because this is pretty tough work."

### **Discuss:**

(links take you to different sections of this handout)

- What was/were the subtle acts of exclusion?
- What message(s) did this communicate to Janelle? ([Potential messages subtle acts of exclusion communicate](#))
- Practice and role play responding as Janelle. ([Ideas for responding](#))
- Practice and role play apologizing as Jeff. ([How to apologize](#))
- Practice and role play responding as an observer.
- Rotate so everyone has an opportunity to practice responding and apologizing.

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## Breakout Scenario #3

**Choose who will voice the narrator and Madilyn and read the scenario below out loud.**

**Narrator:** Idella (Black, she/her) has just been promoted into a supervisory role in a different department. She has just arrived to a meeting of Public Works Managers. Her former supervisor, Madilyn (white, she/her), is already there, along with several City managers (all white) who Idella hasn't met yet.

**Madilyn says:** "Here comes trouble..."

**Narrator:** A couple of the managers Idella doesn't know chuckle.

### **Discuss:**

(links take you to different sections of this handout)

- What was/were the subtle acts of exclusion?
- What message(s) did this communicate to Idella? ([Potential messages subtle acts of exclusion communicate](#))
- Practice and role play responding as Idella. **Note:** Idella may choose to talk to Madilyn later rather than right now, in front of everyone. ([Ideas for responding](#))
- Practice and role play apologizing as Madilyn. ([How to apologize](#))
- Practice and role play responding as one of the observers.
- Rotate so everyone has an opportunity to practice responding and apologizing.