

# Microaggressions Matter

Why small interventions are important.



**Microaggressions  
Matter.**



## About Communities Inc and Bystander Intervention Work

Communities Inc is a social enterprise established in 2011 with the purpose of tackling persistent and long-standing inequalities affecting the most disadvantaged communities. **We are passionate about making sustainable change and empowering communities** and have been working to tackle hate and prejudice since 2013.

**We know that given a chance, most people want to help others affected by hate**, but don't know what to do and are concerned about their own safety, so Communities Inc looked for a way to address these barriers. Supported by Google.org, Stand by Me was the result; a bystander intervention program that aimed to empower those that want to help others through safe and simple interventions.

**Stand by Me puts the emphasis on those that may witness hostility or prejudice, taking the burden for action away from the person affected.** It also provides a range of interventions giving everyone a role they can play. If we want to be safe and be treated with dignity and respect in our neighbourhoods, places of work and educational establishments, then we have to be prepared to take action to make it happen.

We have now been delivering bystander intervention programmes since 2017 and have worked with a range of organisations including Local Authorities, NHS Trusts, the Police, community groups, schools, colleges, universities and private sector businesses. Stand by Me has now been adapted to tackle racism, homophobia, sexual harassment and other forms of prejudice, all of which have been delivered with workplaces, in educational settings and with community groups. **Get in touch with us for a copy of our training brochure.**



**Shamsheer Chohan**

Creative Director



## Introduction

This training is a useful follow on from our main Stand by Me and Stand by Her programs as it goes into more detail around microaggressions, their origins, manifestations and how to address them.

**The learning outcomes for the session are:**

1. Gain a better understanding of microaggressions, their origins and their manifestations
2. Learn about strategies to address them in a non-confrontational way
3. Increase confidence in identifying and responding to microaggressions

## Not all Prejudices are Equal – The Pyramid of Hate

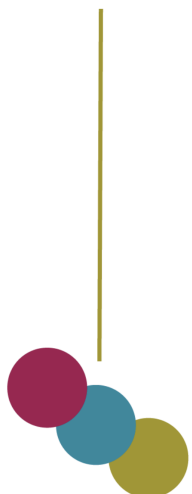
The pyramid provides a useful lens through which to examine hate, hostility and prejudice. It shows us how negative biases, if left unaddressed and unchallenged, can escalate to more harmful levels up the pyramid (or indeed if hate and hostility is encouraged to grow and spread).

- Biased attitudes, thoughts and feelings grow in complexity from the bottom to the top
- The upper levels are supported by the ones below, and as levels become normalised, it becomes easier to move to the next level
- As one moves up the pyramid, the behaviours have more life-threatening consequences for those affected
- The lower levels can be addressed through education and interaction with those different from us while interventions get more complex and difficult as we move up the pyramid

**Whilst every bias will not lead to genocide, every genocide would have started its life as a series of negative thoughts and feelings that were encouraged or allowed to escalate**

In the lower levels of the pyramid, we avoid certain people as we feel uneasy, uncertain and uncomfortable. This is often generated by a lack of information, contact and interaction with these groups.

The upper levels see us seeking and pursuing these groups and acting against them. Often this is taking out our frustrations, anger, fear and unease with them.



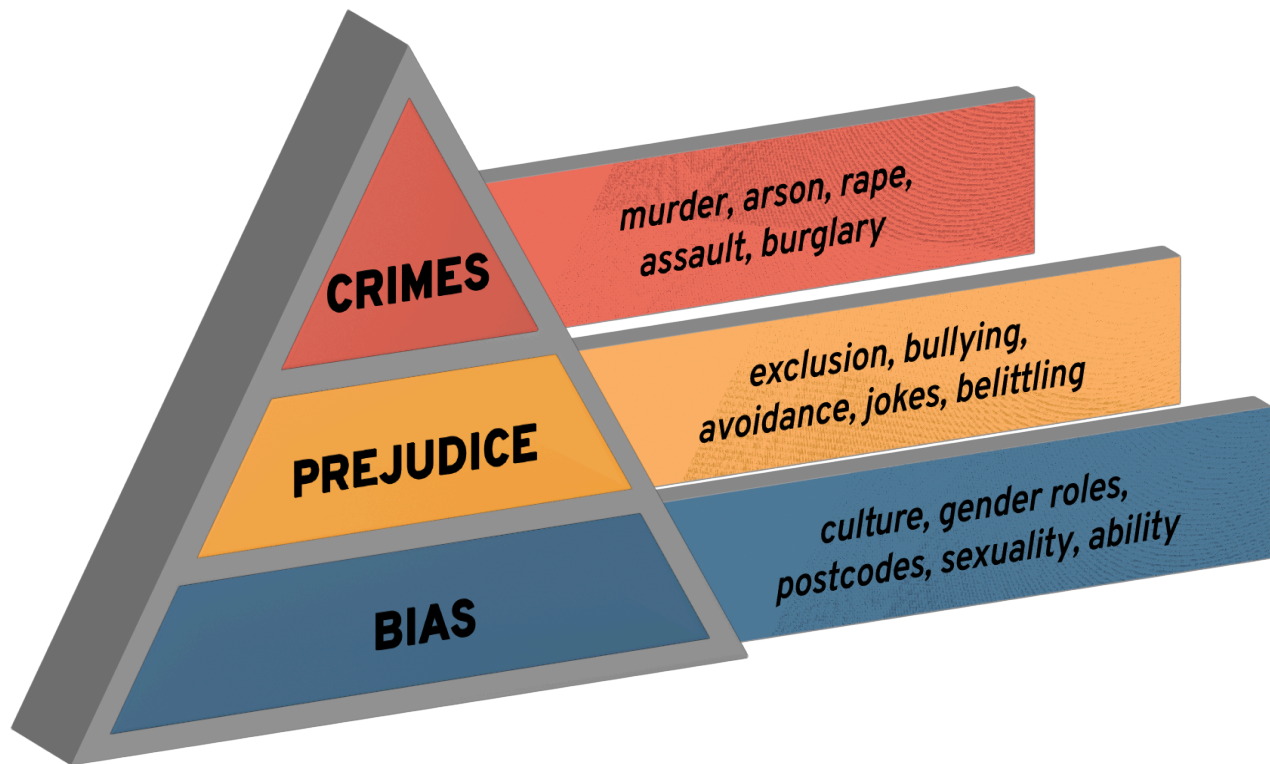


Figure 1 : 'From Bias to Hate'

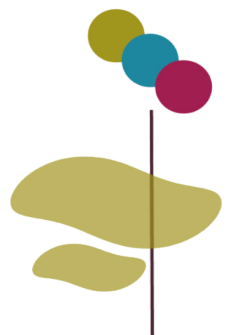
It is the negative biases at the bottom of the pyramid, that present us with the biggest challenges as they are more likely to be hidden, explicit and implied, often leaving the person affected feeling uncomfortable, knowing they have been disrespected or treated unfairly but not quite being able to put their finger on how and why.

This is the realm of microaggressions.

## Origins and Biology

Our brains have evolved to help us survive and to recognise and respond to the threats around us. 6 million years ago this involved:

- Animal predators
- Environmental catastrophes
- Other humans



Now the threats are a lot more complex and sophisticated but our brain still more or less functions in the same way with few exceptions.

We cannot process all the information around us in one go, so we use shortcuts to process this, sorting information into broad categories.

This shortcut processing and preference for 'us' is what leads to stereotyping and is the basis for unconscious bias.

## **Cultural feed**

We are constantly processing the data/information around us and this begins as soon as we are born. Mostly this is unchecked and unconscious so we are mainly unaware of it.

This information can come from a range of sources including:

- Our upbringing and family
- Education system
- TV/social media
- Our peers
- Our employers

**We have to make a conscious effort to recognise it, which can give us more choices as to how far we allow this conditioning to guide our behaviours and attitudes.**

## **Measuring Unconscious Bias**

The Implicit Association Test is a psychological test that measures unconscious attitudes and biases (that we take on through decades of cultural feeds) and can reveal attitudes and beliefs that people may not be aware of.

From the results of millions of tests to measure racial bias globally, 75% of white people show a preference for white faces...as do 50% of black people. Why? Because everyone in any culture or environment is exposed to the same cultural feeds.

It is easier to connect pairs of ideas that are already related and often people's response time is quicker when they have stronger associations (or conditioning).



## Why does this matter

Because this influences our behaviour, which we may be not explicitly aware of.

This could be subtle such as when talking to a black person, leaning slightly away, not having as much eye contact, standing a little further away, saying less....

Or more directly, which is where we see (sometimes conscious) prejudices and attitudes.

## Language and Bias

Negative bias can be expressed through the language we use. Regardless of whether someone uses it consciously or unconsciously, it can have a negative effect on readers and listeners.

Language bias can demean and cast out groups of people or make them feel misunderstood and misrepresented just because of who they are. It singles out people, boxes them in, and categorizes them by creating and perpetuating stereotypes.

The Linguistic Intergroup Bias test, taps into the brain's inner workings and the difference in word choice can indicate stereotyped thinking and negative bias often related to people's identity or characteristics:

### Examples

Age – Calling older people “the elderly” or “the aged”.

Ability or health status – Describing people with different abilities or health conditions as “wheelchair-bound” or “victims” of a disease.

Sexual orientation and identity – Using terms like “homosexuals” or “the gays”.

Religion – Referring to members of one religion as “fanatic” and to those of another as “devout”.

## The Amygdala

The amygdala is a small, almond-shaped part of the brain that controls fear, emotions, and motivation. It's part of the limbic system, which also controls behavior and memory

- The purpose of the amygdala is to ensure survival, being responsible for processing fear and aggression in response to threats.

- It is the part of the brain that picks up information first and initiates the fight or flight response
- Scanning technology records the flow of blood around the brain in response to images presented. The Amygdala records an increased blood flow when observing black faces but not white faces.
- Its is super-fast in its processing and response

The cost is often inaccuracy i.e. it can misread threats!

## The Prefrontal cortex

The prefrontal cortex is known to be the higher-order association center of the brain as it is responsible for decision making, reasoning, personality expression, maintaining social appropriateness, and other complex cognitive behaviors.

- The prefrontal cortex is the executive command for detailed processing and will unpick whether the threat identified by the amygdala is accurate or not
- It will often act to keep our instinctual amygdala in check and tell it to stand down, so it stops us acting on its automatic threat detection
- It used to be smaller in primitive man and has increased in size as the complexity of threats increased through the history of humankind (we have a lot more to process now)
- Having a greater awareness and motivation to not cause harm can determine its level of activity

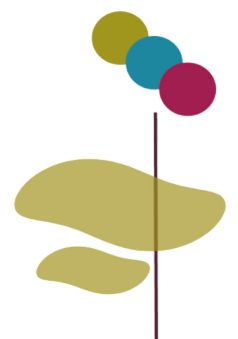
For those not motivated to override the amygdala, their prefrontal cortex will either underreact or not regulate it leaving the amygdala to shape behaviour.

### Not engaging the Prefrontal Cortex can have devastating consequences

The murder of Mark Duggan in 2011 by police who shot him within seconds of getting out of the taxi they had boxed in led to the worst riots in modern British history.

The science says the police were more likely to shoot because of the colour of his skin regardless of whether he was holding a mobile phone or gun. Officers will say they would do the same if the target is white, but the science does not support this.

The same applies to the many shootings of black men by police officers.



42 studies involving 3500 shooters all showed evidence that they were more likely and faster to pull the trigger on armed and unarmed black targets relative to white targets. They required less evidence that a black target was holding a gun compared to white targets. Black and white shooters showed the same level of bias showing it's a learned response.

Conscious awareness and Positive motivation makes a difference to people's attitudes and behaviours

## Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the everyday indications of negative biases. Being aware of these and their manifestations can help us to address them when they first arise, preventing more harmful behaviour taking place.

- The everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviours that people of marginalised groups experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned people who may be unaware of their impact
- They can convey the message that victims are foreigners, criminals, dangerous, a threat or subhuman
- They can create a hostile and threatening employment climate, lower work productivity, interfere with problem-solving, and increase employee turnover

Microaggressions are a common way that hostility is communicated. It can be difficult to describe but these two videos provide a useful insight:

How are microaggressions like mosquitoes?	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emz49wSnNcs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emz49wSnNcs</a>
John Lewis Partnership - It's Not OK	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf2uL5QIT00">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf2uL5QIT00</a>
Anti Racist Cumbria -Microaggressions	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSyqOGxkleQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSyqOGxkleQ</a>

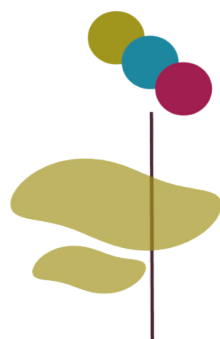




## There are three main types of microaggressions:

<b>Micro Assaults</b>	<p>We know explicit prejudice is not acceptable, so sometimes, people that have prejudices ‘dumb down’ their behaviour to more indirect methods of expressing these. These are micro assaults. They are meant to hurt people through name calling, avoidant behaviour or purposefully uncooperative and discriminatory actions. They are conscious, deliberate and explicit.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Deliberately serving able bodied person before someone with a disability</li><li>• Not giving extra shifts to ethnic minority workers</li><li>• Avoiding conversations with people from the LGBTQ+ community</li></ul>
<b>Micro Insults</b>	<p>These convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s identity; they send a message that they are unimportant or not normal. The subtle snubs are frequently unknown to those doing this, but they convey a hidden insulting message, thoughtless gestures or comments.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• So, you aren’t married then?</li><li>• Why don’t you have children?</li><li>• You don’t work?</li></ul>
<b>MicroInvalidations</b>	<p>These invalidate peoples experiences altogether by excluding, negating or nullifying a person's thoughts, feelings or experiential reality. Comments made are often contradictory to people’s lived experiences.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We don’t have racism in our organisation</li><li>• Women feel safe and confident to raise their concerns in our team</li><li>• People with disabilities are supported in their work</li></ul>

Most people experiencing them say they feel ignored, are given poor service and treated rudely often. They are important to ‘nip in the bud’ and catch early and if left unaddressed they can escalate and become increasingly harmful to others.



Microaggressions require 'micro interventions': that is subtle and indirect responses that can send messages that something is not quite right. Micro Interventions allow us to 'start' a conversation or engagement when we don't know what to say.

**Remember, sometimes microaggressions are about the way that something is said and who it is said about.**

## Hidden Histories

### Racist origins of certain words

The words we use can have some very unsavoury origins and at times can continue to communicate the negative associations with them. This is not saying do not use these terms (as often the meaning has changed since its original use) but be aware of some of the history. Unfortunately the more you look, the more you will come across terms with negative histories, see links below for some examples'

Everyday words and phrases that have racist connotations	<a href="https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/06/us/racism-words-phrases-slavery-trnd/index.html">https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/06/us/racism-words-phrases-slavery-trnd/index.html</a>
11 Common English Words And Phrases With Racist Origins	<a href="https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/common-racist-words-phrases">https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/common-racist-words-phrases</a>
Here are some commonly used terms that actually have racist origins	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/commonly-terms-racist-origins/story?id=71840410">https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/commonly-terms-racist-origins/story?id=71840410</a>

## Whitewashing

Whitewashing means to alter...in a way that favors, features, or caters to white people and where the achievements and successes of minorities are ignored, dismissed or deliberately buried.

For example, Did you know?: An estimated 2.5 million Indians/ South Asians served in the Second World War, or that over 1.3 million Africans served in the First World War. The historical portrayal of the British empire is often about taming and civilizing the savages, which promotes white people as superior and non-white as inferior.

Imagine how things could have been different if this knowledge was widely shared and acknowledged. Those Indians and Africans would be seen as heroes that fought for Britain and laid down their lives as well for a better Britain. They would probably be accorded more value and respect, rather than being seen as people that are a drain to Britain, they would be crucial contributors.

The lack of information keeps generations in a cycle of ignorance that perpetuates hostility. We can find examples of white washing across all areas such as history, education, literature, music, films, advertising, the news.....

What Is Whitewashing, and Why Is It Harmful?	<a href="https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/whitewashing">https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/whitewashing</a>
Paris liberation made 'whites only'	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7984436.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7984436.stm</a>
The 20 Worst Examples Of Hollywood Whitewashing	<a href="https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/the-20-worst-examples-of-hollywood-whitewashing-268110/">https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/the-20-worst-examples-of-hollywood-whitewashing-268110/</a>

In the 1870s, exhibitions of so-called "exotic populations" became popular throughout the western world. Human zoos could be in many of Europe's largest cities, such as Paris, Hamburg, London, Milan as well as American cities such as New York and Chicago

These emphasised the supposed inferiority of their culture, and superiority of 'Western society' which was used to justify their subjugation and rule

People from Asia, Africa, the South Americas and Australia were often duped to 'perform' as the savages the zoos wanted to portray them as and the tide only started turning when millions were involved in the war efforts.

The Chilling History Of Victorian Britain's Human Zoos: Britain's Human Zoos	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZQWgeETMqQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZQWgeETMqQ</a>
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## Erasure of indigenous people

This involves the:

- Silencing of marginalized communities
- Deletion of their experiences

It can include:

- Dispossession of Native lands,
- Forced relocations and assimilation,
- Altering school curriculums,
- Concealing the truth about history,
- Underrepresentation in institutions and society



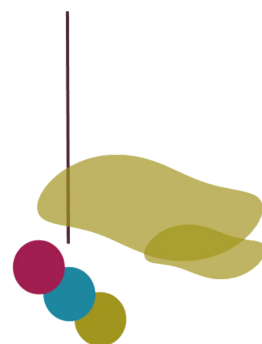
In the late 1880s a movement emerged to kill the Indian and save the man in Canada and the US. 417 residential schools were opened (often run by the Catholic Church) to re-educate children who were often forcibly taken from families, their hair was cut, they were stopped from speaking their language and systemically physically and mentally abused. The aim was to erase First Nation people and any traces of their culture and identity. 150,000 First Nation children attended these residential schools, as part of the government's policy. In recent decades bodies of some of these children or their babies (fathered by priests working at these schools) have been uncovered in school grounds.

More than 6,000 children died. The last of these schools closed in 1997.

Recent years have seen the beginning of a discovery and reconciliation process for the wrongs done. In 2022 the Pope apologised for what he called 'the genocide' against First Nation people. Sugarcane (2024) is a National Geographic Documentary film which highlights the story of one of these schools.

In Australia up to the 1970s, thousands of mixed-race children were stolen from their mothers and given to institutions as cheap or slave labour; many were physically, sexually and mentally abused. A Chief Protector of Aborigines described these as "breeding out the colour" programs.

Sugarcane (2024) trailer	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CisI_WFPDOk&amp;t=7s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CisI_WFPDOk&amp;t=7s</a>
How Australia Erased Its Aboriginals From History	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smj6oMuxGFo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smj6oMuxGFo</a>



## Micro Intervention Strategies:

Strategy One: Making the invisible visible		
	Example of comment	Example of response
<b>Challenge the stereotype</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Address the assumption the comment is made on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women have too much time off having babies</li> <li>• He's too young to be a manager</li> <li>• She doesn't have a disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all women want to have children</li> <li>• Some young people make great managers</li> <li>• She may have, not all disabilities are visible</li> </ul>
<b>Broaden trait to universal human behaviour</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highlight that this issue is relevant for ALL people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women spend too much time at their children's school events</li> <li>• The event is too much fun to attract older people</li> <li>• Trans people always want their voice heard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anyone that is a parent wants to be there for their children</li> <li>• People of all ages like to have fun</li> <li>• Everyone wants to be heard and understood</li> </ul>
<b>Seek clarification</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Find out more information before you respond</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't want to attend that meeting at the prison</li> <li>• His background means there are too many things that can go wrong.</li> <li>• I'm not sure that person would fit in here</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you tell me a bit more about why?</li> <li>• Can you give some examples of what might happen?</li> <li>• What makes you say that?</li> </ul>
<b>Rephrase the communication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Check what you think you have heard</li> </ul>	She's too young to be making those decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He's got some disabilities which means it's going to cost us more to take him on</li> <li>• With such a young client group she may feel out of place</li> </ul>	So, what you are saying is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You don't think you can trust young staff to make important decisions?</li> <li>• You don't think you can afford to take on someone with a disability?</li> <li>• You don't think older people can relate to young people?</li> </ul>

Strategy Two: Disarming the microaggression		
<b>Express disagreement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different ways of saying you don't agree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think we should reduce the opportunities for home working</li> <li>• Gay people don't need maternity or paternity leave</li> <li>• People take time off sick when they are not</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't really agree with that</li> <li>• Mmm...I'm not sure about that</li> <li>• I don't think so</li> </ul>
<b>Non-verbal responses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You don't even have to say anything!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She's not great at presentations</li> <li>• His stammer really bugs me</li> <li>• He's on his third boyfriend this month</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaking head</li> <li>• Rolling eyes</li> <li>• Sighing loudly</li> </ul>
<b>Use an exclamation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sometimes just one word can make a statement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That manager knows nothing about managing</li> <li>• I can't believe she got that job, she's got mental health problems</li> <li>• Women won't fit in with the male dominated environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wow</li> <li>• OMG</li> <li>• Really!</li> </ul>
<b>Interrupt and redirect</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When you are least expecting it, you don't have to respond straight away</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think about asylum seekers using the NHS?</li> <li>• Religion is the biggest problem in the world, don't you think?</li> <li>• Why do some people want us to use different pronouns?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let's not get distracted from what we need to do</li> <li>• Could we discuss that later as I have things to get done</li> <li>• That's important to talk about, let's schedule some time in the diary</li> </ul>
Strategy Three: Educating the person		
<b>Differentiate intention and impact</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognise early that you know they didn't mean to have a negative impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think everyone has a right to decide when to end their treatment</li> <li>• Most people deal with and get on with their lives after childhood abuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know you didn't mean to upset anyone, but what you said could be quite upsetting for some</li> <li>• You might not know but some people may be</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People need to avoid focussing on the negatives in their lives</li> </ul>	<p>triggered by that conversation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some people might take what you say in a way that you didn't intend them to</li> </ul>
<p><b>Point out commonality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Remember we still have loads of things we can connect over</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are miles apart on this issue</li> <li>• I really don't agree with what you are saying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is that a picture of your dog, I love dogs...</li> <li>• I noticed your tattoos, I would love to get one...</li> <li>• You said you worked for an international aid organisation, so did I...</li> </ul>
<p><b>Promote empathy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give the person a chance to be at the receiving end of their/others communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a disability is going to make that a hard job to do</li> <li>• Women can deal with being harassed; they don't need anyone to help</li> <li>• She should have been able to do that presentation really easily</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you feel if someone made assumptions about your ability?</li> <li>• I wonder what you would want others to do if your sister was being harassed?</li> <li>• How do you think your colleague felt being constantly interrupted whilst doing their presentation?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contradict the group stereotype by personalising it</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give an individual example that challenges stereotypes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women don't know anything about cars</li> <li>• Old people don't want to do anything but sit at home watching TV</li> <li>• Gay people don't want the same things as everyone else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I always know exactly what car I want, including the mileage, spec, price and performance</li> <li>• I love travelling and meeting new people from all over the world (older person)</li> <li>• I've always wanted to get married and have children (lesbian)</li> </ul>

## Good News and Microaffirmations

There is one thing that can help us to address our biases and prejudices or move attitudes and behaviours lower down the pyramid... and that is contact with others.

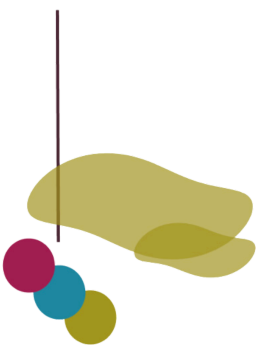
We can all start with micro affirmations...

Tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring and graceful acts of listening'

These are small gestures and acts that make people feel welcome, that they belong, that they have value. Even something as simple as smiling at others can foster this. The connection contact brings can induce empathy and help us unlearn the negative biases we may be consciously or unconsciously carrying with us. The connections could be about anything, and even superficial connections can make a difference

**TV2 Denmark - All That we Share**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc&t=2s>





## Let's Stay in Touch!

If you want to know more about our other programs go to our website [www.communitiesinc.org.uk](http://www.communitiesinc.org.uk) or email: [admin@communitiesinc.org.uk](mailto:admin@communitiesinc.org.uk)

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