# [Proactive Microresistance in a Microaggressive World](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/proactive-microresistance-in-a-microaggressive-world/?st=FFWeekly;sc=FFWeekly210414;utm_term=FFWeekly210414&utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Proactive+Microresistance+in+a+Microaggressive+World&utm_campaign=FF210414)

**April 14, 2021** [**Floyd Cheung, Cynthia Ganote, and Tasha Souza**](https://www.facultyfocus.com/author/ff-floydcheung/)



Microresistance is the umbrella term for small-scale individual or collaborative efforts that empower targeted people and allies to cope with, respond to, and/or challenge microaggressions with a goal of disrupting systems of oppression as they unfold in everyday life, thereby creating more inclusive institutions. Of course, macroresistance is called for sometimes, but as [**Desmond Tutu**](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/desmond_tutu_387490) reminds us, “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

[**In our earlier article on microresistance**](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/microresistance-as-a-way-to-respond-to-microaggressions-on-zoom-and-in-real-life/), we focused on how to react when a microaggression happens. Now, we turn to describing proactive forms of microresistance that can increase our capacity for response when needed and can even foster a kinder, less microaggressive world.

We can do this in four main ways:

* shoring up our personal resources by taking care of ourselves,
* controlling our physical environment to the extent that we can in order to create a favorable playing field,
* building a network of compatriots who can have one another’s back when microaggressions do occur, and
* performing microaffirmation as a way to strengthen those in our network and nudge the social environment towards greater kindness.

Hence, microresistance can take many forms and can be deployed at various moments. Regarding timing, microresistance can happen before, during, and after a microaggressive event. Regarding form, microresistance can be done regularly as a capacity-building practice, or can be an indirect or direct in-the-moment response to a microaggression. Additionally, microresistance can be practiced alone or in concert with others, synchronously or not.

## Shoring up personal resources

One sustainable and activist practice is self-care. As [Audre Lorde](https://www.akpress.org/catalog/product/view/id/3259/s/aburstoflight/category/6/) put it, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” The microresistant practice of self-care prepares us to weather the [toxic raindrops of corrosive microaggressions](https://asu.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/toxic-rain-in-class-classroom-interpersonal-microaggressions) and increase our capacity to withstand macroaggressive storms. For instance, [Tara Parker-Pope](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/02/well/30-day-well-challenge-helping-you-live-well.html) advises us to *move* our bodies, *nourish* ourselves with healthful food and water, *refresh* ourselves with sleep, and *connect*with people we care about as four ways to live well. [José Bowen](https://twitter.com/josebowen/status/1204426544539734018) asks his students how they are doing and hopes they will answer with the acronym SWEET, meaning that they are getting enough **sleep**, drinking enough **water**, **eating** nutritious food, **exercising** their bodies, and managing their **time** well.

## Controlling our physical environment

[Rebecca Knight](https://hbr.org/2018/05/tips-for-reading-the-room-before-a-meeting-or-presentation) shares invaluable advice about “reading a room,” but what if we also arrange the room proactively? For those of us who go to meetings, give talks, or teach classes, this means arriving early and setting the stage, if we can. Not only does this enable us to understand the terrain of the space but also to exert small amounts of control whenever possible. For instance, is the podium in a good place? Is the microphone set up for our height? Where do we want to be relative to the exit or exits should we need to excuse ourselves? This [study](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/Post%20Occupancy%20Whitepaper%20FINAL.pdf) confirms the importance of furniture arrangement for inclusion.

Arriving early also enables us to make some key social contacts, some of whom are behind the scenes. For instance, we always try to meet the sound engineers and other staff before a talk. Not only is it kind to do so, but it creates a mini-relationship with people who will be key to our success. Of course, it’s always good to thank publicly those who helped us behind the scenes, not just the sponsors who invited us.

Finally, arriving early enables us to make contacts with early arriving attendees. This is especially helpful for those of us who give presentations and talks to strangers. We make it a point to introduce ourselves to at least three attendees, ideally in the left, center, and right sections of the room. Hopefully, we’ve made a momentary fan out of those three people. During our talk, we can look those three people in the eyes every now and then. This will increase the audience’s sense of connection with us, and ideally, we’ll be getting some positive feedback from these three fans with nods and smiles.

## Building a network of compatriots

Having strangers on our side can help during a presentation, but having a network of allies can transform our experience of an institution. [Sayumi Irey’s](https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/22898) dissertation, from which we learned the term *microresistance,*focuses on the experiences of Asian American female staff and faculty. She found that all of her subjects “actively resisted microaggressions by finding mentors, creating affinity groups, and connecting with social networking support circles.” Sometimes, we find ourselves isolated and alone. Sometimes, we wonder whether we are imposters. This is not our fault, of course. Institutions need to change. During this still perilous period, however, we will be challenged. Having just one or two allies, whether we share demographic affinity with them or not, can make a significant difference. Ideally, over time, we endeavor to create a larger network of allies and mentors. As [Kerry Ann Rockquemore](https://community.chronicle.com/news/326-when-it-comes-to-mentoring-the-more-the-merrier) advises, “When it comes to mentoring, the more the merrier.”

In our [article](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/eng_facpubs/3/) that reviews the kinds of considerations we must make when deciding whether and how to engage with a microaggressor, we name “aggressor characteristics,” “environmental conditions,” “personal conditions,” and “relational conditions.” Ideally, when confronted with a microaggression, we will have relational conditions in our favor. That means proactively creating relationships with allies.

## Performing microaffirmation

Like network building, microaffirmation is a capacity-building, microresistant practice that shifts the emphasis from the personal to the interpersonal. [Mary Rowe](https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents/?PublicationDocumentID=5404) has been promoting microaffirmations for years. She describes them as “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening.” Small acts of kindness including expressing appreciation, offering to listen, and giving credit where credit is due can build up others who face microaggressions, reinforce our own agency, and help develop a network of collaborators when the storm comes. All boats can survive if they are properly maintained and tied to one another for mutual support.

While individuals can make a difference practicing microaffirmation, [Katherine Rowe](https://ultiworld.com/2012/11/20/how-we-practice-throwing-like-a-girl/) observes that whole teams, departments, and institutions could “foster a culture of microaffirmations.” In what ways might we normalize small-scale, prosocial behaviors in our spheres of influence?

At Smith College in the fall of 2019, the Office for Equity and Inclusion shared cards that featured words of affirmation with student, staff, and faculty leaders. The office also sprinkled them in public spaces like the campus center. One side says, “If and when the time is right, pass this on.” The other side offers one of ten microaffirmations like, “You are rare and wonderful, just as you are” and “Tomorrow is ready for you.” About a month later, chalkings started appearing on campus walkways that read, for example, “You are enough” and “You are not broken. You are breaking through.” We learned later that these were made by a student group. Hence, microaffirmations can seep into a campus’ culture.

After shoring up our personal and interpersonal resources, we are in a better position when faced with microaggressions. Rather than just hoping for the best and reacting as well as we can in the moment, proactive microresistance strategies can prepare us for the inevitable and normalize supportive behaviors that build [“the beloved community”](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-beloved-community-dr-_b_4583249), one small act at a time.

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