

Why the Little Things Matter

By Leslie Aguilar



Expert Forum



Someone recently said to me that he didn't bother speaking up against stereotypes and demeaning jokes or comments, because these were "little things." That got me thinking about why the little things matter...

Microinequities — That's the big term for these "little things" which many choose to ignore. The problem is that even small things — subtle slights, jokes, and stereotypes — don't just disappear. They can affect the "victim," building up over time and chipping away at self-esteem or reputation. Researchers have found that seemingly small actions often can, and do, lead to more serious actions; the "little things" serve as stepping-stones to progressively more damaging actions.

An extreme example concerns Jews during the Holocaust. Genocide did not take place immediately but instead, followed years of increasingly negative words, images, stereotypical depictions, scape-goating and discrimination against Jews. According to Beth Yohe of the Anti-Defamation League, "You can't get to the place where people are willing to carry out genocide without first setting the stage and convincing people that the victims are less than human."

A more prevalent example takes place in the form of bullying. Bullying often starts with some form of name-calling, followed by exclusion and isolation. Pushing, threats of violence and ultimately physical violence may follow. Thankfully, there are strategies to interrupt harmful comments and actions at the source so they don't become more serious. One strategy involves recognizing and avoiding the high cost of silence.

In the face of damaging words and actions — small and large — many resort to silence. The result? Silence does nothing to stop the behaviors because silence is often interpreted as support by the aggressor and as lack of support by the victim. Silence actually fuels microinequities and allows them to evolve into bigger issues.

The good news? You are part of the solution. If you find that a comment is hurtful or demeaning towards another person, stand up, speak your mind and prevent a small injustice from becoming bigger. Offer words of support and affirmation. Act quickly and with respect. After all, it doesn't take a lot of fuss to address something while it's still small. If you feel unable to speak up, seek an ally who can and will. **Remember, your silence hurts.**

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Definitions

Microinequities — The apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove; events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be “different.” [Source: Dr. Mary Rowe]

Microaffirmations — Subtle or apparently small acknowledgments of a person’s value and accomplishments. [Source: Dr. Mary Rowe]

Acts of Silence — Choosing not to confront something because you believe doing so would be difficult, would not be rewarded, or may even be punished. [Source: Adapted from Dr. Leslie Perlow]