

# Countering the Impact of Workplace Bias With Mindfulness

For marginalized attorneys, releasing the lifetime of harm that comes from absorbing bias and microaggressions is a process that can be supported by regular self-care practices.

BY RUDHIR KRISHTEL

“I only feel safe around white people,” a supervising attorney said to a group of lawyer colleagues at a work happy hour. The conversation had drifted to where folks lived, and the supervising attorney felt compelled to share that their comfort was limited to white spaces. Immediately, my chest tightened, my body got warm, and my throat constricted. I was unable to respond or articulate my own feelings about the statement directly when it felt like it mattered the most—in the moment. Years later, this comment still rings in my head and reverberates in my body.

Because of this supervisor’s workplace authority, natural questions and concerns arise. How does their perception of safety impact their choices at work, how work is assigned, who they interact with and myriad other conscious or unconscious decisions? It wasn’t my first experience with this type of microaggression, and over time, these experiences compound on one another.

## Microaggressions Are Replete

These microaggressions are painfully routine. It can feel like death by a thousand cuts. Eventually, individual resiliency wanes. Each slight weighs on top of the ones before.



A recipient can enter into shock, a fight or flight reaction, or a desire to retaliate or exit the situation. The harm is often internalized, left unaddressed or unprocessed, can lead to anxiety or depression, and compounds over time. It is common for attorneys from marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds to want to leave a job after this compounding of microaggressions, impacting both the professionals and firms or companies struggling to maintain a diverse workforce.

The American workplace is acknowledging the pervasiveness of bias and microaggressions and is making progress by dedicating more resources to address these harmful behaviors, while more

broadly investigating how to dismantle policies and practices that collectively undergird structural racism. These efforts should also include resources to support individuals who are experiencing the harm of being pushed to the margins by this invasive dimension of legal work culture.

### **The Option for Mindfulness and Self-Compassion**

Lawyers more likely to experience bias in the workplace can use mindfulness and self-compassion practices in difficult moments. They are evidenced-based practices that can help prevent individuals from internalizing the harm experienced when facing bias or microaggressions and can provide tools to manage future harm. As mindfulness and racial injustice expert Rhonda Magee clarifies in her book, “The Inner Work of Racial Injustice,” mindfulness and self-compassion practices “will help you develop the capacity to stay with the challenges of racism as it arises in the world and strengthen your ability to work against it.”

Attorneys are exceptional at demonstrating empathy towards clients, dropping everything to meet the simplest need. Extending that level of attention to ourselves is much more challenging. We are also incredible at problem-solving. But “taking

action” is not always the best first step when weathering harm based on race or gender.

Rather than finding a way to react, which places our mind directly on the other person or people, dedicate some time and energy to meaningfully tend to yourself when possible. For example, allowing for some mindful investigation (e.g., pausing, taking a few breaths, investigating the impact on your thoughts, feelings and body) can shift how to effectively manage the challenge.

Also, offer yourself judgment-free compassion, rather than moving directly into a fight or flight reaction (retaliate or retreat). This may be hard to do in the moment, so consider doing so whenever time permits. For example, take a moment to recognize the suffering, acknowledge what is unfair and what is being grieved in this moment, remember you are not alone, and offer understanding and support to yourself in the way you would with a client. This approach may also allow for processing of the situation and provide a greater sense of control over the impact of a microaggression on your internal state. With time, practice and intentionality, we can all begin to feel a little more at peace on our own.

This is not about creating additional work for marginalized

attorneys. The workload, challenges, level of responsibility and ongoing burden to promote systemic change are already high. Instead, it’s a reminder that these forms of self-care are another tool to manage the emotional and spiritual weight of these challenges and to persuade leadership to create spaces to allow for that.

For marginalized attorneys, releasing the lifetime of harm that comes from absorbing bias and microaggressions is a process that can be supported by regular self-care practices like meditation and self-compassion. Of course, these tools may run in parallel with other efforts, such as sustaining in a difficult environment, advocating for change, or ultimately departing a harmful workplace environment. Nevertheless, it is important for leadership to offer the space to develop these tools towards greater resiliency and ultimately creating a healthier space to thrive.

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