



## The impact of microaggressions and how to respond

**Guest: Roxy Manning**

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**[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow**

Hello and welcome back to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am so happy to be joined by Roxy Manning. Welcome, Roxy.

**Roxy Manning**

Thank you, Jaia. I'm happy to be here with you.

**Jaia Bristow**

I'm so happy to have you on board today.

So, Roxy Manning's life experience as an Afro-Caribbean immigrant to the US, combined with her academic training and professional work as a licensed clinical psychologist and CNVC certified trainer, that's Nonviolent Communication, have cultivated her deep passion for work that supports social change at the personal, interpersonal and systemic levels. You can read her full bio below this video.

So today, Roxy and I are going to be talking a bit about microaggressions. So, Roxy, can you start off by telling us what exactly do microaggressions mean to you?

**Roxy Manning**

So as you mentioned, I'm an Afro-Caribbean person, and I am dark-skinned. And I remember, one of the first examples of microaggressions I experienced, well not one of the first, actually, but one of the ones that had a really big impact, was being in grad school, and all of the students were worried, like, are we going to get a job after grad school? Are we going to be able to be employed? And another student turned to me and said, well, you don't have to worry about that at all. You're going to get hired because you're black. And for me, there was this shock. Like, do you think I'm not good enough? Do you think I'm not qualified? Do you think the only reason someone would hire me is to fill a quota?

And that's exactly what microaggressions are. They are these little messages. They're not huge, right? It's not like someone's beating me up. But they are these little messages that either invalidate our response, our experiences, or make little insults, put us down in some ways. And that a lot of times a person doesn't even know that they're doing it.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And then that's like a great example of, like, you say, a verbal microaggression. But then there's also physical microaggressions, like one I experience on a regular basis is people touching my hair constantly without consent. And I didn't realize that was a microaggression until I encountered other people of Afro-Caribbean heritage who experienced the same thing. Because I'm mixed and I grew up in a very white environment, so I didn't realize that that was what that was.

### **Roxy Manning**

Yeah. And that's part of the challenges of microaggressions. They're so subtle. So you experience people touching your hair, and it's really easy to normalize it. They're just being friendly, they're curious, all of these things. And then we realize, they're doing this because there's another subtle message that I'm different, that I'm somehow not normal. I'm unusual. And therefore, they can do this to my body. And it's a really insidious message that for many people of color continuously affirm this idea that we're never going to belong. We're never going to be seen as fully equal in whatever society we happen to be in.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And so my next question is, what's the harm in microaggressions and what makes microaggressions traumatic? Because, as you said, they're quite subtle. They're quite small things. And so certain people, mostly those who haven't faced microaggressions their whole life, might be thinking, well, what's the big deal? So what if occasionally someone comments, well, you're going to get a job easier because of the color of your skin. Or so what if someone occasionally touches your hair? What's the big deal?

### **Roxy Manning**

Well, definitely, there's a ton of research that shows huge impacts of microaggressions. And if you just think about it logically, one of the big challenges is that it continuously reinforces the sense that you're less than. So, many of us are growing up... And first I want to pause and say, microaggressions are not just racial. We can have microaggressions related to our gender, our gender identity, our sexuality, so many different areas, disability. So microaggressions occur in any aspect of our lives. And this continuous message that you're different, in that you're less than, is really insidious.

What's the big deal? Well, I remember, for example, that because so many people assumed, one microaggression is that there's something unusual about the way that I talk. Like I mentioned, I'm black, Afro-Caribbean. I have dark skin. And a lot of times, people tell me, you don't sound black. What does that actually mean? It means that they're thinking that black people are not going to sound whatever action they're hearing in my voice, and that they're also assuming that because I sound, quote, "intelligent," because that's the other thing I get, "You're so smart. You're so articulate." That because I sound intelligent, there's also a message that black people aren't intelligent.

And then people start to act on these assumptions without even realizing it. When people decide, who am I going to hire... I'll give an example of an exercise I have people do that's based on microaggressions. I'll ask people, and the listeners can do this, I want you to quickly name the ten people who are in your inner circle at work, the ten people that you're closest to, that you're going to choose for whatever activities, like when there's a special project. And people will come up with a list of those ten people.

**[00:05:17]**

And then I ask them, okay, now I want you to go and I want you to code each of those people and say, what is your race, what's your ethnicity, what's your gender, what's your religion, what's your disability status, all of these things. And what people invariably find is because of the subtle ways that microaggressions operate, that the people that they've identified as the ten most close people are the people who are most like them. And there's a way that we start to distance ourselves from people, not give people the same opportunities because of the subtle operations of these microaggressions.

### **Jaia Bristow**

So what I'm hearing is that microaggressions are acting out of unconscious bias basically, it's the playing out unconscious bias. And that's why they're problematic. And so for the person on the receiving end of microaggressions, how are microaggressions traumatic?

### **Roxy Manning**

Well, the amount of self doubt that so many of us have to live with is huge. We are continuously questioning ourselves, like first, did that happen? So something happened, someone touched your hair, someone made a comment, and you're going, was that actually problematic? When you get that sinking feeling inside, am I being doubted? Am I being questioned? If I walk into a store and I'm being followed, I have to decide in that moment, is this normal behavior that I'm being followed? Or is this person making an assumption about me that I feel actually really, like that gut feeling inside feels really gross.

So there's this continuously retraumatization and activation that you have to live with when you're always experiencing microaggressions. Our nervous systems never get to relax. And so this kind of heightened state of awareness, there's been some research that shows that regardless of income and education, black people in the US have worse health outcomes. And part of the reason that they think that's true is because of microaggressions. That I'm not protected from them, regardless of my wealth, regardless of my education, it's still something that I have to experience, and it has an impact on my physical system.

And so microaggressions, they really traumatize us physically and mentally throughout all of our lives. And it's so hard to live with this doubt and know what to do. I'm always choosing, am I going to speak up and say something and possibly lose my belonging, or am I going to just eat it, swallow it, and then deal with the stress of that inside?

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. Absolutely. I've spoken on this conference with some of the other speakers about how part of the issues with trauma or part of how trauma develops is layering. Right? So if someone is dealing with just one traumatic element, they might be able to process that, and it might not have as lasting an impact on their lives.

But for people who, and I really appreciate the fact that you said that microaggressions are experienced not just by people of color but by other marginalized groups as well, and so for those people, like you say, it's that constant questioning, constantly, because it's so subtle. It's not like when we're victims of like, for example, a racist abuse or something really homophobic abuse or something really overt. But when it's so subtle, it's that constantly questioning ourselves.

**[00:08:39]**

My brother came to me once after a party, and he was like, oh, there was this thing that happened, and it made me feel really uncomfortable, but I can't quite put my finger on why. And he almost asked me to legitimize his discomfort. Because again, most of his friends are white, and he knows that I have a more diverse social circle and that I've done a lot of work on these topics.

But again, I felt so much empathy for that questioning, the fact that he had to ask me. I felt so uncomfortable, but I didn't know how to explain it to my friends. I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to be laughed at by them or told I was making a big deal out of nothing. And so again, as you say, it's also that lack of choice. Either we just swallow it and have to deal with the discomfort on our own, or we risk that kind of social rejection as well. So as you say, it is very impactful.

### **Roxy Manning**

Yeah. This piece that you named of people not understanding. It's like even if I decide inside of myself, this is a microaggression, it happened, then I also have to feel when I try to bring it up to the other person, especially when it's unconscious, that they're like, what are you talking about? I was just being nice. Right?

So a lot of times when I teach, I do a lot of teaching and people will say things like you're so articulate. And I used to get furious when they said that. It's a really common one. And it was so hard to talk to people about why that statement was so painful, because if they don't have my experiences, and they were truly speaking from the goodness of their heart, it requires them to actually drop their perspective and put themselves in my shoes to understand what message that had to me. And a lot of people aren't willing to do that. And so there's a loneliness about dealing with microaggressions that are also hard for folks.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. I think that loneliness is really important, which is why so often, peer support can be so supportive.

And so what are some ways that people can respond when they're faced with a microaggression? They realize they feel uncomfortable. What are some tools and resources they can use in those moments?

### **Roxy Manning**

Well, you just mentioned peer resource, peer support. And I want to emphasize that a lot. Like having someone that you can go to like your brother did with you, and say, this happened, is this in my head or do you get it? Having my experience reflected back, having that resonant empathy, is so important. It helps our nervous systems go, okay, there was a reason why, I can make sense of my experience now. I'm not alone any longer. And there's such a relaxation that happens when I know that this is a shared understanding that someone else has.

So have your empathic support, have people that you can go to, even if you choose not to confront the person, but someone you can go to and say, help me make sense, this happened, and why am I so upset about this.

**[00:11:38]**

The next thing that I really think is important is I want people to be at choice. And I can't emphasize this often enough. So many times, people have been told, like, for me, in order to be a good black person, I can't let anything slide. If somebody says something or does something racist, I need to speak up and do something about it. That's a huge burden in and of itself. And so I want people to be at choice. I want you to know, what's my energy right now? Where are my resources? Do I want to take this risk? In this moment, if I choose to speak up, what are the consequences that I might have to deal with? And is that okay for me? So be really clear for yourself, what are my choices and why am I doing this?

Another piece is, I want folks to be really clear what's going on inside of you. So as much as I have capacity for and I'll talk about that in a little bit, but as long as I have the capacity, I want to understand, first, did this person even get that what they did was a microaggression?

Because there are different kinds of microaggressions, right? There's a deliberate one where someone is kind of knowing that what they're saying is really not okay, and they're doing it anyway. And then there are the folks, like you said, who might come and touch your hair, not even aware of why that's not okay. So my response is going to be really different depending on, am I trying to educate? Am I trying to support myself and having my experience be known? What am I trying to accomplish in this response? And how I respond will depend on that answer.

**Jaia Bristow**

Right. I think it was with Dr. Sophia Graham on this conference, we had a chat about the difference between mirrors and windows. So mirrors is having your experience reflected back at you, and it's so important. And windows is looking in at someone else's experience and understanding their own experience. And for those of us from marginalized groups, we have a lot of windows into other people's experiences, but we don't get that many mirrors reflecting back our experiences. So it's so important, as you said, to find that peer support, to find that connection, to find those mirrors in our lives.

And I love what you're saying about really questioning and differentiating, first of all, the intention of the other person and how aware the other person is of what they're doing. Like, if someone is making a racist joke, for example, it's different than if they say something like, oh, you're so articulate, Roxy, where they think they're giving a compliment, but actually, you know that that's a microaggression. So I think that questioning the intent of the other person, but also being self aware and checking inside the impact it's having on oneself. So maybe we can talk a little bit more about intention and impact.

**Roxy Manning**

Yes, I'm glad, because when I heard you say that back, I wanted to name something that's so important to me. Even though I'm advocating that I pay attention to the intent of the other person, I want to be really clear that it's not my burden. It's not my job to give you a pass because your intent was great, or that your intent, even if it was benevolent, didn't have a harmful impact. And if it had a harmful impact, I get to talk about it.

There's a difference in how I might talk about it. I might be a little bit more gentle. I might do a lot more educating, again, if I have the capacity. But I still get to say that my pain matters.

**[00:15:01]**

And I think that's one of the big things that comes up with conversations of intent and impact. Someone will say, well, the person didn't intend it, and therefore my pain is supposed to be erased. I'm supposed to help that person feel better because their intent was so positive, and that's another cost that people of color, people from marginalized groups have to put up with all the time. It's like I have to invalidate my own experiences in order to support the person from the dominant group so that they feel comfortable, and I feel safe. Because if they don't feel comfortable, I might get attacked. I might be judged. And it's another one of those crazy making experiences.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And there's a couple of really important points you just made there. And one of the things I often, when I'm talking about impact versus intention, and people say, well, I didn't mean to, and get defensive or dismissive, sometimes I compare it to the judicial system, which, granted, is very flawed in many ways. But, for example, and I know this sounds extreme, but if you compare murder and manslaughter, one is with intent, and one is without intent, but they both are crimes. And the impact is still the loss of someone else's life. And the person who caused that loss of life has to pay the consequences. And they might, you know, depending on the intention and whether there was intent or not behind it, it will be a lesser sentence or whatever. But I think it's important, whilst it might sound extreme, I give that example so people realize that actions have consequences, regardless of intent.

And the other thing that you mentioned was around comfort and safety. And again, I think that's so important. Like I'm always saying that one person's safety should not depend on another person's comfort. Right? And so when people who experience a lot of trauma feel really triggered and unsafe to protect themselves, if they have to set boundaries or remove themselves, even if it makes someone else uncomfortable, their safety should not be reliant on the other person's comfort.

And I noticed this as well with the pandemic, for example, and with people wearing masks and different protocols around that. Some people are like, well, I'm uncomfortable wearing a mask, and it's like, yes, but if it's for the safety of the people around you, then it's just, discomfort and unsafety are not equal.

### **Roxy Manning**

Yes. I want to go back to the intention impact piece first. I also give an example that I think really helps people understand, almost like the error that we're so conditioned to do. And I first want to talk about why we make this error. When someone calls us out and says, hey, what you just said or what you just did wasn't okay with me, we get defensive. And partly it's because we're human. Even the person who's doing these things, they want to belong. They want to know that they're respected, valued, thought of well. And so when someone calls them out, it triggers all of their stuff, their shame, their sense that, oh my God, I did something wrong, and now I'm going to be judged. All of that comes up for them. And so they immediately go to, if you only knew what my intention was, of course you'd forgive me, and of course, everything would be okay. And that's problematic, right?

The example that I give to folks is, I'm a parent, and my kids love melons. And so sometimes I'm cutting up a watermelon. And you could imagine if I'm cutting up this really juicy watermelon, I can't wait to give it to my kid, and just as I'm cutting, my child reaches out to grab it, and I cut them. My intent is to give them this delicious, wonderful, juicy watermelon. But if I ever stopped and said, oh my gosh, you're bleeding, I'm so devastated because I wanted to give you this watermelon, it was going to be so delicious, I'm so sad I can't give you this watermelon, it would be ridiculous. And we get that.

And it's exactly the same thing, that before I pay attention to what I wanted, I would put a Band-Aid on that child.

**[00:18:56]**

And so if someone tells you that you've done something that was harmful, focus on addressing the harm. And once the harm is addressed, you can check to see if they want to hear about what your intentions were. My kid probably doesn't want to hear. And chances are that they knew that I wanted to give them this juicy watermelon. I don't need to tell them. My telling them is to make me feel better. And do I want to make myself feel better at the cost of my child having to pay attention to me? If I'm a person from the dominant group, do I want to make myself feel better at the expense of a person from a marginalized group who I've just impacted, having to take care of me? And that's the invitation I have for folks.

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. That's such a great example. I love that. Thank you so much for sharing. I think we'll hopefully get people really thinking about it. I think that's such a great and explicit way of describing doing harm onto the others, and how ridiculous it is in that moment to start defending yourself when the first thing, as you say, the first stage is to care and repair the harm you've done. And then there's a whole bunch of other stages that can potentially happen after that.

**Roxy Manning**

Absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

So what would you say are some of the barriers that prevent us from responding to microaggressions when we are the receiver of them?

**Roxy Manning**

Well, some of the barriers, a big one is that there are huge power differences. So even this belonging to a marginalized group versus a dominant group, there are often differences in power that are associated with those group memberships.

So when I was in school, usually, most of my professors, most of my teachers were white and mostly white men, and I was not only in a marginalized group compared to them, but then they also had the power to decide what grades I got, if I would advance in my career, etc. So there's always this question of, what am I risking if I respond?

Another challenge is, am I going to be believed? Am I going to be seen as crazy, as the over the top hysterical person? Or is my experience, like you said, is it going to be mirrored? Is it going to be seen?

And then the other piece is, and this is kind of related to what you were talking about with trauma, for many of us, microaggressions, and I'm going to talk about this mosquito analogy that folks have mentioned, if you think about microaggressions as a mosquito bite, if I've had one mosquito bite, it's like, okay, it's itchy, but I could ignore it. If I've had 100, it starts to get really hard to ignore. And when they just keep putting bites on top of bites, after a while, you could imagine how irritated and uncomfortable you are if even one more is unbearable. And I might explode.

**[00:21:45]**

And so, one of the challenges in responding to microaggressions is that so many folks from marginalized groups, for many good reasons, choose not to respond. They don't feel safe. They don't trust it's going to be received. They don't trust that they're going to be believed. And by the time they do, it's when they've had that one last bite, that was too much. And then they're not in that grounded, self-regulated place. And they're not responding from a place where they can actually be heard about their experience. And so it's both, how do I get myself in a self-regulated enough place that I can respond? And then, what are the ways that I can respond to manage the risk to myself of responding, or to consciously take on that risk? To be aware of that risk and choose to step into that risk.

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think if we're continuing with a mosquito analogy, there's also, if you're being swarmed by lots of mosquitoes, batting one away isn't going to make any difference. Or that's how it can feel in that moment. It's like, well, what's the point? I'm covered in bites. I've got 50 mosquitoes swirling around me about to bite me again. There's not much for me to do in this moment.

**Roxy Manning**

I love that, because there is that other piece, right? It's pointless. What's the point? And for many people, that is exactly what happens, right? I can say something to this random person. I was walking down the street, and a man walked up to me and said, you'd be so beautiful if you weren't so large. I could say something to that person. And then it's like, what's the point? I'm never going to see this person again. The next random person will say something to me. And I also need to conserve my energy. I need to decide, where do I want to put my life attention and my energy?

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think again, like you were talking about earlier, that's an example where the person knows that what they're saying is mean, like they know that they're being harmful, I think, to some degree.

**Roxy Manning**

I don't really know that he did.

**Jaia Bristow**

Oh, okay. Well, then that person has a lot of learning to do.

**Roxy Manning**

Yeah. But I think that this is also part of that... You mentioned microaggressions being connected to implicit bias, right? There are so many unconscious. It's like this idea that, of course, anybody who's large would know that being large is not okay. So he doesn't necessarily think that he's saying anything bad. He's just repeating what society also says. And so I think, this happens a lot with microaggressions, which also gives that sense of, do I have the energy to educate this person, to do the amount of education to help them understand why that comment is toxic.



**[00:24:16] Jaia Bristow**

And so let's look at it from the side of the person creating the microaggressions. What are some barriers that get in the way of them receiving the feedback from the person that they've harmed? We talked a little bit about the watermelon and the cutting the child, and what are some things that people who might commit a microaggression, or microaggressions plural a lot of the time, what are some things they can do to be more open to feedback and being called out or in and repairing the harm that they might be causing?

**Roxy Manning**

Yes. Thank you. So for sure. I've already mentioned some of the barriers. There's our own shame that comes up, and there's a lot of fear. We live in this really weird time. So if I'm thinking about racial microaggressions, we've been told that racial microaggressions, like racism is not okay. It's a really bad thing. And that bad people are the ones who are racist. And that doesn't acknowledge that all of us have been socialized into some of these beliefs and that we have to work consciously to dispel them.

And so when we do this, for me, it's a question of when, not if, when we fall into these stereotypes, we start to think like, oh, my God, this must mean I'm a really evil, bad person. And we can't hold that, we can't hold that possibility. And so it's easier to reject the message, to defend ourselves, to say, you misunderstood me than to say, oh, my gosh, this is one of those times when I was acting out of this unconscious bias that we all have.

So that's the first piece. How do I accept that I am part of this problem? I have been socialized into this problem.

Another piece is around just not even knowing. Like, we just talked about whether or not this person knew that that comment was bad, right? There's such a lack of awareness about so many of these things, and then people get stuck in this, well, I couldn't have known it anyways, so therefore, aren't you the one who's being too sensitive or making a big deal out of nothing?

Or there's this shame that comes up, like, oh, I should have done this, and then people start to feel really constricted. I can't say anything because I don't know what's going to be the bad thing to say, right? And so people, it's again easier to think, I'm just going to be myself, and I hear people say this a lot, I'm just going to be myself, or I'm just kind of awkward, or I'm from an old school, whatever it is that they say that absolves them from any responsibility to try to be aware and to learn some of these things.

And then the other piece is people don't actually know what to do. So when it happens, even if I had the intention to speak up, people are kind of like, but I don't know how to help a person feel better. I'm worried I'm going to put my foot in my mouth even further, that they're going to feel more pain when I try to help. And I'll talk a little bit about what are some of the actual things you could do that would help the person feel received.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Let's go into that piece now, then.

**[00:27:16] Roxy Manning**

Yeah. So one of the first pieces is, and I talk about this, this is the thing that you're going to do all the time, okay? It's self empathize. Make sure that whenever I'm going to be engaging with someone who's telling me that I had an impact on them, then I'm doing my own work of taking care of myself. I'm connecting to what my intentions are and what my needs are, and I'm doing this all internally, because the more that even a part of me feels seen and understood about what I was trying to do, the less activated I'm going to be, the less defending myself I'm going to need to be.

And sometimes, if that's not enough, get some empathy first. Find that other person who could say, I get what you were trying to do. And I understand. And I'm glad that you're still going to go back and talk to this person and address the impact. But find someone else, not the person who is impacted, who can support you in reducing whatever activation came up for you.

**Jaia Bristow**

Everything you're saying here, the self empathy and the talking to someone else, these are things that are applicable both to the receiver of microaggression, and to the perpetrator. I know you're speaking specifically to the perpetrator right now, but these tools are great for both parties.

**Roxy Manning**

Absolutely. Because it helps us both show up in a much more grounded way for whatever conversation they decide to have.

So then, if I were the... you used the word perpetrator, I like to use the word actor, and partly because the word perpetrator kind of reinforces that sense of, I'm a horrible, bad person. So I'm the actor. I did an act that had an impact that I didn't like.

**Jaia Bristow**

I like that. I was trying to think of a better word. As I was saying it, I was like, perpetrator doesn't feel like the right word, but I couldn't think of another word. So I'm really grateful that you brought that in. So the actor and the receiver.

**Roxy Manning**

Exactly, yes. So if I'm the actor, when somebody is trying to talk to me, I want to now empathize with them. And this is a really hard skill. I'm dropping, again, any intention that my intention will be known, and I'm putting all of my focus on, what was important to that person, what message did they get?

So here are some questions you can ask yourself. Even if I didn't intend to send it, what message might they have taken from my actions? So when someone touched your hair, one of the messages that you might have taken was, there's something different about you, right? You're different than everyone else around you. That's a painful message. We all want to be kind of like in our in group. So I want to notice, what are the hidden messages I might not have been aware of? And can I let the person know that I see them?

Sometimes, because we talked about how subtle they are, the person who's experiencing microaggressions might feel a little bit afraid to say, here's that message that you gave. If someone tells me you're so articulate, I might feel afraid to say, do you think black folks can't speak like me?

Because that's really like, oh, that person might feel really challenged if I say that. But if I, as the actor say, oh, my gosh. I now get that when I said that, one of the messages there might have been that I was surprised to see that a black person can speak like this, or that I don't believe that black people can speak like this. I'm hoping to validate that person's experience in a way that takes the burden off of them for being the one to speak up. So as much as I can, I'm reflecting back, what are some of the hidden messages that I heard?

**[00:30:42]**

And I'm also connecting to what's important to them, what needs were not met for them about that message. And it might be something like, with that piece around the hair, it's like your need for belonging. You want to belong. You want to be accepted, right? You're wanting ease as you walk through your day.

And if I can reflect that back to you like, oh, my gosh. I'm guessing that when I and other people just randomly touch your hair, you're really wanting consent and choice about how people interact with you. And you're also just wanting a sense of belonging and acceptance that you're not really different than anyone else. We're all unique, but not so unique that you're going to get treated in a way that's different than anyone else. And when we reflect back these things, people have a sense like, oh, you get why this is hard, why this is painful.

**Jaia Bristow**

100%. And I think a lot of it is to do with respect. So a lot of the time, like you were saying at the very beginning, the reason that microaggressions are so impactful, is that they make the receiver feel lesser than either the dominant group or the person who's the actor, or whatever. And so again, like you say, it's about consent. It's about autonomy. It's about belonging, but it's also just about respect. I feel disrespected if someone touches me without my consent, I feel like I'm somehow lesser than. People touch and pet animals, but they don't pet other humans without checking first. And even with animals, I have a cat, I always approach her and let her sniff my hand before I stroke her and see how she feels. It's about respect. It's about feeling like the person respects me. And so again, as you say, if the actor takes that kind of responsibility and mirrors back, oh, I can imagine that maybe what I did might have had this impact or that impact, or ask, or I really see you, then that reinstates that kind of respect that feels like it was lost by the impact.

And same with the example you were giving about, oh, you're so articulate. It's not a compliment. It's disrespectful. It's believing that it's surprising that you're articulate because you don't look like you're articulate or something. So then saying, oh, my God, I'm so sorry that I said that. I realize now that probably came across as disrespectful or that probably came across as an acknowledging the unconscious bias, that can make such a difference in healing.

**Roxy Manning**

Yes. And one of the things that I want to point out, and this is an edgy one, I often tell people, don't jump to the apology and don't jump even to the things like disrespect, because what often happens is that, if I'm the actor, that's the easy place to go to. I can be like, oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry. That was disrespectful. And then I drop it because I'm expecting you to say yes, it was. And then we're done. And I don't have to do any more work. And I'm fine if people do that. But make sure that you're reflecting back all of the other pieces first. Make sure that you listen to my pain.

**[00:33:51]**

So, we mentioned that sometimes this is like a compounded experience, and I might be really angry, completely out of proportion to this one mosquito bite. But it's more that all of this mosquito poison is flooding my system. And if that's the case, and I want to yell or scream or just be really upset, listen to me. Don't try to cut me off. Don't tell me I'm making too big a deal about it. Give me as much empathy as I need, so that my system has a chance, in some ways, to leach all of this pain that I've been experiencing.

And oftentimes when people say, I'm sorry, it's this message of I'm sorry, and we're done. I'm sorry. Now you're better. So give people as much time as they need. That's one of the big things actors can do to be really seen for their experience.

Another piece that I find really important is I invite the actor to think about the larger context in which this occurs. Again, going back to this idea that microaggressions reflect implicit bias, and that's at a systemic level, at a group level. And a lot of times, people will make it about the person. You're too sensitive. Other people don't mind having their hair touched. It's like, no, it's not just about me. It's about the messages you have about my group.

And it's compounded because when people tell me I'm articulate, it happens to me on two levels, and I talk about observations can happen on three levels. The first is what the person said, you're so articulate. And when someone says that, it's like, oh, that was painful in and of itself to hear, like why is that surprising?

But then for me, the other level, which the person would have no way of knowing, is that as a child, when I came to the United States, I was put into speech therapy because my accent was deemed problematic. It was a perfectly lovely accent, which I'm so sad I don't have. And so now when people tell me I'm articulate, what I remember is how I was forced to lose my accent to sound a way that others judged was okay and intelligent. And that pain comes up.

And if I'm the actor, I'm listening, does this have other meaning for this person, does it have a greater meaning that I might not have known of? And reflecting that back.

And then the third layer that I'm listening for is that systemic layer. And what group messages am I giving? And that's the one we've been talking about. Do you not believe that black people can sound this way or can use this kind of vocabulary? And then if I can reflect back all three of these pieces, I have the greatest healing for the person, for the receiver.

### **Jaia Bristow**

That's fantastic. And I'm so glad you brought that in, because I think the danger is if people aren't doing that, then in wanting to repair, they might actually add a layer of trauma, add a layer of microaggressions, add a layer of that kind of thing. And I know that it's happened to me, for example, someone's done something, and then I've said, hey, that's actually really painful. Sometimes I might give an explanation. Sometimes I might not. And then they're like, but why, why are you making such a big deal, or stop making such a big deal, or, oh, I didn't mean it, or any of the responses we've talked about. And then that makes me shut down. It adds a layer of not only the initial harm that was caused, the initial mosquito bite by them when I'm already covered in mosquito bites. But then I'm asking for some cream or something, and they're just like putting poison on it instead.

**[00:37:14]**

Or I'm getting maybe a bit caught up in this analogy, but often that's actually more painful is the not being received, is the stop being so sensitive, stop making such a big deal out of this, that wasn't my intention, then, actually, as you say, taking the time to think, oh, why is this so harmful for this person? It obviously is, right? So rather than question why it shouldn't be harmful, it's like, okay, this person is telling me that it's harmful. Why is it harmful? Like you say, let's think about the personal level. Maybe this came across as hurtful or disrespectful for specific reasons. And then let's look at again, as you said, the historical, the history of this person. And the actor might be limited in their knowledge of this, but they can either think or imagine or ask or clarify or.

### **Roxy Manning**

Just listen. Because if you give me this space to talk, you will hear me start to talk about these things, and then you can reflect it back. You can follow where I'm taking it.

### **Jaia Bristow**

100%. And then that systemic piece again is so important. That's where the unconscious bias comes in. It's like, oh, the assumption I made, the reason I thought it was okay to touch your hair and not someone else's hair, the reason I said you were articulate and not the other person next to you saying the exact same thing who happens to be white, is because of the unconscious bias, is because of the assumption that it's okay to touch someone's hair when it's different and curly and fluffy, as many people describe it, or, oh, it's a compliment because the assumption that black people do sound weird or different or funny or whatever it is.

So I really appreciate you bringing in those three levels, those three layers, those three steps to the questioning. And again, as you say, really listen, when someone is sharing something that's harmful for them, because that's how repair happens, is when the person who's been harmed feels heard and feels met and feels held in the hurt rather than dismissed.

### **Roxy Manning**

Absolutely. And when I'm listening, I'm listening really carefully. Because I mentioned before that there's something important to that person that they lost each time when this microaggression happened, and that happens on each level.

So if someone said to me, You're so articulate. The first level might be the one around respect, being seen, like you mentioned.

And then that second level, based on my personal history, might be around, what would be important to me that one. I think there's something around wanting shared understanding of the impact of these kinds of decisions that have been made for little children. And of the loss in my loss to my culture and having to be forced to speak in this way. Like when I go home, people say, oh, you don't sound Trinidad anymore. And all of a sudden I'm judged as not being part of my culture. So that's something that it would be really lovely to have reflected back.

And then that third level, again, around how much I'm wanting every person who's black to have an experience of being really seen and acknowledged for their capacity and strengths, to have that be unquestioned.

[00:40:36]

And so being able to listen for what's missing for this person at each level when I said this thing, and reflect that back, gives that person that sense of, oh, you really got it.

### **Jaia Bristow**

So there's lots of great advice there, so let's summarize. You were talking about for the actor. If they get called out on a microaggression, or if they realize that they've committed harm, then the first thing is self empathize. If you're feeling triggered by the response, that's okay to tune into yourself and acknowledge your own feelings to yourself, not necessarily to the other person.

Number two was getting peer support. And again, so if you're from a dominant group, dominant culture, it's also having the opportunity to talk about the impact maybe that had of being called out, called in, with someone else..

### **Roxy Manning**

From the dominant group.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yes from someone else in the same group as you, so the dominant group in that situation, so that you can process your feelings in a way that's not triggering and painful and causing more harm for that person who has to deal with it all the time.

And it's not necessarily all in this order, because I guess you can't always go off and come back. Then another piece is..

### **Roxy Manning**

Actually, can I just point out something about that?

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yes. Definitely.

### **Roxy Manning**

I would rather that somebody went off and got that support, than really mucked it up by trying really hard to get the person who's been impacted to be the one to do that work. So if I need to, and I invite people to stretch, first stretch, try to stay present, try to do self empathy. But if you can't, please just say, I want to be here, I want to show up for what I did, and I'm going to need, like, 5 - 10 minutes, or I'm going to need some support and I'm going to come back so I can be fully present with you.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I think that's such an important piece. So thank you for clarifying that it is okay, because the people from the dominant group, that actors can also be triggered in those moments. So as you say, having that space and then coming back to the conversation when both parties are ready to have a

conversation creates more... Is when repair can happen. Otherwise, as you say, if both people are triggered, then more harm is likely to happen than repair.

**[00:42:50]**

So other elements. So we have the self empathy. We have the peer support with other people from dominant groups. We have the really listening, really really listening to the receiver's experience, and understanding on all these different layers, why what we said might have had an impact. And that maybe it's because we're the thousandth mosquito, and that was just the one mosquito too many. And maybe everything they're sharing isn't just directed at you. Maybe in that moment, the actor is representing their dominant group rather than that one individual person, in the same way that they'd said something that was biased towards a group when they did the microaggression or said the microaggression.

And then from there, where do we go?

**Roxy Manning**

And then I want to check with the person. Is there anything I can do that would support you in this moment? So part of that sense of, like, nothing's going to happen anyway, is I want to take responsibility for either saying, now that I'm aware of my impact, I'm going to go do some work on this to make sure that I educate myself. That's one step I could take. But I also want to check with the person. Is there anything I could speak? Like microaggressions often happen in public, so is there anything I can do or say to the group to address this harm that I've had?

And I like to have the receiver be the one to decide that, because I want them to give consent. I don't want someone to jump in and say, I'm going to fix it now, and then it's like, wait a second. I did not want this much attention or focus on this issue at this moment. So check in and see what can you offer to support that person? And then after that, let it go, let it go.

**Jaia Bristow**

I think they are two very vital steps. The how can I support you is so important, because if not, it can go into either saviorism or speaking over someone else. So having that consent of how can I support you, and not putting the label of, oh, I'm a terrible person. How do I become a better person? But how can I support you, is very different to, what can I do to be better?

**Roxy Manning**

Yes. Exactly.

**Jaia Bristow**

And then as you say, letting it go, moving on. And if you can't let it go, then you can go back and do the stage of peer support again with someone from the dominant culture, because all of these steps, they're not a scheduled list where it's one by one. All these steps can be done in all different orders, I guess.

## **[00:45:16] Roxy Manning**

Absolutely. And I really love this emphasizing the letting it go piece, because of our guilt, our shame, and all of the messages from society about being a bad person if we do microaggressions, it's hard to let it go. So we start to like, we're revved up, and we're trying to get some sort of absolution from the person, the receiver. That is not their job. If I'm noticing I'm in that place, I definitely want to walk away and not put that burden on the person.

## **Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And then let's go back to the receiver now. What are the stages that they can do? We've again talked about this earlier, but let's sum up, what are the different stages they can do when they've been harmed?

## **Roxy Manning**

Yes. So first again, is to decide, do I want to speak up? And if they don't want to speak up, it is completely, and I like starting this way because I want to give permission, perfectly okay to say, that didn't work for me, and I don't want to engage with you about it. I hope you get support to figure that out. So give yourself permission, even just to name it and walk away, or to just walk away and say, wow, just walk away. You don't have to do anything more than you want to do.

If I do decide to speak up, again, if I have capacity, one of the distinctions I like to make is the difference between calling out and calling it. If I'm calling out, it's because I've had like a thousand mosquito bites, and I'm just going, ow, I'm in pain, and I'm yelling, and I'm just like, going, I'm really activated. I don't have a lot of control. And what I want the listener of this call to hear is that if someone calls me out with aggressive language, saying even I'm racist or something that's really hard for me to receive, they are still giving you a gift, because it is easiest for me to walk away and say, I am never going to talk to that person again. But if I'm letting you know my truth, however painful it is, there's a part of me that's saying there might be something worth saving here. If I let you know my truth, might be we have a lot of work to come back together, but I'm being real and authentic with you. I'm still in connection with you.

So calling out, if you need to call out, and that's what you do, it's okay. It's okay.

And part of my goal, what's really important to me is that we're working together to change the society we've been given. And so that's where calling in comes in. I want to let the person know, you had an impact, and I want you to understand what that impact was, not from a place of educating you, but it might be from a place of saying, I want to be known. And I want other people who look like me to be known about the impacts when these happen. And I'm going to make sure that you have that information.

So I might tell the person as much as I'm willing to share. Here's exactly what you said, here's the message I got from it, and here's why it was painful for me. And if I have a request of that person, and here's what I'd like you to do in response, I make that request. And I do that with support if I need it, have somebody there to hold your back and to insist that when you say any of these parts, somebody can make sure that the person you're saying it to understands you, so they're not deflecting it. They're not being defensive. They can say, hold on. I'd like you to repeat back what you heard that person say, rather than they get lost and they go down a different path. But get support, and then let the person know exactly what was coming up for you. And then make sure that they are able to reflect it back so



that you know that you were received. It's so freeing when we can do that, it is the place where healing happens.

**[00:48:42] Jaia Bristow**

And I think there's a couple of things that really resonate for me. And one of the things when you're talking about the choice element at the beginning, right? It's perfectly okay to just walk away, especially if someone is being unreasonable.

And if we decide to stay and engage, that is a gift. And I really hope that the actors who might be listening to this, who might have found themselves in situations, understand that, because if someone has experienced a microaggression and is willing to engage with the actor, it's because they care. It's because they care about that person. It's because they care about themselves. It's because they care about the relationship, because if someone's being difficult, it's a lot easier to just walk away. But staying is a gift to the actor and supportive to the receiver as well.

**Roxy Manning**

Let me add one piece of that. Is that okay?

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely.

**Roxy Manning**

I really want the actors to get how much work it takes to stay. Because if I stay and I'm telling you my truth, I am going against every experience I've had in the past where I've stayed and I've tried and I was not received, where I was in somebody's gaslighting and been told, oh, you're the one who's the problem. So I'm going across all of that to still show up to be in connection with you. So I really want them to get that this is not an easy gift. This is a gift that requires a lot of effort on the part of the receiver.

**Jaia Bristow**

100%. This is definitely a video I'm going to be sending to a few people I know!

And then whilst we're on the element of choice, I think it's really important to remember as well that like all types of consent, it can be revoked at any time. So if the person decides to stay, but then gets caught up in a spiral, and it becomes exhausting at any point, it's fine to say either I need a break or I'm done. I need to walk away now. I've tried to have this conversation. I've given as much as I can, but ultimately the receivers in those moments need to prioritize their own wellbeing.

**Roxy Manning**

Yes. And that's the one message that I want to give in all of this. The goal is not to retraumatize the receiver, right? Not to continue with all of the ways that receivers have to silence themselves or give up on their self care in order to support other folks. And so I want to receiver to always know, assess in every moment, is this still serving me? Is this still meeting the needs I was trying to meet? And if it's not, you get to stop.

**[00:51:07] Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. I'm mindful of time, which is a shame because I feel like we can talk for another few hours! But Roxy, how can people find out more about you and your work?

**Roxy Manning**

Well, definitely go to my website, [roxannemanning.com](http://roxannemanning.com). But I also want to invite everyone listening to support my Kickstarter. I've been doing this work and sharing it for quite a while, and people keep saying, write a book. I need your book. And so I'm actually writing a book. And I've got an amazing publisher who says they'll publish the book, but they want to see that people want the books. So we have a Kickstarter running where you can go and preorder copies of the book. And that will help bring our books to press next fall.

So I want to encourage everyone to go visit us on [Kickstarter](#), and there'll be a link to that on my website.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Well, I'll be checking that out as soon as I finish this interview. And yes, hopefully everyone can find it through your website. And thanks again, Roxy, so much for your time today. This has been such a great conversation. It's got me thinking about all these topics again, in a different way. And I really appreciate you and your time.

**Roxy Manning**

Thank you, Jaia. It's meaningful for me to talk to someone who's also doing this work and who also shares some of these experiences. So I really enjoyed this.

**Jaia Bristow**

Me too. Take care.

**Roxy Manning**

You too.