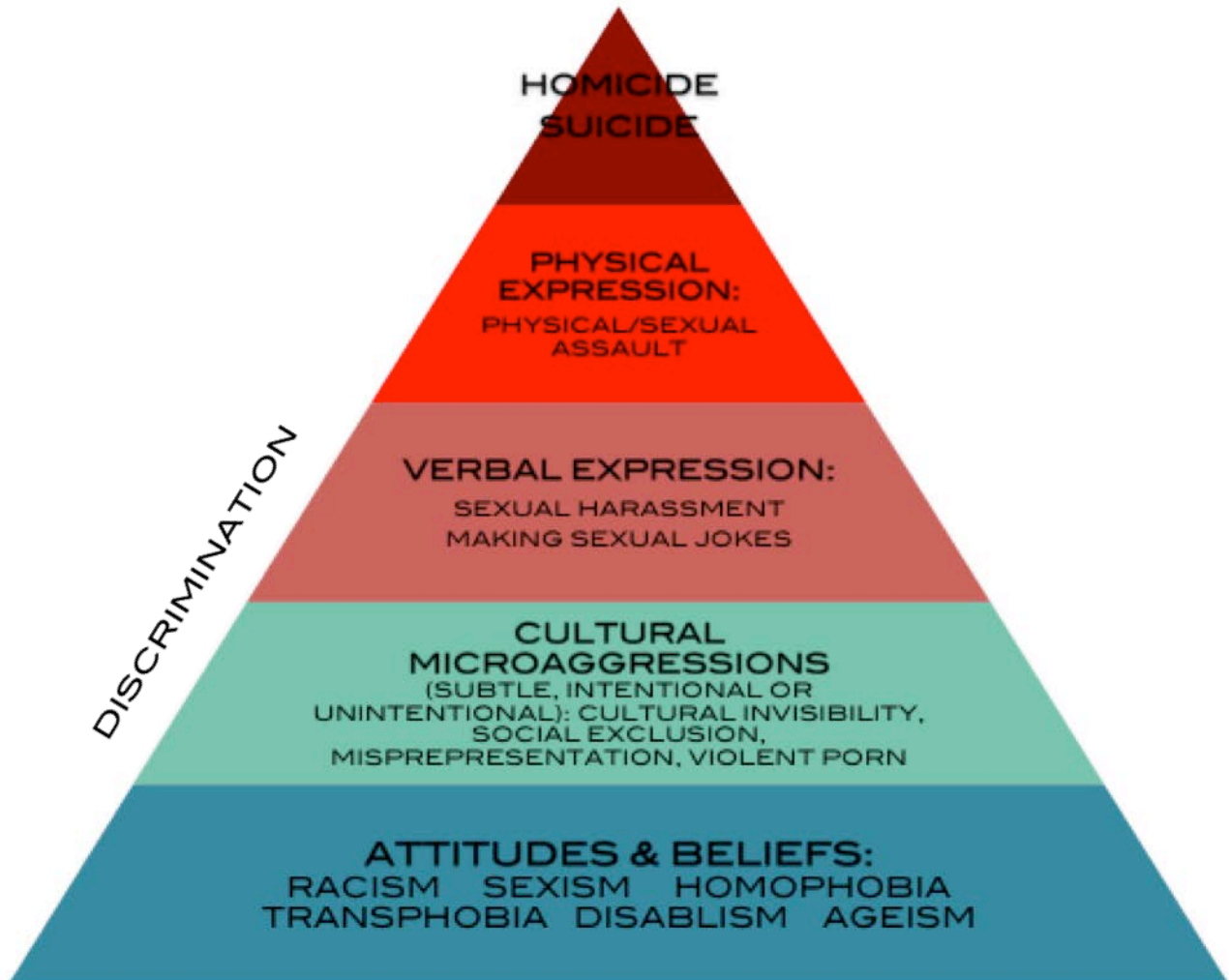


SESSION 2 HANDOUT – PYRAMID OF DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE

In our culture sometimes both men and women can assume that sexual harassment or even sexual violence are a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. However, much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can evolve.

This pyramid represents a continuum of abuse – the further up we go, the less socially acceptable the behaviours are. But we can't measure harm to a victim by what 'category' it falls into – apart from death, right at the top. Everyone's experience is different.



Stage 1: Beliefs and attitudes

Sexual violence is not usually something that an offender simply chooses to commit impulsively out of the blue. Sexual violence, like other forms of violence directed at someone because of their identity, starts with established attitudes and beliefs about other people, whether or not those attitudes or beliefs make sense. These include prejudices such as racism, sexism, transphobia. As offenders cultivate these beliefs through exposure and repeated reinforcement by those around them, they strengthen their dogmatic belief that certain types of people are simply not equal to them, moving them up the pyramid.

Stage 2: Microaggressions

Called 'microaggressions' not because they are insignificant (they aren't!) but because they are all around and normalised as part of our culture, these things represent the daily indignities experienced by people who have less power in society. For example a workplace that only has pictures of Caucasians – white people – on the walls, or a social situation where a group of able-bodied students have arranged to have a party at a place that is inaccessible to their friend who

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uses a wheelchair. In terms of sexist culture, in the UK people have been collecting and sharing their experiences via the [@everydaysexism](#) twitter feed and [site](#).

Stage 3: Verbal expression

Soon, people with prejudiced attitudes begin verbally expressing these feelings of difference and superiority, testing the waters with jokes or stereotypical statements about others; even beginning to harass others, or boast about times they verbally or physically marginalised others.

Once this type of behaviour begins, it may remain at this level or there may be an internalisation of a grossly invalid sense of entitlement and offenders begin to normalise the dehumanisation of others – they actually begin to treat others as less than human.

Stage 4: Physical expression

This is where sexual violence happens. As offenders move up through the pyramid, they feed off the power they have gained. This is where a sense of sexual entitlement can begin to manifest itself as sexual violence.

Offenders believe that it is their right and within their power to use sex as a means to control the individuals they do not see as equals. They can often justify the pain they inflict on others because they believe the victim/survivor has done something to deserve the assault. They do not feel responsible for the crime they've committed, and they may not even recognise their actions as an assault.

Making a Change

Unless the beliefs and attitudes of offenders are challenged early on (it is most effective to address them at the initial stages), it is very difficult to change this type of patterned behaviour. Still, it's extremely important to take a stand against the behaviours at any level of the pyramid.

It all starts with challenging the attitudes and beliefs of our peers and social groups.

