

### **Section 3. Healing from the Effects of Internalized Oppression**

- **What are discrimination and internalized oppression?**
- **Why do community builders need to understand discrimination and internalized oppression?**
- **How do you help people overcome the effects of discrimination and internalized oppression?**

A recent study found that African-American students who were asked to identify themselves by race when taking a standardized test consistently scored lower than other black students who were not asked to specify their race.

In another study, women taking a test of math ability were randomly divided into three groups. One group was asked to answer a list of questions that clearly identified them as women; one was given a list that identified them as residents of the Northeastern U.S.; and the third answered questions that identified them as students at an elite private college. The women that identified themselves as elite students consistently performed better on the test than the others – often better than male students, who, over the years, have almost invariably scored higher than women. (The results on the test used in this study have been so one-sided that they are often cited as proof that men are genetically superior to women at math.)

Researchers at New York University worked with minority and female middle school students who were about to apply to magnet high schools that required entrance exams. They were able to help students significantly raise their test scores and admission rates (compared to the averages for their race/ethnicity and gender) by helping them understand that that who they were was determined by what they could and did do, not by their racial or gender characteristics.

In none of these cases was there instruction in the subject matter of the tests in question, or in test-taking technique. The crucial difference in all cases was how the test-takers identified themselves. Why should revealing or thinking about your race or gender make so much difference on a test of knowledge or reasoning ability? The answer often lies in the assumptions of society and a long history of discrimination. In this section, we'll examine the effects that discrimination and oppression have on their targets, and think about how to counter them.

#### **What is discrimination?**

The word “discrimination” means simply distinguishing between one thing and another. When we talk about discrimination as a social issue, we refer to distinguishing between population groups defined by specific characteristics – race, gender, religion, national origin, political opinions, sexual orientation, class – and treating groups differently as a result. Although discrimination can be either positive or negative – you can either discriminate in favor of or against a particular group – our focus here is negative discrimination.

Unfortunately, discrimination is all too familiar in all societies, from the age-old discrimination against Untouchables in India to racism in the U.S. Caucasians are favored for jobs – often unconsciously – over blacks and Asians. Middle Eastern workers are harrassed in Europe, African-Americans are stopped for DWB – driving while black – in large American cities. The poor are often blamed for their poverty, and denied basic services because they aren't “deserving.”

All of this probably dates back to pre-human times, when our ancestors banded together in groups for safety and mutual aid, and any other group was a potential rival for food and other resources. In most modern societies, there are laws against various kinds of discrimination, but it persists, and much of it is so ingrained that we don't even think of it as discrimination. Gender roles and the treatment of women in general is still unequal: women in the U.S. still earn, on average, less than men for the same work, and women in many other countries are blatantly denied education and other opportunities. According to the United Nations, there is no country where men and women are treated equally.

For our purposes, then, discrimination is the denial of opportunities, rights, and or freedoms to one or more groups that other groups in the society enjoy. It is the failure to treat all people as of equal worth, and to acknowledge their full humanity.

### **What is oppression?**

Oppression is discrimination carried to its extreme. Oppressed people are not only discriminated against, but are also subject to physical and psychological brutality – and occasionally genocide – sometimes for disobeying or displeasing those in power, sometimes to discourage them and others from trying to change their condition, and sometimes out of pure hatred. Modern examples include the treatment of Jews in Germany in the 1930's, culminating in the Holocaust; the apartheid rule in South Africa between 1948 and 1990; slavery and its aftermath in the American South; the disappearances and other atrocities committed by the military governments against suspected leftists in Argentina and Chile; the genocidal violence in the former Yugoslavia; the slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda; and the wholesale starvation and murder of about 20% of the population of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, on the grounds that they were tainted by capitalism.

The distinction between discrimination and oppression is important. In most cases, groups that are discriminated against have some recourse, either under the law or through political action. In many countries, groups that were discriminated against have overcome their situations through education, organization, economic advancement, or some other avenue. For oppressed people, often the only remedy has been force of some sort – either revolutionary action or outside military or economic intervention.

Community developers that work with oppressed people often try to help them understand their situations, so they can decide on what action to take to change them.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian organizer and educator, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, says that the oppressed can change their circumstances through *praxis* – reflection and action – and that in order to do that, they have to learn to analyze their lives and to throw aside internalized oppression. Although Freire worked with and wrote about people who were exploited and oppressed, those who are discriminated against may have to deal with internalized discrimination as well.

### **What is internalized oppression?**

When people are targeted, discriminated against, or oppressed over a period of time, they often internalize (believe and make part of their self-image – their internal view of themselves) the myths and misinformation that society communicates to them about their group. Exploited peasants might internalize the ideas that they can't do any other kind of work, that their lives were

meant to be as they are, and that they're worth less than people with wealth or education. Women might internalize the stereotype that they are not good at math and science, or people of color might internalize the myth that they are not good workers,

When people from targeted groups internalize myths and misinformation, it can cause them to feel (often unconsciously) that in some way they are inherently not as worthy, capable, intelligent, beautiful, good, etc. as people outside their group. They turn the experience of oppression or discrimination inward. They begin to feel that the stereotypes and misinformation that society communicates are true and they act as if they were true. This is called internalized oppression.

Internalized oppression affects many groups of people: women, people of color, poor and working class people, people with disabilities, young people, elders, Jews, Catholics, immigrants, gays, and many other groups.

Not all members of groups that are discriminated against or oppressed necessarily turn stereotypes inward. Many remain proud of their heritage, or are able to take prominent places in the larger society through their exercise of effort, intelligence, talent, interpersonal skill, and self-respect. Many members of oppressed groups try to escape their situations by emigration or other means, and many succeed. Some rise up and overthrow their oppressors, although this can cause nearly as many problems as it solves.

Don't assume that just because someone is a member of a group that has experienced bias, he is suffering from the results of internal oppression. Individuals are different, and have different experiences and backgrounds. If you assume internal oppression in all cases without getting to know the individual at least a little, you may, in trying to be helpful and empathetic, find that instead you're being condescending or insulting.

**There are two ways that internalized oppression functions:**

- *Internalized oppression operates on an individual basis.* A person believes that the stereotypes and misinformation that she hears are true about herself. She holds herself back from living life to her full potential or she acts in ways that reinforce the stereotypes and are ultimately self-defeating.
- *Internalized oppression occurs among members of the same cultural group.* People in the same group believe (often unconsciously) the misinformation and stereotypes that society communicates about other members of their group. People turn the oppression on one another, instead of addressing larger problems in society. The results are that people treat one another in ways that are less than fully respectful. Often people from the same cultural group hurt, undermine, criticize, mistrust, fight with, or isolate themselves from one another.

In Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze*, light-skinned African-Americans at a prestigious black college look down on their darker-skinned fellow students.

It is important to note that internalized oppression is not the fault of people whom it affects. No one should be blamed or blame themselves for having been affected by discrimination. Nevertheless, as community members, we have to face these barriers in order to achieve our goals.

While the stereotypes that people internalize are imposed by society, we all, whether we are members of the favored majority or the oppressed or unfairly treated minority, have a personal responsibility to confront those stereotypes. As members of the majority, we need to help and support those in the minority to see that their personal worth has nothing to do with society's current or past prejudice. And as members of the minority, we have a responsibility to listen to those among us who challenge the majority view, and to analyze and challenge it ourselves. We may need support and guidance in doing so – that's what Paulo Freire provided to those he worked with, and what he wrote about.

**Examples of internalized oppression as it occurs in individuals:**

- Women, low-income people, and people of color don't speak up as much in meetings because they don't think their contribution will be important or "correct". Often participants from these groups may have insight into how to solve a problem, but they hold back from sharing it.
- In response to low expectations and lack of encouragement, some teenagers from oppressed groups believe that they won't succeed; consequently they give up on learning and pursuing their dreams.
- People from oppressed groups often shy away from taking on leadership roles. They don't view themselves as having leadership capabilities, and their style doesn't match that of "traditional" leadership models.
- A person who is not able get a job with decent wages may try to dull his disappointment with alcohol.
- A person who speaks with an accent feels that she should not build relationships with people outside her own culture because she is afraid that others will not want to be friends with her.

**Examples of internalized oppression among members of the same cultural group:**

- Women on the board of a charitable organization compete for the attention of the male chair and refrain from taking leadership roles. They see their greatest capability in organizing dinners and creating decorations for events, even though they all have college degrees.
- The membership of a low-income grassroots organization cannot support anyone from their own community who tries to take a leadership role in the organization. They claim that people in the leadership role become too "business-like" and "authoritative." The role of the leader is discussed endlessly and the organization cannot get to the business of defining and achieving goals.
- Women who work on construction join men in putting down other women who have child care problems or can't do particular work because they are not as strong as some of the men.
- When Latino immigrants from different countries of origin try to organize to create a political power base, the mistrust and prejudices among them makes it difficult for them to work together.
- Fearing that her children will not succeed in the mainstream culture, an immigrant mother is overly harsh in disciplining them so they will "fit in."
- An African-American teenager is not accepted among his group of peers because he works hard and does well in school; he is told he is not African-American enough.

As you can see, internalized oppression can have serious consequences for communities. It holds people back from thinking well of themselves, from living full lives, and from standing up against injustice. It can be the source of physical or mental illness and self-destructive behavior. Internalized oppression can serve to divide people within the same group, so they are not as effective in supporting each other and standing together for change. It can also cause people to be suspicious of those outside their own group, making it difficult to build alliances.

### **Why do community builders need to understand internalized oppression?**

Understanding internalized oppression is invaluable for community builders. People simply can't fight effectively for themselves when they believe the problem is their own fault or that something is inherently wrong with them. To empower communities to become more effective at fighting the battles for better health care, good education, a safe environment, and adequate jobs, community members have to learn how to overcome the discouragement, confusion, and divisions that are a result of internalized oppression.

Luckily, there are methods to overcome internalized oppression. People can heal from misinformation they have internalized and help others in their cultural groups heal as well. As people understand and overcome internalized oppression they will become more empowered to overcome the inequities and injustices present in our society at large.

### **How do you help people heal from and overcome internalized oppression?**

There are several different ways that people can work together to overcome internalized oppression.

#### **Become a close friend, ally, or mentor to individuals who are struggling with internalized oppression.**

Friendship and caring are two of the strongest weapons we have in combating internalized oppression. All the oppressions have one message in common – that certain people are not valuable. Friendship provides a strong and effective contradiction to that message. What we communicate in our relationships and commitment to one another is more powerful than the message of oppression.

We care about our friends, family members, co-workers, or other community members. It is painful to watch them treating themselves badly or failing to live up to their capabilities. We can help our friends out when we see them acting self-destructively or being passive about conditions that negatively affect them.

For example, if you befriend a young person and make a commitment to spend time with her regularly in activities that she enjoys, you can make a big difference in how that person is able to handle the injustices that she faces growing up in a tough society. If any person knows that just one person is on her side, she can manage to believe in herself, even when everyone and everything else is telling her she's not OK.

#### **Take pride in and celebrate your culture.**

Being a member of cultural group can be a source of strength. Our cultures often give us our values, our sense of ourselves in history, our humor, our identities, and our world views. We

depend on our cultures to provide us with a community, a reference point, a home, and a place to get our bearings and remember what is important to us.

Even the discrimination that people have experienced and endured as members of cultural groups gives them strengths. People learn to survive, stand up for themselves, be resourceful, have a sense of humor, and bounce back. People develop a sense of what long-term commitment is all about.

Taking pride in our cultures and celebrating them is essential in combating internalized oppression, because it gives us a more accurate view of our cultures than the one communicated in the media or by the society at large.

What are some ways of taking pride in our cultures?

- Reading and learning more about their cultures helps people gain perspective on how hard their ancestors fought for themselves, often in the face of great odds. Organizing a study group or book club for this purpose can be especially helpful in building community around cultural pride.
- Holding cultural celebrations and practicing rituals gives people a sense of hope, joy, pride, and meaning. It helps to remind people of what their cultures stand for, how rich they are, and what they've accomplished. Cultural arts celebrations can buoy people's spirits and remind them of their strength, goodness, and creativity.

**Note:** Inviting people from other cultures to these events can also be useful at times. When people from the outside understand your culture, it is an important first step in developing a group of active allies who are willing to go to stand up for your group.

**Meet in groups with people from similar backgrounds, to heal from the emotional hurts of internalized oppression.**

Re-valuation Counseling has developed a model in which people of similar backgrounds meet in groups to heal from internalized oppression. In these groups people encourage each other to remember that they are good, worthy, capable, intelligent, beautiful, etc. and that others in their culture are good as well. In these groups, people take turns talking about how their cultural oppression has personally affected them while others listen.

One of the most helpful results of meeting in groups of people with similar backgrounds is that people understand that they are not alone in their experiences of oppression or in the way they feel bad about themselves. Sharing, for example, the experience of growing up around racism, anti-Semitism, or classism, helps people understand they have feelings common to others in their group. This removes the illusion that the experience is somehow inherently their problem alone – and that they are the only source of their own difficulties, rather than problems in the society at large.

Here is the format for a healing from internalized oppression group:

- Meet in groups of 6-10 people at a regular meeting time.
- It is best to have an agreement of confidentiality.
- Each group should have one main leader, but everyone should see themselves as responsible for making the group go well.

- To start, each person has a turn to talk about what they appreciate about their culture/group and something that has gone well in their lives since the group last met.
- Each person has a turn each meeting to think/talk/feel while the group pays attention to them. No one interrupts the person during this time. During this turn, the person has a turn to talk about their experiences as a member of this group. It can be helpful to talk about early memories of being targeted or oppressed.
- People may experience emotional feelings as they talk about these experiences. Feeling emotions is part of the healing process. Laughing, crying, trembling all help people heal from the hurts of oppression and reclaim their pride, humanity, and power.
- When these groups meet over an extended period of time people build more safety to talk about important issues.

Support groups can be very helpful, but only if members ultimately turn from discussion of how they were victimized to real support for taking control of their lives and developing strategies for doing so. Good support groups can be tremendously helpful; ineffective ones can be nothing but opportunities to share bad experiences and slide deeper into helplessness. A good leader or facilitator can make all the difference

### **Take action against injustice and oppression.**

When people take a stand against injustice and oppression it can be a strong antidote to internalized oppression. Taking charge of an unjust situation and setting it right goes miles in healing people from the oppression and injustice they have endured over time.

In the book *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, Ms. Robinson talks about the sense of pride that she and others felt when determined and committed Blacks joined together for the bus boycott.

"Before Monday was half gone, Negroes had made history. Never before had they united in such a manner. There was open respect and admiration in the eyes of many whites who had looked on before, dubious and amused. Even clerks in dime stores, all white, were more cordial. They were heard to add, after a purchase by a black customer, "Y'all come back and see us," which was a very unusual occurrence. The black customers held their heads higher. They felt reborn, important for the first time. A greater degree of race pride was exhibited. Many were themselves surprised at the response of the masses, and could not explain, if they had wanted to, what had changed them overnight into fearless, courageous, proud people, standing together for human dignity, civil rights, and, yes, self-respect! There was a stick-togetherness that drew them like a magnet. They showed a genuine fondness for one another. They were really free--free inside! They felt it! Acted It! Manifested it in their entire beings! They took great pride in being black."

### **When you notice internalized oppression operating in groups, point it out, and help the group change direction.**

In some organizations people tend to criticize each other, get into fights, lack discipline, and undermine or attack leadership. These problems have a range of causes. Oftentimes, the cause is, to some extent, due to internalized oppression. This is especially true if all or most of members of the group or organization are from a similar cultural background. Unfortunately, the more harshly a group has been treated, the more these dynamics operate. Again, this is not the fault of the group that has been targeted. Nevertheless, in order to make a group successful, this dynamic should be recognized and turned around.

How can you tell when internalized oppression is the source of the a difficulty a group? Although there is no sure formula, you can look for some clues that might help you make an educated guess. Some questions that might provide clues:

- Are people acting towards each other in ways similar to how the larger society mistreats them? For example, if the particular group is stereotyped for not being intelligent, do people act towards each other as if they were less than intelligent?
- Do these problems exist throughout the organization? If the problem shows itself in many different settings, it may be more likely that it is internalized oppression that is the main difficulty, rather than a few individuals' problems.

**Be careful here.** Systematic problems in the organization may signal internalized discrimination or oppression, or they may be indications of problems with leadership, structure, or the character of the organization itself. Many organizations that don't involve people who've been discriminated against have systemic problems. It only makes sense that many that do involve marginalized groups also do. Only if the problems seem to mirror the treatment of the group in question by the larger society should you consider that they may stem from that treatment.

- Do individuals in the organization struggle with self-esteem, have difficulties in taking care of themselves, or treating themselves well in other ways?

Even if you don't know for sure if internalized oppression is the main problem, it may at least part of the difficulty. In any case, many of the following recommendations will help any group that suffers from continual arguing, criticizing, undermining, or other related problems.

### **What can you do when you notice or suspect internalized oppression going on in a group?**

- Visibly model how to treat others with respect, and set a good tone. For example, if everyone is criticizing the leader, you can point out his good qualities and accomplishments. If you lead the way in doing this, people will notice. One person can often steer the whole group by stepping outside a negative pattern.
- Take some time in a meeting for people to appreciate each other and notice what the group has accomplished. When people feel discouraged about their progress, they are more prone to treat each other badly.
- Point out the difficulty without blaming anyone: You can say something like, "Let's take a step back and look at how this meeting is going. Do you think if we all made an agreement to not interrupt or criticize each other, we could accomplish more?"
- Explain to people about what internalized oppression is, and how you see that it operates in your organization. Explain, as you see it, how people are hurting each other; and point out the similarity to how society hurts the group as a whole.
- If the problem occurs in a meeting, have people break into pairs in which each person gets a turn to vent their feelings while the other person listens. Then have people come back to the business of the meeting.
- Take a stand and be firm. Whenever group members are putting each other down or acting in a way that has negative consequences, you can take a principled stand against what is occurring. Your stand will set a tone that others may be inclined to follow.
- Welcome new members into your group. Often groups with similar backgrounds become cliquish. They can tend to exclude new people much in the same way that their group has been excluded by the larger society. Establish a policy to welcome new members and get them into the center of the organization quickly.



**Ground rules can be helpful here as well.** The kinds of ground rules that are mentioned above for support groups – no interrupting, listening carefully, disagreeing with ideas rather than people, etc. – can set a tone of respect and acceptance that in itself can do a great deal to change people's views of themselves and others.

### **Protect young people from the effects of oppression.**

Internalized oppression makes its biggest impression on children, because they don't have any context for understanding the injustices of society. It is easy to personalize the negative messages that are coming at you if you don't have a framework for understanding oppression.

There are a few ways to help young people understand oppression and protect them from its effects. First, it helps to explain to children about how and why oppression works so they have a framework for understanding it. This can help a young person make sense of the mistreatment they experience or witness, rather than blaming themselves or others in their own group for it. For example, if you give African-American children a history of slavery in the U.S., they will be able to make more sense of why racism operates today.

Teach young people to be proud of who they are and of their background and culture. Equally important, teach them the value of setting and working toward goals, and of not getting discouraged when things don't go their way. People who've internalized discrimination or oppression may quit when faced with difficult circumstances, seeing themselves as incapable of overcoming setbacks. If children grow up with self-respect and with the understanding that occasional setbacks are a normal part of life, to be overcome by planning and hard work, they'll keep moving forward in both good times and bad.

We can also set up environments for our children in which they and their cultures are cherished. For example, we can make schools become multicultural institutions. Teachers and administrators should understand the importance of integrating the histories and cultures of many groups into the curriculum. School staff should understand how to treat children equitably and have high expectations of every student.

### **In Summary**

Ordinary people are as intelligent and capable as the "experts." We have the capacity to figure out how to solve problems and transform our communities into places in which everyone has opportunities to live a full and satisfying life.

Internalized oppression holds people back, by undermining their confidence and by making it difficult for them to work together. It is painful when people limit themselves as a result of the discrimination and oppression they have experienced.

Fortunately, we can understand how internalized oppression works and what to do to overcome it. Simply understanding how it works can help people turn around some situations. Healing from and overcoming internalized discrimination and oppression will go further in making communities more effective. Undoing internalized discrimination and oppression may be a key issue for fully empowering communities so they can do the work that needs to be done.

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## Online Resources

**[Brown University Training Materials: Power and Privilege Issues with Culturally-Diverse Communities in Research: New Challenges of Partnership and Collaborative Research.](#)** The Northeast Education Partnership provides online access to PowerPoint training slides on topics in research ethics and cultural competence in environmental research. These have been created for professionals/students in environmental sciences, health, and policy; and community-based research.

## Organizations

Center for Living Democracy  
289 Fox Farm Rd  
PO Box 8187  
Brattleboro, VT 05304-8187  
(802) 254-1234

National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI)  
1835 K Street, N.W., Suite 715  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
(202) 785-9400

### **[Re-evaluation Counseling](#)**

719 Second Avenue North  
Seattle, WA 98109  
(206) 284-0113

### **[Southern Poverty Law Center](#)**

400 Washington Ave.  
Montgomery, AL 36104

## Print Resources

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Okihiro, G. (1994). *Margins and mainstreams: Asians in American history and culture*. Seattle, WA: The University of Washington Press.

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