
WHAT IS INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION?

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The truth is all humans, regardless of social status, are made in the Image of God with inherent worth and value. The lies of oppression and internalized oppression, say this isn't so.

Oppression is hatred of one group toward another group which is upheld by public policy and private action. When one group of persons is the object or target of systemic oppression over long periods of time, the mis-education, mis-information, subjugation, and lies begin to be normal, routine, customary, and acceptable to members of the group who are discriminated against. This "normal-ness" is internalized oppression.

The persons who are the target of the hatred often believe the lie that they are inferior, that they are the problem, that they are less worthy. The persons who are discriminated against over a period of time will often shift from a healthy self-image into a self-image that exemplifies the lies of inferiority and inadequacy. When oppressed persons believe the lies that the oppressors tell them about their status as inferior – they have internalized the oppression.

Internalized oppression is like...

- believing a lie;
- taking dishonesty as the truth;
- having faith that persons or institutions that are not trustworthy should be trusted;
- being betrayed but thinking the betrayal is deserved; or
- swallowing poison as if it is nutritious food.

The goal of systemic oppression is to render the targeted group non-thinking, non-imaginative human beings. When people from target groups internalize the lies, myths, and distortions of oppression they often feel they have no intrinsic value. They often feel they are inherently not as capable, intelligent, good, beautiful, deserving, or able as people in the dominating group. They come to believe the lies of oppression and turn those experiences of dehumanization

inward as if the lies are the truth. For example:

- Racism is the lie that non-white people are inferior to white people – that white supremacy is a truthful social norm.
- Sexism is the lie that women are inferior to men – that patriarchy is a truthful social norm.
- Classism is the lie that poor people are inferior to rich people – that economic elitism is a truthful social norm.

Internalized oppression can spread as widely as the lies of oppression stretch: from race to gender, from socio-economic status to sexuality, from age to ability. Internalized oppression can be devastating to individual persons as well as entire communities. It leaves people with little dignity. Internalized oppression keeps persons from serving God, loving neighbor, and respecting themselves. It can be a source of physical, mental, and spiritual pain and hurt. Internalized oppression wounds the soul. It can serve to make people self-destructive, self-loathing, and ill.

The church should take seriously the dehumanization of persons which stems from internalized oppression. Jesus teaches we should be free and fully human. Oppression, and the suffering resulting from it, inhibit our freedom to realize the gospel of Jesus Christ which is a message of hope and healing. Jesus said, “... I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We must be acutely aware of both the bold and subtle ways the lies of oppression lurk in our churches, our preaching and teaching, and our church policies and procedures. We must have the strength and courage to have our eyes opened to the sinister ways that oppression becomes internalized to those already suffering under cruelty. To be the Church, we must be willing and able to root out all forms of oppression – individual and systemic – even within our own denomination. Only then, will we be free to help heal those whose oppression has been internalized.