

# Internalized Racism

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EDITOR'S NOTE—Suzanne Lipsky is a practitioner of Re-evaluation Counseling and uses certain terms and concepts that are probably unfamiliar to you. To better follow some of the terminology used in this article, you may find it useful to read the description of Re-evaluation Counseling in Harvey Jackins' article, "The Art of Listening," in Chapter X below.

**A**N IMPORTANT RESULT of the black caucuses and black workshops in Re-evaluation Counseling has been revealing the nature of *internalized oppression* and the creation of effective techniques for eliminating this major obstacle to our liberation from our midst. Although the ways in which each of us experiences internalized oppression are unique (for each person is individually oppressed), there is no doubt that each one of us has been profoundly hurt by this particular manifestation of oppression. No black person in this society has been spared.

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Internalized racism has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and "agree" to our own oppression. It has been a major factor preventing us, as black people, from realizing and putting into action the tremendous intelligence and power which in reality we possess. On a personal level it has been a major ingredient in the distressful and unworkable relationships which we so often have with each other. It has proved to be the fatal stumbling block of every promising and potentially powerful black liberation effort that has failed in the past. Patterns of internalized oppression severely limit the effectiveness of every existing black group.

This has been a problem which no one has been able to solve and over which many have despaired. Some patterns of internalized racism have become so familiar that we, ourselves, accept them as part of our

"black culture." We attribute them to "the way we are."

It is a breakthrough of major importance that black co-counselors and their allies in R.C. have come up with a clear theoretical understanding of this phenomenon and, more importantly, dependably effective techniques which can completely rid us of this terrible obstacle to our individual reemergence and our group liberation. This has never before been achieved. The recognition of the concept of internalized oppression is of tremendous significance and can be effectively communicated to black people in the world outside of Re-evaluation Counseling.

## WHAT IS INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION?

We know that every hurt or mistreatment, if not discharged (healed), will create a distress pattern (some form of rigid, destructive or ineffective feeling and behavior) in the victim of this mistreatment. This distress pattern, when re-stimulated, will tend to push the victim through a re-enactment of the original distress experience either with someone else in the victim role or, when this is not possible, with the original victim being the object of her/his own distress pattern.

Racism is a form of oppression that has been systematically initiated, encouraged and powerfully enforced by the distress patterns of individual members of the majority culture and their institutions. Black people have been the primary victims in this country, of every form of abuse, invalidation, oppression and exploitation.

This mistreatment has installed heavy chronic distress patterns upon us as a people and as individuals. We are in no way to blame for the initiation and installation of these patterns. It is clear that historically we have been denied the conditions necessary (for example, the safety) to [heal] this distress. It is also evident that from the days of slavery to the

present, we have not been in any position to re-enact these patterns upon our oppressors.

The result has been that these distress patterns, created by oppression and racism from the outside, have been played out in the only two places it has seemed “safe” to do so. First, upon members of our own groups—particularly upon those over whom we have some degree of power or control, our children. Second, upon ourselves through all manner of self-invalidation, self-doubt, isolation, fear, feelings of powerlessness and despair.

It is important to keep in mind that some of the patterned behaviors that we frequently recognize within black cultures were originally developed to keep us alive. They originally had a definite survival value. They are a testimony to the strength,

strength, intelligence, greatness, power and success of our people and our culture. We must also constantly seek and root out those features of our present cultures that have been imposed by responses to racism and that keep us trapped in that oppression today.

#### **HOW DOES INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION AFFECT US? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?**

Patterns of internalized racism get played out in dozens of unique ways in each individual. But we have come to recognize that there are certain forms of internalized oppression that are widely experienced by black people in our society. Some forms of these distress patterns are so universal throughout our black sub-culture that they are mistaken for a “true” part of our culture.

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inventiveness, and determination of our people—our refusal to give up as a people. Even “today” chronic patterns can have “get-us-by” survival value. Today, many of these responses to mistreatment have become embedded in our culture, but they no longer serve a useful function. Instead, these so-called “elements of black culture” operate to lock us into our roles as victims of oppression.

Internalized oppression is this turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the racism and oppression of the majority society. As part of our liberation work, we know that we must seek out and direct the attention of ourselves and the world to the

These destructive and hurtful behaviors and feelings are *not* part of our real culture. They are not part of the nature of black people. They are simply chronic patterns (the kind that play all the time and are mistaken for reality) resulting from systematic and institutionalized mistreatment.

Understanding this gives us the safety to undertake the job of identifying all forms of internalized oppression in ourselves and other oppressed peoples. We recognize these as our enemy, as chronic patterns that prevent our liberation. We subject each example we find to discharge and reevaluation.

What are some of the ways patterns of internalized racism operate among us?

**Individual Relations**—Patterns of internalized oppression cause us to dramatize our feelings of rage, fear, indignation, frustration, and powerlessness at each other—at other black people—often those closest to us.

**Children**—We invalidate our children with fierce criticism and fault-finding, intending to “straighten them out” but, in the process, destroying their self-confidence.

**Group Effort**—Patterns of internalized racism cause us adults to find fault, criticize and invalidate each other. This invariably happens when we come together in a group to address some important problem or undertake some liberation project. What follows is divisiveness and disunity leading to despair and abandonment of the effort.

**Leadership**—Patterns of internalized oppression cause us to attack, criticize or have unrealistic expectations of any one of us who has the courage to step forward and take on leadership responsibilities. This leads to a lack of the support that is absolutely necessary for effective leadership to emerge and group strength to grow. It also leads directly to the “burn out” phenomenon we have all witnessed in, or experienced as, effective black leaders.

**Isolation from Other Blacks**—Patterns of internalized racism have caused us to be deeply hurt by our brothers and sisters. We often develop defensive patterns of fear, mistrust, withdrawal and isolation from other blacks. On top of this we sometimes feel ashamed of our fear of our own people.

The isolation which results from internalized oppression can become so severe that a black person may feel safer with and more trustful of white people than of black. This is an illusion, a confusion, created by the pattern, but an individual may accept living inside this pattern because it feels “comfortable” and therefore “workable.” Clear thinking tells us, however, that this is not a good enough solution. No black person’s

re-emergence will be achieved unless he or she faces and dissolves the isolation from her or his own people.

I can be sure that *anytime* I feel intolerant of, irritated by, impatient with, embarrassed by, ashamed of, “not as black as”, “blacker than”, better than, not as good as, fearful of, not safe with, isolated from, mistrustful of, not cared about by, unable to support, or not supported by another black person, some pattern of internalized racism is at work. Any time I take action or do not take action *on the basis of any of these feelings*, I am giving in to a pattern of internalized oppression, racism and powerlessness. For example, if I do not ask for, demand, and organize support for myself from my black brothers and sisters, I am strengthening the stranglehold of oppression on us all. Similarly, if I do not forcefully persist in offering and giving my support (even risking my own feelings) to another black person in the grip of some distress pattern, I am buying into my own powerlessness and oppression.

**Internalized Stereotypes**—Patterns of internalized racism have caused us to accept many of the stereotypes of blacks created by the oppressive majority society. We have been taught to be angry at, ashamed of, anything that differs too much from a mythical ideal of the middle-class of the majority culture—skin that is “too dark,” hair that is “too kinky,” dress, talk and music that is “too loud.”

**Narrowing of Our Black Culture**—Internalized oppression leads us to accept a narrow and limiting view of what is “authentic” black culture and behavior. Blacks have been ridiculed, humiliated, attacked, and isolated because they excelled in school; because they did or did not talk in a particular way; because they liked classical or folk music; because they did not dance; because they did not play basketball; and in many other ways have been told that they were not legitimately black or “black

enough,” or are “trying to be white,” etc. All of these hurts were served up *and accepted* by human beings wearing re-stimulated patterns of internalized racism.

**Mistrusting Our Thinking**—Institutionalized racism and the internalized racism which results from it have given rise to patterns which cause us to mistrust our own thinking. We carry around doubts about our own and other black people’s ability to think well. Even when we do have confidence in our own thinking we are often prevented from putting this thinking into action by the racist and oppressive structures and practices of the society.

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**Needing to Feel Good Right Now**—The patterns of powerlessness and despair that result from this “impossible” situation give rise to still another pattern common among us which I will call the “feel good now” pattern. The pattern says, “Since I do not know what to do (the “I can’t think good” pattern) or knowing what to do, I am prevented from doing it by the racism around me, and since any black effort is doomed to failure in the long run (patterns of powerlessness and despair), I must settle for making myself feel good right now. At least I deserve that much.” Drugs, alcohol and other addictions; compulsive and hurtful sexual behaviors; flashy consumerism; irrational use of money;

all kinds of elaborate street rituals, games, posturing and pretenses that waste our energies; these are all directly related to patterns of internalized racism and oppression

**Learning and Long-Range Goals**—Learning and thinking are powerfully affected by internalized oppression. Here real, objective racism, internalized racism and deep feelings of powerlessness combine to make it very difficult to commit ourselves to flexible thinking all the time; or to correct action toward long-range goals; or to efforts with delayed rewards. Prevented by society from acting on our correct thinking—and we often do see clearly what is wrong and what needs to be done—we are limited to acting on our feelings. It would be hard to find a more effective way of keeping us powerless and ineffective towards our own liberation.

**Survival**—Internalized oppression is a major factor in the perpetuation of so-called “getting by” or “survival” behaviors. Some of these behaviors were developed in the slavery era of our oppression as a necessary response to acute problems of survival in that situation. Learning to silently withstand humiliation by practicing on one another is an example—e.g., playing “the dozens,” The development of “happy” or “clowning” or “shuffling” or “ignorant” patterns are other examples. In order to “survive” we have learned also not to show or share our feelings (“cool” patterns), or to disguise them (“tough” patterns)—particularly feelings of tenderness, love and zest.

Because we have been the victims of attack, humiliation, and exploitation the re-stimulated patterns draw us to play out these behaviors on others and to feel that we must do so in order to survive, or at least to prevent ourselves from again being the victim of the pattern.

Such patterns no longer serve our interests or our liberation; but just as the pattern of oppression continues

to operate even when it no longer serves the exploitative purposes for which it was originally installed and perpetuated, so too our “pseudo-survival” patterns have a momentum of their own and remain in force long after they have ceased to serve any useful purpose for us.

We can no longer allow ourselves to settle for survival. Survival is not

person in the United States has experienced at least one of these distress patterns but always in some individual, unique way. Each of us has been individually oppressed and participated in internalizing and experiencing this oppression in individual ways.

Although the effects of these patterns have been devastating to our

and in the wide world. I am sure that nothing will contribute more significantly to our individual reemergence nor to black liberation than our firm commitment to this project.

It appears, in fact, that at some point black co-counselors must address internalized oppression. Those who have begun to address their counseling to these areas have found that profound and positive changes have taken place in many areas of their personal and group life—even areas that do not, at first, seem related to internalized racism. These people have reported success in making significant changes in relationships, parenting, the workplace and in organizations in which they participate.

Where internalized oppression has not been tackled, individual Co-counselors have often found themselves blocked or slowed in their counseling; black or Third World classes have been unable to meet the needs of the participants and have dissolved; support groups have floundered and workshops have sometimes exploded.

We need to refine our theory with regard to internalized oppression. We need to fully commit ourselves to a firm policy against all forms of internalized racism—and we need to further develop effective counseling techniques to discharge all patterns of internalized oppression.



Let us agree to stop being the victims of internalized racism. Let us see it for what it is—nothing more than a distress pattern worn by a victim, who feels powerless. There is nothing wrong with any human being (including you) except the effects of mistreatment. These can be changed now by you and your allies. ■

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enough. To accept these “pseudo-survival” behaviors or call them part of black culture, is giving in to the worst kind of internalized racism and powerlessness

**Other Oppressions and Divisiveness**—The workings of distress patterns have caused us to introduce, tolerate, proliferate and internalize within our black sub-culture other oppressions such as classism, sexism, adultism, anti-Semitism and the oppression of other oppressed groups. This has only created further disunity and divisiveness among black men and women and young persons and persons who appear to be of different classes. (In fact, almost all black people are of the working class, although this reality may be obscured from both themselves and other blacks.) Unity and pooling of the power among blacks, and between blacks and other oppressed groups, is thus effectively prevented.

These are some, but by no means all, of the common manifestations of internalized racism among black people. It is probable that each black

person, we need not despair. We have achieved a major beginning victory against them. We have realized that these terrible feelings and the destructive behaviors that result from them are only patterns—patterns of distress imposed on us from the outside! We know that these can be destroyed by systematic and committed discharge and re-evaluation. These destructive patterns can be replaced by a reality of rationality, love, power and unity among ALL blacks and ALL oppressed peoples

The perpetuation of internalized distress patterns is the only thing that stands in the way of our coming together and taking the lead in ending all racism, oppression and exploitation. Knowing this can be done, only patterns of despair and powerlessness stand in the way of our acting on this certain knowledge.

#### **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

We possess, right now, the knowledge, the tools, and the power to attack and eliminate patterns of internalized racism from among ourselves