

# Internalized Racism

Internalized racism occurs when people targeted by racism are, against their will, coerced and pressured to agree with the distortions of racism. Each of us targeted by racism fights, from childhood on, as long and as hard as we dare, to maintain a sense of ourselves as good, smart, strong, important, and powerful. However, in our societies, racist attitudes are so harsh, so pervasive, and so damaging that each of us is forced at times to turn racism in upon ourselves and seemingly agree with some of the conditioning, internalizing the messages of racism. We come to mistreat ourselves and other members of our group in the same ways that we have been mistreated as the targets of racism.

Examples of internalized racism appear everywhere, for example:

- Racism has made us think of ourselves or each other as stupid, lazy, unimportant, or inferior.
- Racism has made us criticize or verbally attack each other, using the racist messages of our societies, or allow others in our group to do so.
- Racism has made us physically attack or kill each other, playing out our rage about racism at one another.
- Racism has made us put our individual well-being last. Racism has made us unable to think about our physical and emotional health, making us vulnerable to heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, ulcers, and more.
- Racism has made us criticize and beat our children in misguided efforts to “discipline” them and keep them from openly displaying pride or pleasure in themselves (attempting to make them less vulnerable to racism, but instead leaving them more beaten down and enraged).
- Racism has made us feel hopeless, despairing, and angry, which can make us vulnerable to the lure of alcohol and other drugs for “relief” from those feelings, even though we know that this does additional harm to ourselves and our families.
- Racism has made our various racial groups fight with each other over what seems like a scarcity of resources; racism has made us fight each other in gangs.
- Racism has made some of our group join racist institutions and take part in carrying out their racist policies against our own people.
- Racism has made us feel disconnected from other members of our group, or divide or categorize each other by behaviors or lifestyles, believing that some of us are “better” or “more legitimate” than others and that what some others do is “not part of” our cultures.
- Racism has made us place higher value on members of our group who appear more white, and denigrate those who have darker skin, kinkier hair, or other “less white” features. We also do the reverse—we target those with lighter skins as not being “black enough,” not legitimate persons of color.

We are not to blame for any of these attitudes or behaviors, but we can increasingly understand them and take steps to end them and to heal the damage done to us by racism.

## **HEALING FROM THE DAMAGE INFLICTED BY RACISM AND INTERNALIZED RACISM**

To heal from the damage inflicted by racism and internalized racism, we need to tell our stories—how racism has affected our lives, what has happened to us and to our people. We need the chance to openly express our feelings about our experiences of racism. When we do this, the damage done by racism begins

to dissipate. We start seeing ourselves as good, smart, strong, complete human beings. We feel and act more powerfully and hopeful about ending racism and other oppressions. We treat each other more respectfully and cooperatively.

For this healing process to work well, we need someone to listen attentively—someone who is sincerely interested, who stays relaxed while we express our emotions, and who encourages us to use the process of emotional release—crying, laughing, trembling, and so on. Any two individuals can agree to take turns listening to each other, without interruption, for a specified amount of time (for example, half an hour each), encouraging each other to share our experiences fully and release our emotions.

United to End Racism has found that safety for healing from internalized racism builds when people meet not only in pairs but also in support groups with others from a similar background or heritage (for example, African or African descendant, Indigenous, Asian or Asian descendant, Chicano/Chicana, Mestizo/Mestiza, or Arab or Arab descendant). In these support groups each member has an equal amount of uninterrupted time to share experiences of racism while the others listen attentively. The support group leader encourages the person talking to express his or her thoughts and feelings. The leader welcomes and encourages the tears, trembling, raging, and laughter that often occur spontaneously as people talk about their struggles with racism.

When we first participate in these groups, internalized racism may cause negative feelings about each other (feelings of distrust, dislike, upset with, and so on) to surface. Members of the group have to make an agreement to not act on the basis of those feelings that would keep us separated from each other.

Questions such as the following can help members of support groups begin to identify and focus on internalized racism:

- What information about yourself would you like others to know—about your heritage, country of origin, family, class background, and so on?
- What makes you proud about being a member of this group, and what do you love about other members of this group?
- What has been hard about being a member of this group, and what don't you like about others in this group?
- What were your early life experiences with people in this group? How were you treated? How did you feel about others in your group when you were young?

When people are given a chance to talk and express their feelings, internalized racism is directly challenged. As emotions are released, people's negative feelings about themselves and others in their groups begin to disappear. People are able to think more clearly. They can reach for cooperative relationships more easily. Once groups of people have had a chance to meet separately in this way, greater unity and participation are possible when they join with larger, more diverse groups of people.

Support groups can be used in many settings—at the workplace, at school, in religious settings, in the neighborhood. Support groups are increasingly helpful for the participants over time. As the participants get to know each other, they become closer to each other, more supportive of each other, and more open. Even two people can have a support group, taking turns listening to one another. Support groups can also be used for non-race-based groups, such as women, young people, and working-class people.

---

## **United to End Racism**

719 Second Avenue North • Seattle, Washington 98109 • USA

Telephone +1-206-284-0311 • Fax +1-206-284-8429 • E-mail: [ircc@rc.org](mailto:ircc@rc.org) • Internet: <http://www.rc.org/uer>

© RATIONAL ISLAND PUBLISHERS 2001