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Diagnosing Internalized Oppression

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For more than five hundred years, indigenous peoples have survived various oppressions: land theft, genocide, rape, the killing of our ancestors, forced religious conversion, boarding schools, the demise of many of our traditional ways of governance, languages, and cultural and spiritual teachings. This legacy is called "historical trauma" or intergenerational trauma. History has left many of us wounded and it has been passed from generation to generation. One need only look at the impact of alcoholism on families, the disproportionate rate of alcohol-related problems on future generations and codependent behavior among some loved ones who are related to alcoholics. The disproportionate rates of suicide on the reservations, diabetes, and men of color in prison are not solely because of poverty and racism.

"Those disproportionate rates point to internalized oppression as part of the cause," says mediator and peacemaker Roberto Chene. "It's a form of internalized oppression to see so many of your own hurting. It hurts you. The daily expression (of injustice) forces you to shut down and numb yourself. If not, the daily anger would eat you up."

Many indigenous psychiatrists and community healers agree that "internalized oppression" is a result of historical trauma passed across generations that continues to actively wound people. "Internalized oppression is when we take on the attributes (psychological, spiritual) of the perpetrator and use these energies against our families, communities, ourselves," says psychologist Eduardo Duran, who wrote *Native American Post Colonial Psychology* with native scholar Bonnie Duran.

The oppression can be internalized in the form of self-hatred, or we may believe our power comes from oppressing or hurting others. "Internalized oppression affects domestic violence in that the self-hatred is projected onto someone who looks the most like us, i.e. family member. In trying to kill the family member, we are attempting to kill the internalized shame and injury we carry," says Duran.

Internalized oppression has numerous manifestations. Symptoms include:

- o Judgment and criticism of people.
- o Gossip, envy, intolerance of others.
- o Using victimization to make excuses for inappropriate actions.
- o Needing to create crisis and enjoying the rush of the crisis, or feeling that this is the normal state of life.
- o Fear-based reactions - someone in our environment needs to pay for wronging us.

- o Feeling detached from our own feelings or detached from others.
- o Denial or embarrassment of your family, culture or heritage.
- o Speaking your mind in a hurtful or disrespectful way and justifying this as "but I'm doing it for my people."

Strengthening cultural life ways can help people to address historical trauma. As the saying goes in Spanish, la cultura cura or culture cures. But we must also recognize that someone out of balance can abuse cultural knowledge, including that of ceremonies, healing and spirituality, in a warped sense of superiority or to take advantage of others.

One important step in healing internalized oppression is understanding how social structures contributed to, or created, the oppressions. Self knowledge and self understanding is also crucial. Understanding or recognizing what has hurt us is the first step towards changing our behavior and perception of problems.

According to Chene: "A common form of internalized oppression is that when we become aware of our dysfunction of the particular group, we blame ourselves. We ask the question, what's wrong with me rather than what's wrong with us that we're like this. We're in relationship with society. The emphasis on the individual assumes that the dysfunction arises from within ourselves. It's an internalized oppression between human beings and structured society."

In communal cultures, rectifying internalized oppression must be addressed not only at a personal level, but with family members and within communities because the oppression is like a germ that infects collectively.

"The reason for understanding the interaction with oppression is to liberate us from the self blame that takes away from our own change. We're not looking for excuses," said Chene. "We're looking for understanding to free us from the burden of self blame so that we can use that energy for change."