

INTERNALIZED ANTI-SEMITISM

Like all oppressed peoples, Jews absorb the hurtful messages of their oppression and turn them against themselves and other Jews. This is internalized oppression. A large part of anti-Semitism is singling Jews out for blame, so it is not surprising that many Jewish people blame themselves and other Jews for their problems -- and sometimes even for anti-Semitism. And because anti-Semitism is often invisible or denied, it is easy to see why Jews might conclude (and may have been told) that anti-Semitism is only in their minds. In order to overcome the painful effects of anti-Semitism, it is important to raise awareness of this oppression in both its external and internalized forms.

EXAMPLES OF INTERNALIZED JEWISH OPPRESSION

“Survival strategies”

Centuries of systematic persecution, policies of genocide, and near-extirpation only a few decades ago, have left many Jewish people frightened about their survival. Given this history, being visible as a Jew often feels dangerous. Many Jews have chosen the survival strategy of assimilation, attempting to “pass” by adopting the standards of the dominant culture, including changing their names or having their noses fixed with plastic surgery, avoiding any participation in expressions of Jewish culture, and abandoning legitimate Jewish concerns.

Other Jews have concluded they could not hope for acceptance or comradeship with non-Jews. Their response has been to seek safety, human sharing, relationships, and community primarily or exclusively with other Jews. They attend only to those issues which they perceive to be crucial for Jewish survival, while ignoring other societal problems.

In the absence of anti-Semitism, Jews would be free to express their heritage and identity in a myriad of ways, without fear of rejection or violence. When Jews are no longer oppressed, they will be free to live anywhere in the world, and to participate in communities with other Jews or non-Jews, as they choose.

Divided against each other

Anti-Semitism divides Jews from other groups, and from each other. For example, in some periods of history, assimilated Jews were uncomfortable – even openly hostile – towards Jews whose language, dress, or religious observance they thought might reflect badly on the Jewish community as a whole. Tensions between more and less assimilated Jews have been expressed by calling each other either “too Jewish,” not “Jewish enough,” or “self-hating Jews.”

Effect on Individuals and Personal Relationships

Intense fears, passed down from generation to generation, can have a crippling effect on Jewish people’s daily lives. Perpetually on guard against potential attack, some Jews find it hard to trust anyone -- even the people they love. Chronic feelings of unsafety can take a toll on personal relationships.

For example, a Jewish mother was distraught that she kept yelling at her four year old to put on his boots. She couldn’t understand why she wasn’t able to accept that he liked to move slowly. To help her understand what might be underneath her impatience, she was encouraged to yell out several times in a counseling session, “Put on your boots.” After the fourth time yelling the phrase, out of her mouth popped the words, “You have to put on your boots now! If the Nazis come, I want you to have boots on or you won’t stay alive.” The mother had no idea that her impatience was rooted in her terror from her people’s history in the Holocaust.

Some Jews try to hide the fears they carry, but that does not make the terror go away -- the unhealed trauma is still inside. For some Jewish people, the fear may show up in insomnia, asthma, high blood pressure, eating disorders, or a general

failure to take care of one's health. On the flip side, some Jews become preoccupied with their health, convinced that every worrisome physical symptom must be stage 4 cancer!

Jews are never to blame for being anxious -- about their health, or about anything else. They come by their fears honestly, from a history of threats and uncertainty, and need opportunities to build trust and deal with painful memories and emotions. Providing such opportunities for Jews to be listened to, and heal from these internalized hurts, is at the heart of Jew and Allies United to End Anti-Semitism. The more our allies understand the impact of internalized oppression on Jews, the more they can both have compassion for Jewish struggles, and become fiercer allies in the work against anti-Semitism.