The Impact of Racism and Oppression on Emotional Health

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The events of the past several weeks since George Floyd's tragic death have once again shined an ugly spot light on the age old crisis of racial and social injustices in the United States. This may be one of the most burning spot lights we've seen in our nation, and hopefully the one that will lead to lasting change for people of Color in this country.

Historically, while black slaves in the U.S. experienced centuries of horrific treatment at the hands of white people, another group also knows first-hand how oppression destroyed lives. Jewish people endured unfathomable treatment and genocide all over Europe at the hands of the Nazi Party. Sadly, even in the year 2020, both of these groups, and many others, are still persecuted by certain members of society for being "different."

Now, imagine being a member of more than one "persecuted" group in this country- black and Jewish? A black, Jewish, gay woman? I recently had the opportunity to attend a webinar sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League where one of the panelists fit the latter description. Ilana Kaufman, Executive Director of the Jews of Color Initiative, has spoken about her experiences as a Black, Jewish, professional woman and member of the LGBTQ community. She admits, at least once, feeling a lack of acceptance by a member of her own group because she didn't "fit the traditional picture" of that group's membership. She responded to this incident by saying, **"I understand that the gestalt of Jewish, gay, black, community-leader-me is simply unmetabolizable to some Jews. The package in which I exist defies the physics of some mainstream Jewish community assumptions — even among those who share the history of oppression."**

Unfortunately, not all victims of discrimination can process it as a problem outside themselves. Many attribute negative treatment from others to their own perceived internal flaws- in simpler terms, "they don't like me because I'm bad, I'm not likeable." People who grow up believing this to be their truth often suffer from depression and anxiety, a lack of trust in the world, powerlessness, hopelessness and helplessness, and damaged self-esteem. Many suffer trauma symptoms not only from present triggers, but often-times from a generational unresolved trauma history.

The human brain can be severely impacted by trauma, whether it stems from real events experienced by the individual directly, hearing about injury or harm of a loved one, or the after-effects of historical trauma experienced by their ancestors. In more extreme cases, trauma can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition resulting from an incident of threatened or perceived significant bodily harm or death. On-going threats of this

nature, experienced repeatedly over a long period of time, can lead to Complex PTSD characterized by more extreme and enduring symptoms that may be much harder to treat.

Regrettably, there will always be incidences of natural disaster, accidental unexpected loss, terminal illness, and other tragedies that human beings have no control over. However, we DO have control over man-made tragedies like racism, discrimination, inequality, bigotry, and the oppression of people because they are "not like us." We can and should work together to end the reign of hatred that has existed in our society for far too long. Every human being has a right to feel good about themselves, no matter what their color, culture, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. **The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)** offers these tips for a community to fight hate:

1. **Act**- Do something! In the face of hatred, apathy will be interpreted as acceptance by the perpetrators, the public, and worse, the victims. Pick up the phone! Call friends and colleagues. Host a neighborhood or community meeting. Suggest some action. Sign a petition. Repair acts of hate-fueled vandalism. Be Creative!

2. **Join Forces**- Reach out to allies from synagogues, churches, schools, clubs and other civic groups. Create a diverse coalition. Include children, police, and the media. Gather ideas from everyone, and get everyone involved.

3. **Support the Victims**- Hate crime victims are especially vulnerable. If you are a victim, report every incident, in detail, and ask for help. If you learn about a hate crime in your community, show support. Let victims know you care. Surround them with comfort and protection.

4. **Speak Up**- Hate must be exposed and denounced. Help news organizations achieve balance and depth. Do not debate hate group members in conflict-driven forums. Instead, speak up in ways that draw attention away from hate, toward unity.

5. **Educate Yourself**- An informed campaign improves its effectiveness. Determine if a hate group is involved, and research its symbols and agenda. Understand the difference between a hate crime (crime must happen, such as physical assault, intimidation, arson, or vandalism; crime is motivated by bias) and a bias incident (conduct, speech or expression that is motivated by bias but does not involve a criminal act).

6. **Create an Alternative**- Do not attend a hate rally. Find another outlet for anger and frustration, and for people's desire to do something.

7. **Pressure Leaders**- Elected officials and other community leaders can be important allies. But some must overcome reluctance- and others, their own biases- before they are able to take a stand.

8. **Stay Engaged**- Promote acceptance and address bias before another hate crime can occur.

9. **Teach Acceptance**- Bias is learned early, often at home. Schools can offer lessons of tolerance and acceptance.

10. **Dig Deeper**- Look inside yourself for biases and stereotypes. Commit to disrupting hate and intolerance at home, at school, in the workplace, and in faith communities.