



Community and Social Justice Support Nights Healing Oppression

Rationale: When we talk about diversity or difference, we're talking about differences in power. Society has taught people to regard certain differences as inferior and not deserving of equal power. This labeling allows the "non-different" people to take power away from the "different" people. This process is called *oppression*. The opposite of oppression is *privilege*. You have privilege if you are perceived to be a member of a group defined as "non-different" or "normal" – a group that is in power. Since the existence of a group's privilege is usually a taboo topic for members of that group, people with a certain kind of privilege very often do not recognize it.

The U.S., like most societies, is an oppressive society. All structures are to some degree oppressive, and almost all people in the U.S. have been formed in this paradigm.

The model used by Tools For Change (www.toolsforchange.org) is not interested in assigning blame to individuals, but in helping people recognize the pervasiveness of oppression. No one really has the option of declaring oneself uninvolved – there is no neutral place. According to this model, everyone is either acting in such a way as to support and maintain an oppressive structure, or they are actively working to increase their awareness and challenging the oppressive structure.

Sometimes a person will in some ways be a member of a privileged group and at the same time be a member of an oppressed group. For example, a white gay man may have "race privilege" and "gender privilege" but experience oppression as a gay man. People in this position can (a) recognize the benefit of the privilege and become aware of oppressive structures and ways to act as allies to those who are oppressed, and (b) recognize the effects of their oppression and take action to have that experience taken into account by those in the oppressive structure.

A sense of defensiveness or guilt about our privilege or society's oppressive attitudes that we have adopted as our own do oppressed people no good. We cannot change who we are or what we have experienced in the past. We can, however, make a decision to stand with the oppressed regardless of our background. Gradually, as we become more clearly aware of privilege and oppression, as new relationships are formed and new choices are made, we will become more and more effective allies.

Each group member is invited to create a collage on the inside and outside of the boxes representing their understanding of "Other," or of privilege and oppression, especially as they have experienced these this year.

On the outside, they may place words or pictures representing aspects of "other-ness" or oppression they have encountered. On the inside, they may place items representing privileges they have enjoyed, relative to those they've met this year.

Allow sufficient time for this exercise (20 minutes or more) as it does require some thought. Explain in advance that they will have the opportunity to share what they have created, reserving time for that portion as well.

Questions:

Some questions that may be helpful:

- When were you first aware of the existence of the “Other*” and what was it about this person/these people that made them “Other”? Who helped you interpret this experience? How did your family help you interpret this experience?
- How frequently do you find yourself in close contact in an equal power situation with someone who is “Other”? In close contact in unequal power situations? What defines these circumstances as equal or unequal in power?
- Tell about some times you have had to adjust your behavior, assumptions, or outlook when with the “Other.” Tell about times when the “Other” has had to adjust behaviors, assumptions, or outlooks when with you.
- During the year, consider who you are/aren’t considering “Other.” Are some people somehow “safer” to consider as “Other”? What have you learned about privilege and oppression?