

What Is Internalized Homophobia?

PT psychologytoday.com/us/blog/queering-psychology/202002/what-is-internalized-homophobia

When I worked with Latino teenage boys as a clinician and counselor, I encountered quite a bit of homophobia. I once led a group in healthy relationships in South Central L.A. and the boys I worked with would open up to me, sharing thoughts such as: "I can't help it but it weirds me out to think about two men kissing." Looking back, I'd squirm in my seat when this topic would come up; I myself was uncomfortable confronting their homophobia because I had yet to confront my own internalized homophobia.



I'd like to pause for a brief mindfulness exercise. As therapists or just fellow curious humans that have chosen to read this blog post, observe how you're feeling about this topic. What comes up for you? What images, memories, or feelings? Is this topic uncomfortable? What sensations arise in your body? Do you feel defensive or curious? Open or tense? Just notice, without judgment.

Whatever is coming up for you, it's all okay. Mindfulness 101 is to take the judgment out. What I've learned as I dig deeper into my own biases and prejudices is that we all have rocks left unturned, nooks in our psyches we are blind to, and prejudices towards folks somehow "other" than us. (It's worth saying that I'm White and have experienced considerable privilege in my life on that basis.)

As I've grown to understand it from my friends, fellow LGBTQ community members, colleagues, and clinicians, internalized homophobia is what happens when we take the biases, prejudices, and hatred towards gay folks reinforced by society (aka societal homophobia) and turn these biases inward back on ourselves.

Internalized homophobia can show up in the form of self-hatred, shame, fear, anxiety, and depression for many gay clients, whether we are out of the closet or not. (I'm speaking in a collective "we" here, as this is a concept I became familiar with through my own personal experience recognizing it, and working through it.)

I should also acknowledge there is debate within the psychological and scientific community as to the extent that this impacts gay and lesbian individuals and if we should use the term "internalized homophobia" or instead deconstruct it and redirect our attention instead towards "more salient issues of cultural and institutionalized heterosexism."

As I've grown to understand it, these are two sides of the same coin. Societal messages about gayness being different, somehow "wrong," or even "bad," impact all of us, whether or not we acknowledge it. I think of internalized homophobia as misdirected anger at ourselves as somehow defective and "not enough."

Alan Downs describes the internalization of homophobia in his book, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the pain of growing up gay in a straight man's world*. He also describes it as a process of internalized shame. While he focuses on gay men, specifically, it is a relatable concept for many gay folks.

Colloquially, internalized homophobia is a topic I've seen performed on stage a number of times recently in Los Angeles, where writers and comedians alike describe the pain of living in the closet as young teens. Just this weekend I attended a theatrical performance called *Marginalized*, where a queer writing group told stories of the internalized shame of their childhoods as gay folks.

Or my friend Sophia Cleary, alesbian comedian based in Los Angeles, who I witnessed leading a room to erupt in laughter as she described the closet much like a horror movie. Sophia spoke of a time she tried desperately to be straight, staring into the mirror yelling, "I'M STRAIGHT. I'M NOT GAY!" We erupted in laughter, the familiarity of this scene relatable, but she closes the joke to state: "*That* is internalized homophobia. And it's really scary." And scary it is. Many queer folks I know have gone through periods before coming out where we ourselves participated in homophobia or belonged to homophobic spaces.

I also want to acknowledge that while this post is focusing on internalized homophobia, much of it can also apply to internalized transphobia, which has similar roots in societal norms around what is normative in society, but with regards to gender.

Why Talking about Internalized Homophobia Is Important

It's important to understand because as clinicians, we need to help our clients work through these damaging messages and gently guide clients to reprogram to messages of self-acceptance, compassion, tolerance, and understanding. Moreover, therapists themselves may possess biases they have internalized *towards* their LGBTQIA clients that they are unaware of, given how deeply entrenched they are within us, gay or not. *Psychology Today* blogger Joe Kort writes about this, noting that many therapists, while affirming of their LGBTQIA clients, may not be aware of "the insidious role that internalized homophobia plays in many of these people's lives."

In other words, through *heteronormativity*, young children pick up messages from a young age that being attracted to the same gender is "different" and somehow, "bad," while to be heterosexual, while normative, is "good" and even "admirable." Dr. Kort describes this: "The overwhelming message they get is clear: I'm bad, I'm wrong, the world is dangerous, I'm unsafe and must keep my true feelings secret."

Addressing Internalized Homophobia Starts with Compassionate Awareness

Here's what I want to get across about internalized homophobia: it touches all of us in one way or another, whether or not we're conscious of it. Dismantling deeply entrenched systemic homophobia is a complicated undertaking, one I can't pretend to break down and eradicate through one post alone.

But dismantling systemically starts with us, being aware of ourselves, by acknowledging homophobia exists in all of us, to one extent or another, gay or straight and across racial and socioeconomic lines. Even us gay folks — especially us gay folks — are prone to it. I had a dear gay friend who is very much

an outspoken champion of gay rights say to me once, “No one likes lesbians” and then chuckle, “You know what I mean, Whit.” Ouch. Even within the LGBTQIA alphabet, we're prone to biases and in-fighting against our own people.

This isn't about judgment, it's about awareness and then the act of self-compassion. (An approach grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can be a helpful starting place to look at our own biases and in turn, help others through theirs.) It's hard to encourage our clients to let go of self-hatred, self-loathing, internalized rage, and shame if we don't understand the role homophobia plays in its development. Our ability to help our clients, whether we share their sexual orientation or not, rests in our ability to first tap into our own biases and prejudices, those nooks and crannies of our psyches waiting for us to explore.

As we think about LGBTQ+ mental health and we consider the needs of our clients that fall along the LGBTQ+ spectrum, I encourage you to pause and take a moment to look inside. Revisit the mindful exercise we began with and pause and take a few moments, write down some reflections, or strike up a conversation with your colleagues about homophobia in our communities, our families, and our own hearts and minds.

From there, I can promise you it will be easier when, inevitably, a client's internalized messages of shame show up in the therapy space and they need your help to untangle them. Who knows, maybe you'll even have the privilege to watch your first client walk out of shame — the dreaded closet — and into self-acceptance and peace with who they are. It's an honor and a privilege to witness, I can promise.