

Resistance and Resilience: Stories of Overcoming Internalized Oppression

By Mardoche Sidor, MD; Adaiah Lassalle, LCSW; Karen Dubin, PhD, LCSW; and The SWEET Institute

Internalized oppression can silence voices, shape identities, and restrict possibilities. Yet, history and lived experience also testify to the human capacity to resist, rise, and reimagine. Where oppression internalizes shame, resilience plants seeds of dignity. Where systems reinforce inferiority, resistance births creativity and collective action.

The Science of Resilience

Research in psychology and neuroscience shows that resilience is not merely a personal trait but an adaptive process built on supportive relationships, meaning-making, and opportunities for growth. Studies on post-traumatic growth suggest that individuals facing adversity often develop deeper empathy, stronger purpose, and greater psychological flexibility (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Epigenetic research has further revealed that resilience can mitigate some of the biological impacts of stress and trauma across generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

Narratives of Resistance

Throughout history, communities facing oppression have resisted not only externally but internally. Enslaved Africans preserved songs, rituals, and language as forms of resistance to dehumanization. Survivors of colonialism cultivated pride in heritage, creating counter-narratives to imposed inferiority. Today, individuals and groups challenge stereotypes through art, education, and activism, reclaiming identities distorted by oppression.

Practical Tools for Building Resilience

- **Storytelling and Narrative Reclamation:** Sharing one's story counters imposed silence and restores agency.
- **Community Anchoring:** Building connections with supportive networks strengthens resilience against isolation.
- **Affirmation Practices:** Daily practices of self-affirming statements have been shown to buffer stress and improve performance in the face of stereotype threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).
- **Mind-Body Integration:** Practices such as mindfulness, breath awareness, and movement therapies restore regulation to the nervous system and support psychological flexibility.

Reflection Questions

1. Where have you witnessed resistance in your own story or community?
2. Which inner narratives have you rewritten in the face of oppression?
3. How might you cultivate resilience in daily practices and collective spaces?

Conclusion

Internalized oppression can wound deeply, but resilience ensures that the story never ends in defeat. By reclaiming dignity, telling new stories, and building supportive communities, individuals and groups rise, again and again, proving that oppression, though insidious, is never the final word.

References

- Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65(1), 333–371.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1–18.
- Yehuda, R., & Lehrner, A. (2018). Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: Putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. *World Psychiatry*, 17(3), 243–257.