Basic Anti-Oppression Theory

**Oppression Is A Learned Behavior**

**Benefits and Facilitation Options**

**Benefits:**
This exercise is a writing exercise to explore how attitudes, beliefs and prejudices are formed, misinformation is passed down or shared, and how a learned behavior can be “unlearned.” The exercise also allows people to share their own strategies and successes to unlearn oppression. As a writing exercise, it encourages personal reflection and honesty and can allow people who aren’t as comfortable sharing aloud a chance to participate more fully.

**Time Required:** 15 – 20 minutes

**Ideal Group Size:** Any

**Support Materials:** Board or flipchart, markers, Handout – Oppression Is A Learned Behavior, Pens

**Key Instructions:**
1. Pass out the handout “Oppression Is A Learned Behavior.”
2. Read the Goal statement at the top of the Handout.
3. Remind participants that they won’t be required to share their responses; they can do so only if they want to.
4. Remind participants that it’s important to choose an oppressed group to which they DO NOT BELONG.
5. Give participants about 10 minutes to complete the writing.
6. Ask for people to share their response to the last question. Often during the sharing, participants will reveal the answers to the rest of the questionnaire but it is not required or necessary.
7. You may also ask participants to share how it felt to do the exercise. DO NOT ask participants to share the answers to the questions 1-3, it could bring up stereotypes that could potentially hurt other people in the room.
8. Be sure to thank those who share after they’ve done so. To close, thank everyone for reflecting on what may bring up difficult memories.

**Key Points:**
- Oppression is a learned behavior.
- It can be difficult to let go of some of the behaviors, beliefs, feelings, etc. without some very intentional work.
Oppression Is A Learned Behavior

The goal of this exercise is to see how oppression is a learned behavior, often beginning when we are very young. These questions will provoke thought, evoke memories (some may be good, some not so good), and prepare you for some personal work. As you are doing this exercise, please pay attention to how you are feeling. You will not be required to share your specific responses during the debriefing of this exercise – only if you want to – so please be as honest with yourself as you can.

Choose one oppressed group to which you do NOT belong. You may want to use a group we discussed earlier.

1. What is your first memory of either coming into contact with someone from this group, or hearing about someone from this group?

2. What stereotypes do you hold about this group, or have you held about this group in the past?

3. Where did these stereotypes come from?

4. Have you been able to debunk these stereotypes? How have you done that?