

# Overcoming Internalized Homophobia

## Objective

To explore and address feelings of internalized homophobia.

## What to Know

Growing up, people are taught the rules and values of society. In a homophobic, heterosexist, discriminatory culture, they may develop negative ideas about homosexuality and same-sex attraction. LGBTQIA+ people may be socialized into thinking that being non-heterosexual is somehow “bad,” “wrong,” or “immoral,” – leading to feelings of self-hatred and self-disgust. These feelings can develop into “internalized homophobia,” also known as “internalized oppression.”

Internalized homophobia refers to the involuntary belief, acceptance, or internalization by LGBTQIA+ individuals of the negative stereotypes, prejudices, and homophobic attitudes of society toward homosexuality and LGBTQIA+ identities. This internalization can manifest in self-hatred, low self-esteem, and a denial of one's sexual orientation or identity. It can also lead to difficulties in accepting oneself, forming healthy relationships, and may contribute to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Internalized homophobia is influenced by societal attitudes, cultural norms, and personal experiences with stigma and discrimination. Addressing internalized homophobia often involves personal reflection, therapy, and support from affirming communities and individuals.

Personal worth and a positive view of sexual orientation are critical for mental health and internalized homophobia manifests itself in many ways that impact mental health. Check off any of the following statements that apply to you.

- Denial of your sexual orientation to yourself and others.
- Attempts to alter or change your sexual orientation.
- Believing you are never good enough.
- Engaging in obsessive thinking and/or compulsive behaviors.
- Under-achievement or even over-achievement as a bid for acceptance.
- Low self-esteem.
- Negative body image.
- Contempt for the more open or obvious members of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Contempt for people at earlier stages of the coming out process.
- Denial that homophobia, heterosexism, biphobia, or sexism are serious social problems.
- Contempt for those who are not like you, or contempt for those who *are* like you.

\_\_\_ Engaging in homophobic behaviors – ridicule, harassment, or verbal/physical attacks on LGBTQIA+ people.

\_\_\_ Projection of prejudice onto another target group.

\_\_\_ Attempts to pass as heterosexual, sometimes marrying someone of the other sex to gain social approval.

\_\_\_ Increased withdrawal from loved ones.

\_\_\_ Shame or depression, defensiveness, anger, or bitterness.

\_\_\_ School truancy/dropping out of school or workplace absenteeism/reduced productivity.

\_\_\_ Continual self-monitoring of one's behaviors, mannerisms, beliefs, and ideas.

\_\_\_ Clowning as a way of acting out society's negative stereotypes.

\_\_\_ Mistrust and destructive criticism of LGBTQIA+ community leaders.

\_\_\_ Reluctance to spend time with or have concern for children for fear of being seen as a pedophile.

\_\_\_ Unsafe sexual practices and other destructive risk-taking behaviors – including risk for HIV and other STIs.

\_\_\_ Separating sex and love, or fear of intimacy.

\_\_\_ Low or lack of sexual drive or celibacy.

\_\_\_ Thinking about suicide or attempting suicide.

\_\_\_ **Add up your score.**

If you scored five points or above, you may have internalized homophobia. Here are some examples of how internalized homophobia and oppression may affect you:

- **Fear of discovery.** You may try to hide your sexual orientation from family, friends, work colleagues, and so on by “passing” as straight. You may also “pass” to protect others, i.e., pretending your partner with whom you live is “just a good friend.”
- **Discomfort with LGBTQIA+ people.** You may not socialize for fear you will be seen going to/from LGBTQIA+ friendly venues despite being comfortable going to gay bars when traveling, or you avoid discussing LGBTQIA+ people out of concern for what others might think about you.
- **Heterophobia.** You may put down or even avoid heterosexuals.
- **Feeling superior to heterosexuals.** You may embrace the idea that LGBTQIA+ people are “better” than heterosexuals.
- **Being attracted to unavailable people.** You may fall in love with a straight friend. If a pattern of being attracted to unavailable people is repeated, it may be the result of internalized homophobia.

- **Short-term relationships.** You may work long hours, and when a partner wants to get to know you, you may decide your life is too busy for a relationship and that you are comfortable with hookups.

Internalized homophobia and oppression can have a significant impact on your mental health, as well as influence your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This worksheet is designed to support you in exploring and addressing feelings of internalized homophobia.

### **What to Do**

Write down instances when you felt discomfort, shame, or negativity towards your sexual orientation. Describe the feelings associated with these moments.

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Reflect on what triggered these feelings. Are they specific situations, people, comments, or thoughts? List them.

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Consider where these feelings might come from. Can you trace them back to early life experiences, societal messages, or specific events? Be as detailed as possible.

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Fill in the following chart. In the first column, identify any recurring negative thoughts about your sexual orientation. In the second column, write down whether the thought is based on fact or if it is an assumption. In the third column, note whether this thought helps or harms you. Then, write down evidence this thought might be untrue. Finally, try to reframe each negative thought into a positive or neutral statement. For example, change "I'm wrong to feel this way" to "My feelings are valid, and it's okay to be who I am."

Identify negative thoughts	Fact or assumption?	Help or harm?	Evidence this thought is untrue	Reframe each negative thought into a positive or neutral statement

Create personal affirmations that promote self-acceptance and love. Repeat these daily.  
Examples: "I am worthy of love and happiness" or "My sexual orientation is a beautiful part of who I am."

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Research and list LGBTQ+ groups, online communities, or events where you can find support and understanding.

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Identify public figures or individuals in your life who are openly LGBTQIA+ and whom you admire. What qualities do they possess that you value?

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List activities that make you feel good about yourself and commit to doing them regularly.

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Find a creative outlet to express your feelings and experiences, such as writing, art, music, or any form of self-expression that feels right for you. What will you do?

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Reflect on this exercise and notice any changes in your feelings or thoughts. Do you notice changes?

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Remember, overcoming internalized homophobia is a personal journey that takes time. Be patient and kind to yourself along the way. You are not alone, and support is available if you require it.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What was challenging about this exercise? Be specific.

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Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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