

THE LADDER OF EMPOWERMENT

The Ladder of Empowerment is designed to highlight the impact of internalized racism on people of color while outlining an approach to empowerment.

Empowerment is not a state but a process. It is a journey that all people of color must take in order to heal and protect ourselves from the devastating impact of racism.

The Ladder of Empowerment takes us through various stages in both identity development and the process of empowerment. It is important to remember that all of these stages exist at the same time in all people of color. Critical questions for us to ask are which stage currently dominates our life and in what direction are we heading. The racist system is always pushing us to stay in the lower stages. Our job is to find ways to work with the people around us to help ourselves and others move through the process and become more empowered.

Stages Of Development

1. Not White

The empowerment process begins when a person of color realizes that they are not white. This usually happens when that person is a child or has just moved to the U.S.. We begin to understand that we are part of a group and not considered white. It is in this stage that we realize that all of the racist stereotypes, images, and prejudices that we are hearing and have heard are about us.

This realization can cause a psychological crisis in people of color. The crisis can take the following forms:

- People of color decide to try to become white. Changing one's physical features to look white is a way to deny that they are not white.
- People try to be as good as whites. This person uses whites as a model of humanity. So whatever whites have, they must have. Whatever whites do, they must do.
- This stage can cause depression and confusion.
- Some people of color get angry or mad at the realization of racism and that they are not white. This anger can help catapult people to the next stage.

2. Rage/Depression

Rage is the stage where people of color are often consumed by anger at white people for their racism. Rage is a reaction to the brutal oppression people of color have endured for hundreds of years. Rage can take the form of people of color attacking whites or other antagonistic behavior. Some people of color actually think that rage is empowerment. But in reality, it is the opposite. Rage isn't empowerment because it usually is not driven by the desire to strategically and constructively dismantle racism. Rage is reactionary.

The other side of this stage can often be depression. People of color can react to the realization of the previous stage by being overwhelmed with the immensity of the oppression they will have to endure. Depression can also be the result of identity conflict.

3. Exclusion and Immersion

In this stage, people of color use our rage productively by directing it to temporarily exclude whites from our social lives and immerse ourselves in our culture. This is a necessary stage of development for people of color. Exclusion gives us time and space to deal with our problems. Immersion can be healing time when we learn about the culture that was taken away from us. Some people of color mistake excluding whites from our circle or immersing ourselves in our culture as empowerment. We think that by only having "us" around we have reached our ultimate goal. Some of these people remain in this stage for years. For other people of color, this exclusion and immersion can push them to the next stage. We want to learn more about ourselves, our people and our history.

4. Self Awareness & Investigation

In the previous stage, people of color begin to develop an awareness of ourselves, our culture, and our history. In this stage awareness is not enough; we want a much deeper level of knowledge. We need to understand our place in history and in the world. It is particularly useful and important to investigate and study the history and culture of other people of color and that of white people. This gives us a better perspective about ourselves, and helps us prevent the wedges that racism so often constructs between groups in order to divide and conquer us.

5. Challenging

With all the knowledge and awareness that we have gained through this process, now it is time for action. We need to work with other people of color and whites and learn how to challenge each other and to be challenged. One of the impacts of internalized racism is that it makes challenging racism difficult. Part of our empowerment is learning to resist and challenge despite the internal and external barriers. If we can not do this, we could fall backward into one of the previous stages like rage or exclusion.

6. Collective Action

It is not enough to challenge racist moments individually, although that is incredibly important. Here we work together to build an organization or institution. The process of empowerment becomes a collective process. People of color must be working with other people of color and white allies to stay truly empowered. The goal is to be a part of a community of resistance.

7. Community of Resistance

A Community of Resistance is

- Organizing for collective Power to work for social justice and transformation.
- Building a community that can heal the remnants of racism and internalized racist oppression.
- Building a community or organization that can help members learn to think critically about the community, country and world.
- Developing a culture and specific projects that promote leadership development to help people of color realize their potential.
- People of color can never truly be empowered until we develop formal and informal systems of **accountability** with our community. We must be able to hold each other responsible for our actions lovingly and effectively.