

## Working with Shame



Shame is the feeling that a person is, at their core, bad or wrong. A person might feel shame for no reason at all, or long after they have made amends for a misdeed. It is different to guilt in that guilt is the recognition of a behaviour being wrong, shame is when we say we are bad.

Shame researcher Brené Brown, argues that guilt serves an important social purpose. It can drive people to apologize to others and avoid doing harm. Shame, Brown says, serves no purpose. It is simply a source of suffering. Therapy can help people understand why they feel ashamed and work to break free from shame.

Toxic shame is shame that leads to chronic negative emotions, or behaviour that harms oneself or others. People who feel chronic shame may think they are unworthy of love. Others may fear connecting to others, convinced that others will eventually see the “real” person and reject them. This can cause numerous relationship issues, including:

- Trouble forming or sustaining friendships or romantic relationships.
- Difficulty being honest in interpersonal relationships.
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Abusive behaviour.
- Getting into abusive relationships.

People experiencing shame may engage in self-harm such as cutting, binge eating, or restrictive eating. Some people attempt to mask or overcome their feelings of shame through:

- Substance abuse such as alcoholism or drug addiction.
- Compulsive behaviours such as shopping or gambling addiction.
- Workaholism.

### **8 ways to manage and challenge shame**

- 1) **Mindfulness** is a skill which helps you connect to yourself and can help you pause, and notice what you are feeling – bad and good. Note, recognising when you feel good is a good opportunity to reinforce self-compassion!
- 2) **Identify shameful emotions and triggers** – what is happening just before you enter the shame spiral? What was said? What were you thinking? How does it feel in your mind and body when you are feeling ashamed? By identifying these things, you will be able to recognise when you have the potential of, or have just entered the shame spiral and can challenge this feeling quicker
- 3) **Recognise self-defeating thoughts** - E.g., “seeking help will force disclosure of shame – it will be discovered that my shame is deserved – I will be rejected” this is simply not true and is a sneaky trick of shame to keep itself hidden where it can thrive and grow. See my download on negative scripts which identifies 10 of the most common cognitive distortions
- 4) **Notice the language of shame** – What words and statements do you say to yourself and about yourself when you enter shame? What tone do you use with yourself? What subtle ways do you communicate your shame without the use of language –for example, do you keep your eyes focussed downwards, do you make yourself small, do you pick at your skin? These are all aspects which can help you notice when you are entering shame. They are also self-reinforcing of the shame and if you can notice them and stop them, you stop reinforcing the shame in that moment
- 5) **Recognise that shame isn’t always bad** – Ok, I know this sounds a weird one to put in a list of ways to challenge shame but sometimes we can feel ashamed of feeling shame!! In some circumstances, shame can motivate people to engage in behaviour change, can elicit sympathy/cooperation and pro-social responding from others. Do you get anything out of your shame which indicates that your needs are not being met in other ways? Please note – this isn’t a ‘bad’ thing. It is just a different way of identifying your needs thirst.

- 6) **Shame from trauma** - Shame can often stem from a traumatic experience. Understanding our body responses or processing of trauma can be helpful. Also recognising that often the responses we got after the event can be shame-inducing. Having a space to explore the event with a trained therapist can be helpful in identifying where it came from and challenging it. Please only connect with trained therapists who are competent in working with trauma and/or shame, you can find these by looking at directories which verify counsellors training and experience such as BACP Directory, Counselling Directory and Psychology Today.
- 7) **Use Imagery to develop self-compassion** – OK so I know that when you feel shameful you don't feel you deserve compassion but we are here to challenge shame so hear me out. Imagine yourself as a young child or a friend who is struggling with what you are struggling with. What would you say to them if they said your thoughts out loud and judged themselves in the way you judge yourself? Most likely, you would empathise, show kindness, highlight their strengths to them and be compassionate. Offer it to your imagined child or friend and then offer it to yourself – say it out loud to yourself in the mirror. Repeat it regularly. It may well feel uncomfortable and strange at first, but just as your shame and negative scripts have become embedded through repetition, so can positive scripts and self-compassion.
- 8) **Engage in Self-soothing** – When offering yourself verbal self-compassion is too uncomfortable, or even feels threatening, there are different ways to offer yourself physical warmth. We unconsciously may self-soothe when we bite our nails, experience leg shaking, foot tapping or suck our thumb. When self-soothing out of shame we want to adopt more mindful self-soothing techniques, and often these are techniques which appeal to the senses, such as:
- **Touch** – taking a warm bubble bath filled with Epsom salts to help relax tense muscles, or getting a massage
  - **Taste** – drinking a cup of hot drink, such as a herbal tea to help relax or chewing gum
  - **Smell** – lighting aromatherapy candles or using essential oils
  - **Sight** – settling down comfortably in front of your favourite feel-good or comedy film or laying in an open space and watching the clouds pass by
  - **Sound** – listen to your favourite music, use apps to hear relaxing sleep music or meditations

