

I AM UNCOVERING MY SHAME AND WORKING TO TRANSFORM IT INTO SELF-ACCEPTANCE.

In itself, shame is not bad. Shame is a normal human emotion. It is the emotion which gives us permission to be human. Shame tells us of our limits. Shame keeps us in our human boundaries, letting us know we can and will make mistakes, and that we need help. Our shame tells us we are not God.

Children who grow up in dysfunctional families receive messages of toxic shame on a daily basis. Because they are children, they have normal needs and desires to be held, to be emotionally nurtured, to be given the opportunity to explore and ask questions, and to be allowed to test boundaries and establish their own identities. Yet these needs often are unmet in dysfunctional families. Worse, children in dysfunctional families often receive punishment or shame because they have these needs. Children develop their feelings about themselves according to the way their parents respond to their needs. The feelings of toxic relational shame are stored in the unconscious, where those messages continue to have an impact on their lives. Once the shame feelings have been triggered, we move into a cycle of shame in which we lock on to a particular behavior to protect ourselves from further shaming. We may defend ourselves, argue, or withdraw from others. All of these protective behaviors perpetuate the shame cycle.

A family environment in which shame plays a dominant role teaches a child to live by the following rules:

- **BE IN CONTROL OF ALL BEHAVIOR AND INTERACTION WITH OTHERS.**
That way no one can shame you.
- **ALWAYS BE “RIGHT” AND DO THE “RIGHT” THING.**
There’s no difference between bad behavior and a bad person, so in order not to be bad, be perfect.
- **IF THINGS DON’T GO RIGHT, BLAME SOMEONE ELSE.**
That way you’re always better than the people around you.
- **DENY FEELINGS, ESPECIALLY NEGATIVE OR VULNERABLE ONES LIKE ANXIETY, FEAR, LONELINESS, GRIEF, OR REJECTION.**
Those feelings can get out of hand, but if you don’t have them, you’re safe. You know you won’t experience something you can’t handle.
- **DON’T EXPECT RELIABILITY OR CONSTANCY IN RELATIONSHIPS.**
Since people are unreliable, it’s much safer to be attached to things like food, alcohol, sex, work, or money.

Shame as a healthy human emotion can be transformed into shame as a state of being. To have shame as an identity is to believe that one’s being is flawed, that one is defective as a human being. Once shame is transformed into an identity, it becomes toxic and dehumanizing (life-destroying). It necessitates a cover-up, a false self. Once one becomes a false self, one ceases to exist psychologically. To be a false self is to cease being an authentic human being, because as a false self, one tries to be more than human or less than human. This results in a lifetime of cover-up and secrecy. It divides us from ourselves and from others. The authentic self goes into hiding. Years later the layers of defense

and pretense are so intense that one loses all awareness of who one really is. The demand for a false self to cover and hide the authentic self necessitates a life dominated by doing and achievement.

Toxic shame is felt as self-blame. Healthy guilt is an emotion which results from behaving in a manner contrary to our beliefs and values. Unlike guilt, which has to do with feeling bad about what you do in the external world, shame is feeling like a failure on the inside: like you are flawed, inferior, no good, dirty, unlovable. It holds the distorted idea that everything that goes wrong is intolerable. It is an emotion that gets internalized as a state of being ... and such is unhealthy and untrue. Shame is an all-pervasive character assassinator.

Toxic shame also wears the face of grandiosity. It can appear as narcissistic self-enlargement or wormlike helplessness. Each extreme refuses to be human. Each exaggerates: one is more than human; the other is less than human.

To be shame-bound means that whenever you feel any feeling, any need or any drive, you immediately feel ashamed. Internalized shame is the essence of codependency. It is the core and fuel of all addiction.

Toxic shame affects are relationship with God, others, and ourselves. It is the feeling of shame that isolates the survivor and proves to be the roadblock to intimacy. Shame creates a fear of exposure, an unwillingness to trust others, and deep anxiety because of the need to keep the secret. Our natural response to the shame, to the fear of exposure is hiding – denial and deception. So a key element in healing is exposure. Self-esteem cannot be gained in a vacuum. John Bradshaw says, “The best way to come out of hiding is to find a nonshaming intimate social network. The operative word here is intimate. We have to get on a core gut level because shame is core gut level stuff. Toxic shame masks our deepest secrets about ourselves; it embodies our belief that we are essentially defective. We feel so awful, we dare not look at it ourselves, much less tell anyone. The only way we can find out that we were wrong about ourselves is to risk exposing ourselves to someone else’s scrutiny. When we trust someone else and experience their love and acceptance, we begin to change our beliefs about ourselves. We learn that we are not bad; we learn that we are lovable and acceptable. True love heals and affects spiritual growth.”

To continue self-blaming is to do to yourself as an adult what was done to you as a child. You must sever this legacy by changing what you say to yourself, how you treat yourself, and how you let others treat you. Total self-love and acceptance is the only foundation for happiness and the love of others.

Kristin Kunzman gives some ways to get out and stay out of your shame: (She has a good chapter on parenting and reparenting yourself in the book, *The Healing Way*.)

Recognize shame, label it. This takes away some of its power over your life.

Remember that shame is not about who you are. It is about how you were parented and treated as a child. “The way we were treated as small children is the way we treat ourselves the rest of our life.”

(Alice Miller)

Buy a book of affirmations to read daily and apply them to your life so you begin thinking of yourself in positive ways.

As a friend, write yourself an affirming letter, emphasizing your good points. Take out the letter and read it when you feel down or shameful.

Call a friend and get a boost when you feel shameful. Let your friend know how you're feeling, and ask for some positive affirmations.

As we speak our shame out loud, as we hear others express theirs, we begin to compute how greatly it has poisoned our point of view and how severely we have let it punish us. We will see how our shame supported a system in which the perpetrators were protected and we bore the brunt of their offense – first in its actuality, then again in carrying their shame for it.

Discussion Questions:

Describe how shame makes you feel.

Describe what shame feels like in your body.

How do you hide from others?

How do you hide from yourself?

Describe the shame and guilt you have felt about your abuse.

How does the sense of shame affect relationships?

Do you ever have feelings of contempt for yourself?

How would your life be different if you felt secure and confident instead of ashamed?

Do you try to perform well in an attempt to gain others' approval and attention? If you do, does it work? Why or why not?

John Bradshaw identifies seven dysfunctional family rules that are very common among shame-based families. The following is a list and brief explanation of "The Dysfunctional Family Rules."

1. CONTROL

One must be in control of all interactions, feelings and personal behavior at all times ... control is the major defense strategy for shame.

2. PERFECTIONISM

Always be right in everything you do. The perfectionist rule always involves a measurement that is being imposed. The fear and avoidance of the negative is the organizing principle of life. The members live according to an externalized image. No one ever measures up.

3. BLAME

Whenever things don't turn out as planned, blame yourself or others. Blame is another defensive cover-up for shame ... Blame maintains the balance in a dysfunctional system when control has broken down.

4. DENIAL OF THE FIVE FREEDOMS

The five freedoms describe full personal functionality. Each freedom has to do with a basic human power ... the power to perceive; to think and interpret; to feel; to want and choose; and the power to imagine.

5. THE NO-TALK RULE

This rule prohibits the full expression of any feeling, need or want. In shame-based families, the members want to hide their true feelings, needs or wants. Therefore, no one speaks of their pain.

6. DON'T MAKE MISTAKES

Mistakes reveal the flawed vulnerable self. To acknowledge a mistake is to open oneself to scrutiny. Cover up your own mistakes and if someone else makes a mistake, shame her/him.

7. UNRELIABILITY

Don't expect reliability in relationships. Don't trust anyone and you will never be disappointed.

(Taken from the following tapes by Jeff VanVonderen: "Uncovering Shame" and "Wounded by Shame / Healed by Grace")

Guilt: an emotion about behavior (a signal; an emotional flare)

Shame: a belief about; an assessment of; a mind set about you (I'm bad, defective, mistake)

Shame-based system: a system that's based on shame. Shame is the basis of what goes on in the system. Shame is the force that motivates behavior. Shame is the glue that holds us together.

10 Characteristics of Shamed Based Systems

The reason it is important to understand this is not so that we can blame the system that we came from and say, "I'm the way I am because of them." Our issues as human beings are not how we were treated as kids. Our issues are how we decided to respond to how we were treated as kids. But in order to understand how we chose to respond and learn to make different responses, we need to understand how we were treated as kids.

(1) Out loud shaming

"Shame on you!" "You are stupid!" "You are spoiled!"

(2) Performance Oriented

More focused on behavior than they are people.

(3) Unspoken rules

Rules that govern the system that are not said out loud, because if they were said out loud, they'd look as "goofy" as they are. Reasons for a no-talk rule: A) If I don't perform you can't talk B) If I don't perform and you talk, you're the problem for talking; and C) Keeps all these other rules unspoken. You become the problem for noticing the other stuff. What people think is the most important thing.

This is so important because people live these things (unspoken rules) out unintentionally (subconsciously). They pass these on to the next relationships. And if you don't like these rules, you have to know you have them and break them on purpose or else you carry them on to the next generation. Here's some examples: Adults are more important than kids. Women are here to do what men want. People who are sad are over sensitive. If parents are upset, it is because of the behavior of the kids. It's the kids responsibility to fix parent's feelings. Not showing feelings is the same as not having them. Questions are disrespectful. It's never OK to say no to adults. Peace at all cost. Needs are selfish.

- (4) **Coding**
If you're in trouble for noticing stuff then you have to figure out how to say stuff without saying it; so you code. (Example: If you had the no talk rule, needs are selfish; then you'd have to ask for needs without asking because you'd have to look no needy.)
Another part of coding is triangulating.
- (5) **Idolatrous**
People are taught to get their sense of OKness from something other than God.
- (6) **Have a hard time with kids**
Because kids are messy, in process, ask hard questions, and don't do it right. ("Act your age" meant act like an adult.)
- (7) **Focused on fault and blame**
- (8) **Strong on head skills**
Good at denying problems and rationalizing
- (9) **Weak on heart skills**
People aren't allowed to feel; pretend to be happy when sad
- (10) **Survival roles**

If you've come from a shame-based family or have a history of other shame-based relationships, that means that the essence of the message that you've gotten from those relationships is: "Something's wrong with me." "I'm defective." "Perform better and I'll be O.K., but I'm not O.K. now." And when you do the standard gets moved and you're still not O.K.

Characteristics of People from Shame-based Family Systems

People from shame based systems ...

- (1) are tired (emotionally, physically, spiritually, and psychologically).
If your performance is the solution to your shame and you can never perform enough, but you haven't been taught it's O.K. to quit, so you keep performing – you're going to be tired
- (2) have shame-based identities
struggle with low self-esteem. Hard for them to like and accept themselves.
- (3) Have a shame grid

External circumstances and events tend to indict you and shame you as a person because you have a grid or a filter that filters all the incoming information and gives it a little bit of twist that turns out to be something bad about you. Human mistakes make you feel like you're being seen in a diminished way. But the problem is that most often the person who is indicting you is you. If you fixed everybody in the whole world by jumping through all the hoops that everybody wanted you to jump through and everybody was pleased with you – you'd indict yourself because you'd know that you really didn't want to do that stuff anyway.

Here's how the shame grid works. If you don't agree with me what that means is that you don't agree with me. It means you have one opinion, I have another opinion, and the two opinions are not the same opinion. But a person with a shame grid is you don't agree with me means something's wrong with me for having the opinion that I have. The fact that I think the way I think means something is weird about me, not you think your way and I think my way and that's O.K.

My mistake is not about behaviors, but it's about me.

Someone else has a number of positive circumstances happening to them means someone else has a number of positive circumstances happening to them. But through a shame grid, it means God must not love me as much as He loves them.

- (4) Use negative self-talk
- (5) Are performance oriented
- (6) Can't admit mistakes
Why? Mistakes indict, so I need to blame someone else to push away the shame.
- (7) are unaware of their needs
Normal is to go without. If you have a need you're selfish.
- (8) Martyr their needs
It is positive and virtuous to go without needs.
- (9) Are over responsible
If there is a problem, I must have caused it. If there is a problem, it's my job to solve it. It's my job to make everybody in the world and everybody in my family happy, get along, make sure their needs are met, and keep the peace – that's my job.
- (10) Have incredible radar
You learn to pay real close attention. You learn how to pick up everything.
- (11) Don't trust their radar
- (12) Code
Saying it straight makes you the issue, so you have to code.
Growing up with the unwritten rules creates the need to code.
- (13) unaware of feelings or dishonest with them

Because expression of feelings is shamed, you learned to hide your feelings. You've become an expert at stuffing them or ignoring them. Feelings hurt too much.

- (14) Feel like they're on an emotional roller coaster
People who control their feelings end up being controlled by feelings.
- (15) Have a lot of stress-related illnesses
- (16) Feel like they don't belong
- (17) Can't have fun, guilt free
- (18) Don't know what real is
How things looked is what mattered, not what was real.
- (19) act in ways that are contradictory
Perfectionistic then a slob, worried about what people think then don't give a rip, clamping down on kids and then giving them the benefit of a doubt all the time, trying hard then giving up.
- (20) Act compulsive
- (21) Often become addicted
An addiction is present when a certain activity or course of action produces negative consequences and you keep doing the course any way
- (22) often victims
Because they have deeply engraved messages of defectiveness, so they tend to find relationships that affirm their defectiveness and the best way is to find an abusive relationship that feels comfortable.
- (23) Can't take gifts
You don't deserve this person to be giving you this gift. If they knew about you what you knew about you, they wouldn't be giving you this gift. Plus it's not really a gift anyway – they're going to want something back later on. Nothing's for free – there must be a string.
- (24) Can't give gifts
- (25) Sabotage their success
Don't deserve to make it
- (26) ask for intimacy and when they get it they push it away
If someone gets too close, they might see your shame.
- (27) Are survivors
In order to make it through a shame-based family, you had to acquire certain skills and become expert at certain roles that were conducive to survival. Now you have this brand new relationship and you keep using those old survival skills that you had to have to make it through the shame-based family. Instead of knowing how to have new skills to match the new relationship, you create circumstances that you need to survive, so that you can use your skills.
- (28) Have a hard time trusting people