

EXPOSING SHaME

Shame is taboo. We do not like to talk about it. We can admit to feeling guilt, anger, fear or even sadness, but not shame. Why? Unlike the other emotions which have to do with behaviour, shame has to do with our core-being. Admitting shame is exposing the inadequacy in our core-being. It is saying 'I am not good enough', 'I am not worthy of love and acceptance'. So we deny, avoid, suppress and cover up, just so that we do not have to face our vulnerability that comes with shame. Our unworthiness will not be found out.

Shame is often called the most obstructed and hidden emotion and therefore the most destructive. Here, we will look at shame squarely and bring it into the light. We shall do so through exposing three of its primary characteristics. By so doing, we hope to keep our sense of shame in perspective.

Shame is a primal emotion. It is embedded in our psyche. It exists from the time we are born. Subconsciously, we know that shame is primal and we take advantage of it. We parents are often guilty of using this strategy on misbehaving children. "Look at that Auntie there. She's laughing at you," we say to them. They cringe. No one needs to teach them what shame is. "Shame on you," we say. This is immediately understood. No explanation needed.

Shame is insidious and toxic. It has a way of remaining hidden



while causing great damage. It succeeds, ironically, with our collaboration. Destruction of self and others, perfectionism, criticism, jealousy, envy, blame, accusation, just to name a few, are shame-driven behaviour. Yet shame is not usually nor easily identified as the primary emotion behind them.

A person will readily admit to killing out of rage because he was insulted. He may not know it was the triggered shame that did it. Even if he does know, he may not admit to it, the way he readily owns up to his other emotions.

We can become so unknowingly 'shame-sensitive' that an honest comment, for example, "This dish is too salty" can sound like "shame on you" to us. This may trigger a shame-based reaction. We mutter a defensive, curt reply, "Don't eat it then", proving correctly that hurt people hurt others.

Shame is a dictator. The world we are born into is, by default, a

shame-based one. We are all too familiar with feeling the shame of being excluded from activities or company, the shame of being compared poorly with others, of being criticised and ostracised.

We grow up in environments where shame-based communication is the norm. "How many times must I tell you... (shame on you)?" "Look at what you are doing... (shame on you)." "Do you call this acceptable... (shame on you)?" What is not spoken but implied, has a greater impact on us, than the spoken message.

Slowly but surely, shame wields its power over us. It creates unhelpful beliefs such as "People will accept me only when I am good enough." "I must not let it show even if I am not up to mark." "I must guard my shame from showing at all costs." We begin to form shame-based thoughts such as "Why can't I be like other people?" "Why can't my family be like other families?" Before long, shame dictates our behaviour. We subconsciously develop shame-based coping strategies. It even becomes our motivation. We become misguided and 'motivated' by the fear of re-living shame we once experienced. We do not want to fall behind and suffer shame for it. So we drive ourselves hard and we wonder why we cannot stop. We wonder why we cannot derive fun and joy out of what we do.

Connect-Point

Shame has to do with our core-being. In the core of our being are core-needs. To be loved, accepted, to feel a sense of belonging and to feel worthy; these are our core-needs. When these needs are met, we feel whole. But in this broken and imperfect world, we are more likely to experience unmet needs, in different degrees. Our core-being gets dented repeatedly by a sense of shame each time our needs are unmet. The beliefs that 'we are not good enough, we don't belong, we are not worthy enough to be accepted for who we are' get hammered deeper and deeper into our being. At some point we accept that, erroneously, as our identity. "That's who I am", we conclude about ourselves.

Then it gets worse. When Shame works in cahoots with Fear, and it often does, we struggle to cope. We discover that people's opinions of us, their judgment of us trigger shame in us. Now, we not only need to fend off shame, we have to cope with fears of "What will people think? What if people find out about the true me?" etc. Summarily, we cringe under the fear of man.

Out of that struggle, we begin to adopt subconscious shame-based coping strategies. We block out Shame and Fear. We deny feeling them. We build walls to keep people out to protect ourselves from experiencing them. If not, we find safety in finding fault in and judging others. We disown our sense of shame and shift it to others. In extreme cases, we become controlling and abusive.

For as long as we accept our shame-based identity as truth, we will be bound by shame, fear and our unhealthy coping strategies. Getting out of this requires us to know our true identity. We need to realise that we have made the wrong conclusions about ourselves. That we have decided on our worth based on others' opinions of us when we are actually inherently worthy. We need also to accept the imperfections of the people we have depended on to meet our emotional needs as well as the frailty of our own being. Then we need to find the grace within ourselves to forgive those who have hurt us. Forgive the people who have not met our needs to be loved, accepted, to belong and to feel worthy, those who have caused us shame and fear. Forgive ourselves, and release ourselves from unrealistic expectations, from judgement of others



and self. This process demands courage and honesty.

Only then can we be ready to adopt new and helpful coping strategies. Only then can we look at Shame and the accompanying Fear in the eye boldly and undoggedly.

Shame and the accompanying fears need to be stripped of their powers through being exposed and brought into the light. Instead of denying, hiding them which we used to do, consciously interrupt the moment when we detect the emotions. Confront and acknowledge their existence. Take them on fully. Feel their full impact. Take a step back, check for unhealthy beliefs and thoughts that had triggered the emotions. Challenge possible thoughts like "I cannot even do a simple thing well." "I am worthless." Replace them with healthy and constructive ones like "I have made a mistake. That was careless of me but it is not a reflection of my self-worth." "I have no control over how others look at me but I can choose my own reaction to the situation." "I can accept the consequence of my mistake," etc.

Shame is deep-seated. For too long, we have allowed it to reign and rule over us. It cannot be easily dislodged. We will need to use the battering ram of our new found convictions, to break it down firmly and consistently whenever it surfaces. As we do so, we will establish ourselves more and more in our new identity. We will strengthen in new coping strategies and develop healthier thought patterns.

Contact Us

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