i. Connect

Bethesda Bcare Centre 溢恩社会服务

Embracing Shame by Bringing It Into the Light: (ii) Owning and Rewriting Our Story

VOL. 17 ISSUE 1 (2026)

Few emotions cut as deeply as shame. It doesn't just remind us of what we've done or failed to do. It convinces us that who we are is flawed, unworthy or unlovable. That is why wherever there is shame, guilt lurks too.

Like twins, shame and guilt always come together. Yet they are not identical: guilt points to what we did, while shame points to who we are. Guilt says, 'I made a mistake, I feel bad about it' but shame whispers, 'I am the mistake. I feel ashamed about myself.' Shame is always tied to our sense of worth — it attacks our identity rather than just our actions.

Let's look at this scenario to understand the difference.

Your children made a mess at someone's party. Your guilt makes you think, "I should have stopped them earlier. I could have been stricter with them." Your shame makes you feel, "I am a lousy parent. I can't even make my kids behave properly."

Guilt says, "I *did* something bad or I *didn't do* what I should have done." Shame makes you think, "I *am* bad." See the difference? Shame always points back to your sense of worth — how valuable or lovable you believe you are.

Shame looms large in our lives because of how we are wired. We want to belong. We want to be accepted. Shame makes us fear we're not "good enough" to be accepted or belong. It's like a voice whispering, "You don't deserve love or respect because of this."

Remember Jane* of our previous article? Her father would criticise her for being slow, stupid, or useless, often in front of customers. She would have felt both guilt and shame. She would have felt guilty for failing to be the help her father had expected of her. But it was her shame that caused her to think ' I'm not good enough', 'If people knew this about me, they'd reject me.' Her shame drove her towards trying to be perfect, flawless so as to be accepted. She strove to be wanted, to belong and ended up in codependent relationships. At some point, her coping mechanism collapsed. She suffered a mental breakdown.

Jane's story shows that shame can quietly shape a whole life. Thankfully she need not have to suffer under its control for the rest of it. If she desires a breakthrough, she does not have to let shame lead her anymore. She can begin to take charge of her life and take control of her shame. She can move on to a new path, towards healing. Healing begins with *owning* her story and *rewriting* it.

To do this, Jane must first challenge the old, unhealthy faulty beliefs she held about herself. She must dispel the lie that her worth is defined by external factors like performance or peoples' opinion of her. She must embrace the new belief, the truth, that her worth is not defined by mistakes, failures, flaws or even success. She has to begin forming a healthy sense of self-worth. She must recognise that she can fail and still be valuable. Her inherent worth is unchanging, constant and cannot be taken away from her.

*fictitious name

Connect-Point

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. - Brené Brown, author of 'The Gifts of Imperfection'

In the previous article, we discussed the importance of honouring and owning our feelings of shame. Here, we extend that to owning our story behind our shame. This means not pretending parts of your life didn't happen, even if they were messy or painful. It's saying: "Yes, this is part of me. It shaped me. *And now I get to decide what it means going forward.*"

A crucial part of owning our story is taking responsibility. This doesn't mean blaming ourselves for everything — it means recognising our part honestly. It's asking,"What part of this is mine to carry, and what part isn't?"

For Jane, that might mean admitting she wasn't always alert, efficient or thorough. She wasn't following her father's instructions carefully, for example. Instead of believing in the lie, "My dad called me useless, so I must be." She can now reframe, "My dad was stressed and struggling. His words hurt, but they don't define me. I felt shame because I believed a lie."

Repeating this new story to ourselves is powerful. Sharing it with someone else about our past and our rewritten story takes it further. However it involves risks. It comes with vulnerability, a possibility of being misunderstood and being rejected all over again.

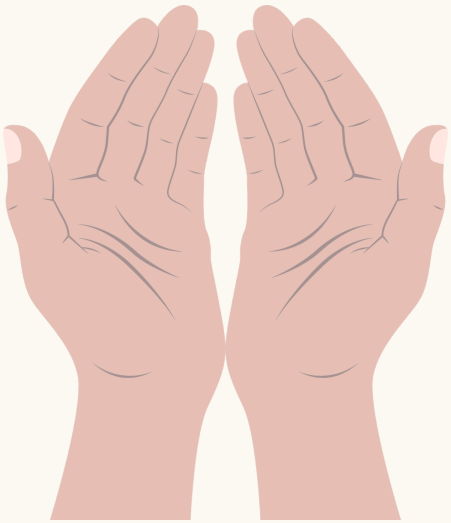
Author Brené Brown recounted the story of a recovered alcoholic. She was very popular with the children in her neighbourhood. One day she decided she would come clean about her past with one of the parents.

The parent, shocked by the disclosure blurted out that she longer felt safe about leaving her children with her. The recovered alcoholic replied," I am the same person whom you knew a few minutes ago. That was my past I told you about. I am now the new me, the same person whom you could trust your children with before you heard my story."

Owning our story and sharing the rewritten one is like turning on a light in a dark room — you see things clearly, and the shadows lose their power. It will no doubt make us vulnerable. Each time we survive vulnerability, we disarm shame's power over us. The story above illustrates that. It takes courage. It requires wisdom. It brings with it a lot of benefits.

Owning and rewriting our story is choosing growth over stagnation. When we share honestly, others often say, *"I have a story too."* That builds connection, authenticity and freedom.

Shame wants to stay hidden. It thrives in silence. It hates exposure. It cannot survive being shared. It loses its power over us when we own it and rewrite it. When the time is right, when we are ready, we must share our rewritten story. We share it with someone safe — not rushed but intentional. We do it because we choose honesty, authenticity and a life free from shame's control.



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