

Bringing Shame Into the Light: Honouring What Hurts

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It hides. It lurks in the shadows. It holds us back, silences us and leaves us frozen. It is called 'shame'; the elusive, subtle, and often insidious emotion.

Yet shame is not always destructive. In small doses, it can be a means to regulate behaviour and keep us in line, the way a teacher sternly calls out, "Peter!", with a disapproving glare. What we often experience unfortunately, is toxic shame. It is harshly inflicted on us; - the type of shame that has great power to harm us.

Jane* was 55 when she sought help for her mental breakdown. By then she was divorced, had endured several abusive relationships, and was receiving treatment for bipolar disorder. At the heart of her story lay a recurring theme: shame and rejection.

Jane's father was retrenched from his white-collar job and became a hawker when she was thirteen. After school, she often helped at his stall. She remembered being shouted at, criticised for being slow, stupid or useless, often in front of customers. The sting of those moments left her angry and bitter, but she never named the deeper emotion. Only in counselling did Jane realise that what she had felt all along was shame.

Psychologists have studied this hidden emotion deeply. Brene Brown, a leading researcher and author on 'shame' defines shame as 'the intensely painful feeling of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging'. We are not able to identify shame and call it as it is because the feeling is just too painful to go near. Acknowledging shame often compounds the sense of shame.

When we don't call shame as it is, it exerts a powerful hold over us. In Jane's case, she began to internalise the shame. The shame she carried became part of her identity. She began to believe she was fundamentally flawed, constantly thinking, "Something is wrong with me." That belief eroded her sense of self and left her vulnerable to self-blame, negative comparisons and destructive self-talk. She coped by seeking escape. Unfortunately, her escape led her into abusive relationships, repeating the cycle of shame and rejection she had known since childhood.

Jane's unrecognised shame also bred shame-anxiety in her. She would live in constant anticipation of being judged, hyper-vigilant to signs of rejection, and overly concerned with how others saw her.

Jane's early experiences of shame taught her that mistakes were dangerous: - they risked rejection and judgement. To protect herself from failure, she developed perfectionism and co-dependency. If she could perform flawlessly, she might avoid the sting of shame. Striving to be flawless became her shield against exposure, while co-dependency gave her the illusion of safety in a world where shame had once left her lonely and insecure. In this way, shame became the hidden driver of her perfectionism and co-dependency. But when she was passed over for a promotion because of weak language skills, her coping system collapsed. The perceived failure was too much to bear, and her breakdown followed. Her coping strategies had turned against her.

*fictitious name

Shame when pushed down often hides in our pain and comes out as anger, fear or bitterness. An example would be of a father berating his wife for giving in to the son's desire to be in the choir, screaming at the boy, calling him a wimp for not trying out sports at school. Instead of recognising the shame evoked in him when he (the father) was once severely bullied by other kids for not being athletic, the pain is released as anger. Like all good fathers, this father is subconsciously protecting his son from suffering the shame that he himself experienced and so when resisted, his disappointment turned into rage, not knowing that he is actually perpetuating the shame in him to his next generation.

Perhaps Jane's father, like this father, had also subconsciously wanted to protect his daughter from the perceived failure he had experienced in the harsh world where he was judged to be not good enough. That shame if acknowledged and processed would have produced very different outcome for him and his daughter.

Shame is also often fused with fear. Our fears are often rooted in shame, be it fear of meeting people, speaking in public etc. Behind it may be a shame over how we look, over how we are being perceived negatively etc. When this shame is acknowledged and confronted, fear loses its grip over us.

Shame which is explored, identified, acknowledged and embraced loses its power over us. The first step towards doing so is to honour the emotion. All our emotions deserve to be honoured. This includes shame.



Connect-Point



Shame thrives in silence; healing begins in light (unknown)

Shame is universal. It pops up easily in any situation or interaction. We are made for relationships and created to live in communities. So, shame is not something we can avoid nor get rid of. Yet that feeling that makes us think, "I'm not good enough" or "Something is wrong with me," is so hard to cope with. We naturally want to avoid revisiting it lest we reopen the wound shame inflicts. It makes us want to hide, stay quiet, or pretend nothing's wrong.

When we ignore our emotions, they don't disappear. They just get bottled up. Emotions like shame are signals to us to attend to them. Ignoring them is doing so at our own detriment.

So, face it we must. We need to learn to navigate shame in a way that makes us look right at it, deal with it and be okay with it so that it does not become something that cripples or destroys us, not something we feel compelled to avoid and deny. Honouring it is the way to go.

Honouring our emotions is respecting ourselves. It is sending the message to ourselves; - 'How I feel matters. What I do with it strengthens me.'

Honouring our shame is about being authentic. We want to be real. We do not want to pretend that all is fine when we hurt inside. Honouring our emotions is calling the emotion as it is. "I feel shame. I am shamed. It hurts deeply."

What do we do after we have decided that we want to honour our emotions? We embark on the practice of recognising and becoming aware of the physiological sensations that come with the emotion. Many of the sensations that come with shame are common to every one; - our body starts to contract, our heart rate increases, our chest constricts and our head lowers. There are those that are unique to the individual. Some will blush, have wet palms or fidget. These reactions are our body's way of saying: "I feel exposed or judged." Awareness of these signals will help us catch shame before it controls us.

Shame is like a bully in our mind. If we stay silent, it grows stronger. But the moment we call it out — "This is shame, and I see it" — the bully shrinks. Naming and acknowledging shame doesn't erase mistakes, whether ours or others'. It frees us to learn, grow, and move forward without being trapped by that heavy feeling. Bringing shame into the light is the first step towards developing shame resilience — a healthy way of managing and transforming it into strength. That resilience, explored in future articles, is what allows us to reclaim our worth and live with courage.



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