



# The Power of Shame

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- *Do you often leave a conversation criticizing yourself for sounding stupid?*
- *Do you ever feel guilty for things that are not your fault?*
- *Do you sometimes feel too embarrassed to go to meetings or parties?*
- *Do you secretly believe that you have a fatal flaw that will prevent you from having the life you want?*

If you answer yes to these questions you may be experiencing shame.

## What Is Shame?

Shame is a mighty force. It is that feeling of being inherently flawed, damaged and defective; it keeps us prisoners of self-doubt, dampens our spontaneity and drains our life energy. It has many faces with different voices, but they all say that what we present to the world is a lie, that we are a fraud, that we won't amount to much, and that we should keep ourselves hidden. Shame can be like a virus that we carry under our skin, dormant some times and activated when our stress levels are high.

## Where Does Shame Come From?

Shame comes from several sources. In the normal course of development children experience shame. Learning to walk, read, write and reach other developmental milestones requires trials and errors. How parents respond to these challenges can minimize shame or increase its power. Any form of difference that sets us apart from the mainstream (physical disability, sexual orientation, learning differences, to name a few) may also cause feelings of shame. In addition, our culture induces shame by selling us images of how we should be richer, thinner, younger, and, in general, different from how we are naturally.

## How Does Shame Appear?

Shame has a physical form. It manifests in blushing, sweating, dry mouth, a lowered gaze, sweating palms, collapsing shoulders, nausea and a racing heart. Shame appears in the voice of an internal judge criticizing everything we do. It causes us to feel like an imposter that, no matter how accomplished we may be, we are just fooling others. Shame is also woven into self-destructive actions like drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, cutting, hurtful relationships or in self-sabotage in the workplace. While shame is a powerful force, it can be managed and its impact diminished.

### **Tips For Reducing Shame:**

- 1) Know that you are not the only one: Many people struggle to be free of shame. It's a hard process, but with patience you can diminish shame's force and be free of its oppression.
- 2) Awareness is the first step in any change process. Practice identifying when you are feeling shame
- 3) Compassion is the antidote to shame. Work on developing and practicing a compassionate voice that is non-judgmental, understands you and your experiences, and is kind and encouraging. This voice allows you to be human with all the quirks and wounds and imperfections that make us human.
- 4) Explore the origins of your shame. Was it from a critical family? Something that had you feel different than others such as a learning disability or an incident of abuse? Understand how messages from your younger years got internalized. These are the messages that your compassionate new voice needs to counteract.
- 5) Notice how current behaviors may reinforce your sense of shame. Do you do self-destructive things that reinforce shame? Do you then say, "see... that shows I'm worthless." Plan how you can begin to give up these behaviors and replace them with more self-supportive ones.
- 6) Become skilled at inner coaching™. Learn to focus on your attributes. You can learn to identify with your strengths, gifts and talents. You are larger than the wounds you carry.
- 7) Surround yourself with people who treat you well and stay away from people who cause you to feel bad about yourself.
- 8) Share this handout with someone you trust. When we talk to people we trust, rather than isolate, we widen our perspective and promote healing.
- 9) Seek professional help with qualified providers who can help you move through these steps and guide you through the difficult process of letting go of shame.
- 10) Educate yourself about shame. Here are some books we recommend:
  - Healing the Shame that Binds You - John Bradshaw
  - Letting Go of Shame - Ronald and Patricia Potter-Efron
  - Facing Shame: Families in Recovery - Merle Fossom and Marilyn Mason
  - I Thought it Was Just Me (But it isn't) - Brene Brown
  - The Gift of Imperfection - Brene Brown
  - There's Nothing Wrong With You: Going Beyond Self - Hate-Cheri Huber