

Shame, Compassion, and the Journey Toward Health

Jane Shure and Beth Weinstock

Introduction

Shame is a mighty force. It can make one feel inherently flawed or defective, invalid as a human, and essentially unlovable. In its extreme form, it is experienced as an internal and ultimate truth about one's core being. Shame takes one prisoner, inhibiting spontaneity, draining life's energy, creating emotional paralysis, and triggering an impulse to disappear. Women with eating disorders are often consumed by their shame, living under its spell and tormented by its power.

Shame affects mind, body, and behavior. Physically, shame draws the body inward and manifests in symptoms like blushing, sweating, nausea, and a racing heart. Cognitively, shame appears as severe and constant self-criticism, causing the belief that one is never good enough, smart enough, nice enough, or thin enough. Behaviorally, shame is reflected in patterns of withdrawal, secrecy, avoidance, deception, and self-destruction. Shame acts like a thief, robbing one's spirit and injuring one's soul.

Despite its powerful and potentially crippling impact, shame was not a focal point in psychological literature until recent decades (Karen, 1992). Freud, for example, focused on guilt rather than shame. He saw shame as a cover for deeper emotions (Lewis, 1992), acknowledged it as self-evident, but did not attempt to explore its vicissitudes and dynamics (Karen, 1992).

Contemporary theorists, however, have begun to name shame as an important element in modern psychology. One author described shame as "fluid, diffuse, indeterminate, complex and evasive" (Edelson, 1988, p. 33), while another said that shame is like "a wound made from the inside out dividing us both from ourselves and from one another" (Kaufman, 1992, p. xx). Karen (1992) believed that shame is a major cause of emotional distress in our time, while Nathanson (1987) saw attention to shame as the missing factor for success in psychotherapy. The addictions recovery movement has educated people about the relationship between dysfunctional