

THE RULES OF SHAME-BASED SYSTEMS AND PEOPLE

The following rules are common to all shame-based systems, both families and other types of organizations. All families and organizations have rules; having rules helps things run more smoothly. Unfortunately, the rules of shame-based systems and people are rigid, unrealistic, and destructive and become the credo by which members of the system strive to function in their daily lives. They become the “stage directions” for their own self-destructive “life script.” It is also through these rules that their partners, children, and others who come in contact with the shame-based person begin to take on and live with the shame themselves. These rules are communicated both through what is said and how people act.

The rules in a shame-based system arise from an intense feeling of fear. People who are shame-based fear that, without these rigid and unrealistic rules, their entire world will “fall apart.” They also fear that they will be rejected and abandoned by others if they don’t play the roles that these rules specify that they are supposed to play. People use these rules to try to experience some sense of power, safety, and predictability in an otherwise chaotic and frightening world. But in the process of providing some temporary relief and stability, these rules only solidify the shameful feelings within you and make the fear that you feel even worse. Finally, since the rules are ultimately impossible to follow, the system always breaks down and, in fact, generates more feelings of shame, insecurity, and defectiveness for you and everyone around you because of that “breakdown.”

Think about the shame rules listed below and see which ones fit for you in the way that you were raised and in the way that you currently view and treat yourself and others and live your life.

BE TOTALLY IN CONTROL OF YOURSELF AND EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING AROUND YOU

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that it is absolutely necessary to be completely “in charge” of all your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This also means that you need to be in control of the people around you and the situations in which you find yourself. This intense need to be in control is the cornerstone of a shame-based person or system. This attempt to control may be motivated by a primitive drive for power and domination, but it may also be simply motivated by a desire to achieve some sense of safety and predictability in a frightening, chaotic, and unpredictable world. An example of control would be expecting others to do what you want them to do and expecting that they will see the world in exactly the same way that you do. Two types of controlling behavior are listed below (you can also see other information about control and being a controlling person in other articles on this website):

OVERT CONTROL, a **DIRECT** way to try to get what you want, manifests itself in behaviors like being demanding, yelling to force others to do what you want, and using emotional, verbal, and physical intimidation and sometimes even violence to “make your point” and get your way.

COVERT CONTROL, a more **INDIRECT** way to try to get what you want, involves behaviors like manipulating, being sarcastic, “playing the martyr,” becoming “ill,” acting “fragile,” and trying to “guilt” others into being who you want them to be and doing what you want them to do.

BE PERFECT AND EXPECT (AND SOMETIMES, WHEN NECESSARY, EVEN DEMAND) PERFECTION FROM OTHER PEOPLE

If you are a shame-based person, you have been taught that you and others must always be “correct,” “do what’s right,” “never make mistakes,” and “be on top of everything” going on in your lives. This rule imposes a strict requirement that you have to rigidly comply with and live up to some sort of perfectionistic image of the way people and the world around you are supposed to be (as you define this in your own mind). It is then expected that this facade will be presented to the outside world as a valid representation of the way things really are (e.g. with you and with your family, friends, and others). This image includes an intense fear about acknowledging any problems or difficulties because doing so would communicate to others that you are, in fact, “flawed,” “defective,” and “deficient” as a human being and would simply invite more shame from the outside (or from your own thought process). This need to live behind a flawless and perfectionistic facade significantly decreases your ability to be fully human, with all your faults, frailties, and shortcomings. A strong organizing principle of this rule is to live up to certain stereotyped notions, values, and expectations of the dominant, popular, and mainstream culture. Trying to be perfect creates enormous stress and tension in your life and, in the end, you (and others) are never able to actually be that “perfect person” that you think everyone is supposed to be.

- An example of this would be not taking the risk to ask questions in a class you were taking because you do not want to look “stupid” or “silly” to the other students and the teacher and thereby not opening yourself up to learn as much as you possibly could if you were more interactive, took those risks, and participated more actively in the educational process.

BLAME SOMEONE (EITHER YOURSELF OR OTHERS) WHENEVER ANYTHING “GOES WRONG” IN YOUR LIFE

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that, if something doesn’t happen as you think it should, you need to assess blame, either toward yourself or someone else, and then punish the “offender,” whoever that happens to be. Blame tends to get activated in the system when the control and perfection rules break down, as they always do. The shame-based system focuses on **WHO** did the “misdeed” rather than on **HOW** the situation or issue can be effectively addressed and remedied. This intense need to find fault means that you are continually split into two parts: the **JUDGE** and the **OFFENDER**. Every problem situation is viewed as an opportunity to reject and condemn yourself or others for anything that occurs. This way of looking at life leads to viewing yourself and others with a mindset of constant negativity, cynicism, judgment, and contempt.

- An example of this would be yelling and screaming at a young child for spilling her milk at the dinner table and berating and demeaning her for what she has done rather than getting down on the floor with her and showing her how to clean it up. Another example was a client of mine whose grandmother used to say, whenever he or any of his siblings became ill, “*Who gave it to him/her?*”

COMPARE YOURSELF CONTINUALLY TO OTHER PEOPLE

If you are a shame-based person, part of the legacy of blame and fault-finding is a tendency to continually compare yourself to those around you. Everyone else becomes your competition and you end up translating your own and others’ normal and natural “differentness” into “deficiency.” In a shame-based system, it is not okay to be different from whatever the shame-based system says is the “correct” way to

be and to live. As a result, you either feel inferior, insecure, and shameful if you are not living up to these expectations. Or you feel superior, condescending, arrogant, and grandiose if you believe that others are not living up to these expectations (and that you are). This continual comparing process can be taught by both your family and the larger culture. This rule is designed to demean you and anyone else who is not able to live up to the shame-based system's rigid ideal of what you and others are "supposed to be."

- An example of this might going to a dinner party and feeling insecure, inadequate, uninformed, and stupid when others know more about a particular current events topic than you do.

THINK ONLY IN EXTREMES

If you are a shame-based person, part of the legacy of comparing is viewing life and the world around you exclusively in extremes. Because things have to be a certain way in order for the world to be "okay," there is only one "right" way to think, to feel, and to be. Or there is the other way, but that is the "wrong" way. You and others are either "good" or "bad." There is no "middle ground" that allows for the many variations that, in fact, exist in humankind and make us unique and different from one another. Situations, decisions, issues, values, and, even other people, are all "black and white." There are no "shades of gray" that even allow for the idea that there are different perspectives and different conclusions about a particular issue or for the infinite complexity of the human race.

- An example would be writing someone off as a "bad person" and a "loser" because they support an issue you disagree with rather than allowing them to have their own way of thinking about the world.

DENY THE REALITY THAT EXISTS AROUND YOU

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught early on to deny the existence and validity of emotions, especially the "negative," uncomfortable, and vulnerable ones in yourself and others. Feelings like fear, disappointment, hurt, anxiety, and even sadness pose a significant threat to the image you are supposed to project of "having it all together" and being totally "self-sufficient" and "in charge" of your life. You are also taught to deny your wants and needs so you don't dare ask directly for help, emotional support, and love. In a shame-based system, asking directly for anything is just another sign of your own weakness, imperfection, and inability to take care of yourself. Finally, you are taught to deny responsibility for yourself and what you say and do because, in a shame-based system, acknowledging mistakes and being accountable only leads to punishment, humiliation, and more shame. As a result, rigid roles consume your humanness and your identity and your interactions with others become empty, hollow, and distant with little room for uniqueness, spontaneity, and genuine intimacy.

- An example of this would be pretending that you're not hurt by something a friend has said to you because you're afraid that acknowledging and talking about your real feelings would make him (and others) think you were "not a real man" or a "wimp."

DISTORT THE REALITY THAT EXISTS AROUND YOU

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that, when compulsive, irresponsible, or abusive behavior does occur, you should immediately use distortion to make the behavior into something more "acceptable." Thus, the reality of the shaming event is minimized, justified, or "normalized" to excuse the hurtful or destructive actions. The goal in doing this is to assist the shaming person to avoid taking any clear responsibility for what has really occurred. This distortion process is also used to maintain the

“status quo” in the shame-based system and to avoid positive change that might be triggered by openly discussing and understanding the real meaning of the shaming, abusive, or addictive and compulsive behaviors. These confusing messages contribute to a “crazy-making” atmosphere where it becomes extremely difficult to identify what is actually happening in any given situation which then profoundly interferes with gaining a real understanding of what healthy and nurturing human relationships really are.

- For example, abuse and violence in a home might be excused and distorted by saying, “*Your father only hits you because he loves you and wants you to be the best,*” “*Your mother really ‘meant well;’ she only yells at you to help you learn right from wrong,*” “*Every family gets into ‘arguments’ now and then,*” and “*Your parents are just treating you that way ‘for your own good.’*” Alcoholism might be minimized and distorted by saying, “*Oh well, all families have someone who drinks a little too much from time to time.*” Significant depression and suicidal thoughts might be distorted by saying, “*I think that everyone ‘gets a little down’ at times in their lives.*”

DON’T SPEAK HONESTLY AND OPENLY ABOUT YOURSELF, OTHER PEOPLE, AND WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR OWN LIFE AND AROUND YOU

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that you should never identify and talk openly about shaming, irresponsible, compulsive, controlling, or abusive behavior. It also means that you should not talk honestly about what you think, feel, want, or need in the present. Speaking honestly about what is actually going on or how you actually feel is equated with “disloyalty” to the family system and its other members. This idea of “maintaining the silence” or “keeping the secret” is not simply based on choosing the option of privacy. Rather, it is based on the belief that it is not really safe to talk openly about what you see happening around you because it will lead to “punishment” of some sort and more shame for you or others. It is also based on the notion that it is, in fact, hopeless to self-disclose in an honest and open fashion since “*it won’t do any good anyway*” (i.e. nothing will really ever change). This “don’t talk” rule, and the misplaced loyalty it generates, is probably the single most hindering factor in overcoming the harmful effects of shame. Secrets and dishonesty are always a hallmark of a shame-based person and system. Shame-based people also learn quickly that it is not at all safe to share their vulnerability and who they really are because this will only lead to criticism, judgment, condemnation, and more toxic shame. This fear about being truly vulnerable with others can follow us throughout the entire course of our lives, making it very difficult to truly connect with partners, friends, and even our own children. Without honest and open sharing about who we really are, true intimacy, healing, and recovery can never occur.

- An example of this is alcoholism or abuse in the family, where there is the “white elephant in the living room” (i.e. the alcoholic’s drinking and irresponsible behavior; the abusive person’s hurtful and disrespectful attitudes and actions) that everyone knows about but that no one is willing to talk about in an open and direct fashion so that the issue could begin to be addressed effectively.

BE UNPREDICTABLE AND UNRELIABLE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught not to expect or to provide consistency and ongoing connection in relationships with partners, friends, family members, and other people. Love and emotional connection with others are always tentative and very conditional. With this rule, you learn quickly that you can’t count on others to be there for you unless you are the way they want you to be. They also learn that they can’t count on you unless they live up to the unrealistic and perfectionistic expectations that you

have for them. The implied threat here is that relationships are always in jeopardy and “up for grabs” and can be lost in an instant. This can lead to a confusing and frightening roller coaster of mood swings; irresponsible, compulsive, and disrespectful behavior that seems “to come out of nowhere;” and emotional over-reactions where you and others repeatedly disappear from your emotional connections with absolutely no discussion or explanation. These interactions breed an intense and justifiable anxiety that there is always the possibility of being rejected and abandoned by those who are closest to you, a powerful fear for shame-based people (and for some of us as well). These beliefs and actions also sometimes trigger frantic attempts to find ways to re-connect so you can experience some sense of attachment and belonging in your life. This can lead to co-dependency and “people-pleasing” behaviors where you and others become consumed by how other people are feeling and literally end up living your lives through someone else (e.g. feeling happy when they feel good; feeling miserable when they feel bad).

- An example of this might mean sulking and withdrawing attention and affection from your partner for several days whenever she or he says or does something that you don’t like. Other examples are “cutting people off” whenever they “cross” you in some way or having a history of “feuds” or “grudges” with family and friends to punish the other person or sometimes, in your own mind, to “protect” yourself and keep yourself “safe” from disappointment and emotional pain.

DON’T EFFECTIVELY RESOLVE CONFLICTS AND ISSUES THAT ARISE BETWEEN YOU AND THE OTHER PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught to avoid completing interpersonal transactions with others and to avoid any meaningful sense of resolution whenever disagreements, conflicts, or issues do arise. The powerful message is either to completely avoid disagreement or to endlessly engage in arguments that go absolutely nowhere. Thus, issues that were seen as a “crisis” the day before may not even be felt to be a “problem” in the present because they have been dropped or forgotten by one or most of those involved. Unfortunately, however, these situations are usually not really forgotten but are merely “shoved under the rug” and live on, especially in those who are being victimized by the more powerful shamers in the system. This process builds a “reservoir” of confusion, fear, anxiety, resentment, and mistrust that only creates more emotional distance and a profound lack of safety, trust, and genuine intimacy in the relationship and the family.

- An example of this might mean becoming verbally abusive with your partner about an issue between the two of you and then not getting back to talk about the issue or the interaction because you are telling yourself that it has been “taken care of” since you now feel less tense about it as a result of “dumping” your stress, anger, and disrespect on that other person. Essentially, they have become your “scapegoat.” It is “completely over” for you, in your mind, so it should be “over” for them as well and they should just “move on” and “get over it” (which, generally, they don’t). This could also mean having a significant disagreement with a partner or someone else and never returning to discuss it again but still feeling anxious or resentful about whatever the issue happens to be and this then creating a “wall” and emotional distance between the two of you.

DON’T TRUST YOURSELF (OR ANYONE ELSE) IN YOUR LIFE

If you have grown up in a shame-based family, your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs are constantly discounted, minimized, rejected, and disqualified. You don’t really ever have the opportunity to develop an internal sense of what actually feels “okay” and “not okay” to you. In short, you don’t develop the

ability to truly trust yourself. If you have grown up in a shame-based family, the very people who are supposed to be there to validate, nurture, and love you (and teach you how to effectively exist in the world and learn to trust yourself and others) have betrayed you and lied to you about who you are as a person and about the world around you. Other people become your adversaries and enemies rather than becoming your friends and supporters. This all too often gets transformed into the belief as an adult that no one, not even a life partner, can really be trusted because they will undoubtedly eventually hurt and betray you and lie to you in the same way that your parents or others did to you in your childhood when your shame first developed. Thus you can't really trust them either. Other people and the world around you become dangerous, threatening, and very scary.

- An example of this might be feeling sad, hurt, or discouraged and then doubting and questioning whether you "should" feel the way you are feeling because you don't know if it's actually okay to feel that way. This would also include not being willing to share these feelings with anyone else because you believe that they would probably ridicule or demean you for feeling the way that you do.

MAINTAIN A RIGID (AND, IN THE END, FALSE) FACADE THAT YOU PRESENT TO THE WORLD AROUND YOU TO AVOID BEING VULNERABLE AND TO BE "SAFE" (AS YOU DEFINE THIS) AND TO TRY TO "FIT IN" AND "FIND A PLACE" FOR YOURSELF RATHER THAN TRULY TAKING THE RISK TO GENUINELY FIND AND LIVE YOUR "TRUE SELF" AND CONNECT EMOTIONALLY WITH OTHERS IN YOUR LIFE

If you are a shame-based person, the culmination of all the above rules results in this final rule. It says that you and everyone else need to hide your true selves---thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs---and present an "acceptable" (i.e. "false") image about who you are to the rest of the world. This rule means that you don't even get to know who you actually are as you live out the unhealthy and destructive "life script" that someone else wrote and produced for you. You believe that you need to act and be the way that others (whoever this happens to be) think you are supposed to act and be. And others need to be and act the way that you think that they are supposed to be and act. You need to pretend and "live a lie" rather than getting to know your real self and being genuine, authentic, and true to who you actually are as a human being. This facade is a mask that you present to the world to try to "survive" and to get the approval and "respect" of those around you. Sadly, it never works effectively to help you lead a happy, satisfying, fulfilling, and healthy life but, for many shame-based people, this "facade" is the person they end up living and dying with.

- An example of this might be learning when you were young that you are expected to be quiet, polite, and passive and to seek to please and placate others at all times. This becomes your "facade" and you strive hard to maintain it in your adult life even if you start to feel anxious, depressed, or angry about never speaking up for yourself or getting what you really want out of your life.