

## TOXIC SHAME IS...

An intensely painful way of looking at yourself, other people, and the world around you and a destructive and unhealthy way of living your life that involves control, perfectionism, blame, reactivity, negativity, cynicism, despair, fear, emotional disconnection and, ultimately, paralysis and stagnation in your ongoing life.

Created in you as a child when you were hurt, wounded, and devalued by important people in your early life (or you saw this being done to others) and added to by your own or others' shaming and unhealthy attitudes and behaviors during your adult life.

A painful and destructive **"life script"** written, directed, and produced for you by other people who did not have your best interests at heart. This life script communicates to you that you (and others) are somehow defective, "bad," flawed, unworthy, and "never good quite enough."

Based on a set of unrealistic, distorted, and rigid core beliefs about you and the world that came from your interactions with and the messages you received from the people who hurt and demeaned you and others. **These messages communicate to you:**

...That you, as a human being, are incompetent, inadequate, powerless, unloveable, and, ultimately, completely alone

...That the world is a frightening, threatening, and dangerous place, where you cannot really trust anyone else and where you need to be constantly "on guard" to protect yourself from being hurt, humiliated, demeaned, and shamed in the present

Triggered and maintained in your ongoing life by your own negative, judgmental, and punishing self-talk that says things like:

*...There is something really "wrong" with me*

*...I don't quite measure up to other people*

*...I'll never amount to much*

*...I'm not very important/I don't really "count"*

*...I can't do much of anything "right"/I'm "no good"*

*...I'm bad/I'm a mistake*

*...I'm ugly/I'm fat*

*...I'm a dummy/I'm stupid*

*...I'm a loser/I'm a failure/I'm worthless*

*...I'm a "klutz"*

*...I'm crazy/I'm "nuts"*

*...No one really cares about me, no one really loves me, and other people are "just out to get me"*

*...Nothing in my life will ever get any better*

*...I don't even deserve to be here/There's really no point in living for me*

## HOW SHAME BECOMES A PART OF WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE FUNCTION IN OUR LIVES

Shame develops through an interpersonal and interactional process with people who are important to us in our childhood and in our adult lives. If you think about it, your family or origin and childhood experiences teach you what it is to be a human being in this life; we learn how to think about ourselves, other people, and the world around us. As a child, we all tend to identify with significant others in our lives (e.g. parents, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches) in order to survive; to belong and “fit in;” to be emotionally connected, approved of, and loved; and to gain and feel a sense of power, security, and safety.

Even if the role models in our early lives are not positive and realistic, we tend to internalize and “take in” the “voices” we have heard and the models and the situations we have observed and experienced. We end up taking on strong (and often very rigid and unrealistic) feelings and beliefs about ourselves and the words that were said to us (e.g. “*stupid, loser, failure, jerk*”) and the actions we saw which become ongoing indictments of ourselves and others even into adulthood. It is literally like a taped message is created in our heads which was recorded long ago and is now “turned on” in the present in situations wherever there is an opportunity to shame ourselves or others. These become our own patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving in the present. In addition, these messages from childhood, especially if they are negative, can be reinforced throughout our adult lives by the people around us (e.g. partners, extended family, friends, employers, co-workers, acquaintances, and even complete strangers) and by our day-to-day experiences.

The thoughts we experienced as children become our own negative self-talk in the present. We often think and say the very same negative words and labels that were said to us or around us. As a result, we can actually end up “visualizing” past images of shaming interactions (e.g. a parent or peer shaming or blaming us as a child) and apply those to what is happening with us today (e.g. a partner or a boss being critical with us in the present). These can become linked with the original shaming and traumatic scenes (author Gershen Kaufman refers to these old traumatic and shaming experiences as “**governing scenes**”). This creates the potential for us to react to present situations with all the intensity of that original governing scene and thus to increase the legacy and burden of shame that we carry within us in our adult lives (i.e. these governing scenes can often shape our emotional and behavioral reactions in the present).

## THE DESTRUCTIVE AND PAINFUL OUTCOMES OF THE INTERNALIZATION OF SHAME

- We can reproduce shame “at will” within ourselves with little or no outside experience to actually trigger our shameful feelings through our own negative, cynical, judgmental, and shaming self-talk
- We start to view even harmless or neutral events as clear indications of our own or others’ unworthiness and others’ disrespect directed at us (e.g. when someone doesn’t respond to our greeting them in the hallway at work)

- We can think ourselves into feeling shame constantly (no matter what is happening around us) and we experience an ongoing sense of anxiety and defectiveness
- We learn to blame and punish ourselves and others for mistakes, problems, and “shortcomings”
- We actively work to disown important parts of what we truly are inside (e.g. the aspects of ourselves that were not “acceptable to,” valued, or tolerated by our parents or others when we were young (e.g. our assertiveness and the ability to speak up for ourselves, set personal limits, and maintain healthy boundaries; our willingness to allow ourselves to feel sad and cry; our spontaneity and “fun-loving” part; our normal, natural, and healthy need for approval, support, and assistance).
- We end up becoming our own critical and shaming parent (or those other people who were hurtful with us) and the original shaming person is no longer even needed to create that shame within us.

## **HOW SHAME CAN ARISE OVER THE COURSE OF A LIFETIME**

### **SOME EXAMPLES IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

- The mere process of being a child (e.g. being smaller, not knowing how to do things, not being as competent and capable as parents, older siblings, and other children in school or in the neighborhood)
- Not having your emotional expressions validated by your parents and others (e.g. “*You shouldn’t feel that way,*” “*Don’t be such a sissy,*” “*Only babies cry,*” “*Why don’t you just grow up?*”)
- Being blamed and punished for making mistakes or having difficulties rather than others helping you find a solution or remedy for the problem you are confronting
- Direct shaming strategies aimed at you by others (e.g. “*Shame on you,*” “*You should be ashamed of yourself,*” “*How could you think/feel/do something like that?,*” “*What is the matter with you?*”)
- Indirect shaming strategies directed at you by others (e.g. transferring or foisting parental shame on a child, e.g. a parent telling a child in a store, “*Stop that, you’re embarrassing me*”)
- Unrealistic performance expectations for children (e.g. having to get all A’s in school, having to be the team captain or student council president, having to go to an prestigious college, having to get a certain type of job) and children’s inability to achieve these parental expectations
- Doing poorly in the different areas of their lives (e.g. emotional problems or difficulties, not doing well in school, or having few or no friends) and/or “acting out” in a variety of ways (e.g. using alcohol and drugs, skipping school, spending time with the “wrong crowd,” becoming involved with school or legal authorities due to their misbehavior)
- Emotional abuse and indirect expressions of disgust and contempt toward a child (e.g. withdrawing affection and attention to punish a child, standing over a child to try to intimidate him/her)
- Verbal abuse and direct expressions of disgust and contempt toward a child (e.g. disparagement and belittling comments like “*You are such an idiot,*” “*You’re an ungrateful little brat,*” “*How can you be so stupid?*”)

- Physical abuse (e.g. tickling a child after they have asked you to stop, grabbing with the intent to inflict physical pain or intimidate the child and “get your point across” to him/her, ritualistic and abusive spanking a child using belts, switches, rulers, hairbrushes, sticks)
- Sexualized comments, sexual abuse, or incest (e.g. talking about a girl developing breasts or a boy growing pubic hair, hugs or physical affection that last too long or are uncomfortable for the child, adults or older children having sexual contact with a child)
- Witnessing emotional, verbal, or physical abuse of others (which is shaming and traumatic in and of itself for those who observe these behaviors)
- The whole period of adolescence (i.e. rapid hormonal and physical changes; being ridiculed, bullied, or excluded by peers; being rejected by the opposite sex; not having the “right” jeans, shoes, jackets, cell phones, tablets, computers, or video game systems)
- Parental anger directed at a child (this is almost always interpreted by children as an indication that the parent no longer likes/loves them and parents need to work hard to “rebuild and maintain the bridge” back to the child by being clear that that child’s behavior may not be okay at times but that the child is always lovable and worthwhile to them)

**SOME EXAMPLES IN ADULTHOOD** (shame here is often associated with cultural expectations and relates to “failure” and losses, e.g. an inability to attain your goals, dreams, or aspirations and the loss of an identity or the loss of an important part of who you wanted to be or have been)

- Handling your emotional life in an ineffective, dysfunctional, and unhealthy way (e.g. being negative, cynical, and hostile in the way that you think about yourself, other people, and the world around you; expressing your anger in an explosive and disrespectful way; being controlling with others in your life; “acting out” in an irresponsible, compulsive, or addictive manner [e.g. alcohol and drug abuse; compulsive eating, gambling, and sexual behavior] and experiencing significant consequences [i.e. loss of relationships with partners and friends, losing jobs, being involved with the legal system] as a result of doing this)
- Job and career (i.e. not making enough money or having the lifestyle you had hoped for or expected; not having as much responsibility, success, or recognition as you had expected or wanted; being “stuck” at a particular stage in your career; being demoted or actually being fired or laid off)
- Relationship, marriage, and family (e.g. not having relationships work out including separation and divorce and less time with your children; feeling “stuck,” “trapped,” or miserable in an unhappy, unfulfilling, or unhealthy relationship; your children “acting out” and getting into trouble; being estranged and emotionally distant from your children; your children “moving out” and beginning to live their own lives as adults with little time for you)
- The aging process for you and others around you or seeing this in yourself or others (e.g. becoming less “attractive” by gaining weight, losing your hair or your hair graying, and getting wrinkles; your mind and body no longer functioning as they once did including becoming “forgetful” and not as “sharp” as you once were; experiencing more “aches, pains, and stiffness;” not being able to work as hard, stay up as late, or play sports or do physical activities as well as you once did and feeling fatigued with less energy for daily activities; experiencing illness [physical or

emotional], injury [or seeing those close to us experiencing illness, injury, or dying], or surgeries which can lead to thinking about our own vulnerability, fragility, and eventual mortality)

- Retirement (i.e. no longer working, making money, and “being a successful, useful, and productive person” [by your own or society’s standards]; having no or few hobbies, interests, or activities that you enjoy at this point in your life; having friends become ill or die or having few friends with whom you feel an emotional connection)