

MOVING YOURSELF TOWARD PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT: Taking Some Steps To Overcome The Pain And Dysfunction From Your Past And Grow Into The Person You Truly Wish To Become In The Present

The path to overcoming your toxic shame involves a lifelong commitment to regularly work at and practice a variety of strategies that can lead you to healing, growth, and fulfillment in your life. The following suggestions form a blueprint that you can use to look at and actually change your shame-based attitudes, thoughts, and actions. Remember, however, that the change process is a slow one and don't expect too much of yourself all at once. The "bottom line" in overcoming shame is conscious awareness and sustained effort on a daily basis to move your life forward in a more positive and healthy way.

STEP 1) Face your shame directly, acknowledge that it is there within you, and learn to accept it as an important part of who you have been in the past and who you are as you function in the present at times. In other words, **stop the denial about the existence of shame in your life**. Then, begin to search for the thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs underneath the shame that you have had to deny as part of the process of experiencing a shame-based childhood and having to live as a shame-based person. Shame is always a "cover-up" that serves to hide our genuine humanness in all its glory and imperfection.

Watch out for feeling shameful about still experiencing your shame at times. Avoid thinking you should be "perfect" and "just get over it," which can be just another manifestation that shame is occurring within you. Instead, use your shame as a "warning signal" or a cue that something important is happening within or around you at a particular time. Then look at how this relates to your past, what you need to learn about the circumstances that are triggering your shameful feelings in the present, and, finally, what you can do differently in the current situation to handle it more effectively than what you did in the past.

STEP 2) Begin to work to understand what toxic shame is and how it differs from personal empowerment and a lifestyle based on accepting your humanness and taking clear responsibility for yourself in everything that you do. Identify the destructive and unhealthy "life script" (e.g. the good little girl or boy, the hard-working super-achiever, the self-sacrificing and long-suffering martyr, the arrogant rebel, the perpetual victim, the underachieving loser) that someone else produced, directed, and wrote for you when you were young. Then start to believe that there truly is an alternative way to live your life and make the clear and conscious decision that you do not wish to continue to live out this unhealthy script in your life as you move forward. See more about "life scripts" in shame articles on this website.

STEP 3) Recognize and stop the denial about your current acting-out behaviors and begin to intervene in the ongoing activities and thought patterns that you do which perpetuate and add to the burden of shame that you carry in the present (your "**sustained shame**"). Shame-based actions involve anything that you do that undermines your own self-respect and the respect and dignity of others around you. These can include behaviors like:

- emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse of others;
- workaholism and compulsively trying to be "productive" and "useful" at all times;
- sexual acting-out (e.g. having affairs, using prostitutes, compulsive use of pornography or masturbation);
- compulsive use of TV, online or video games, the internet, your computer, tablet, and cell phone;
- compulsive over-eating, gambling, and shopping and spending; and

- alcohol and drug abuse.

This can also include those negative and destructive attitudes and thought patterns, e.g.

- a cynical, hostile, and vengeful mindset
- a victimized, self-pitying, and “martyr” mindset
- a hopeless, despairing, and depressed mindset
- a fearful, panicky, and anxious mindset

The only way to accomplish this is by beginning to recognize and make conscious choices that allow you to interrupt these self-destructive and self-defeating behavior and thought patterns. There is no “magic” to making this happen. But if these patterns continue to be an ongoing part of your daily life, you can make little or no real progress at addressing the places where your shame originated nor in learning to focus on yourself rather than continually blaming outside people and circumstances for what happens in your life. These patterns also need to be interrupted in order to allow you to get in touch with the real feelings underlying your shame (e.g. confusion, fear, sadness, hurt, disappointment, anger), which are effectively hidden from your consciousness by the shame and the defenses these shame-based behaviors generate within you on a regular basis. People use these sorts of irresponsible and compulsive behaviors to “medicate” the shame and the emotional pain that is a part of who you have been in the past. These kinds of “quick fixes,” however, are never helpful in truly healing and moving on with your life and, instead, keep you “stuck” in your shame-based drama. Remember that shame is always a “cover-up” for what is really going on with you in your soul, in your heart, and at your very core.

You also need to identify and start to attempt to intervene in your remaining and more subtle controlling, manipulative, and self-defeating attitudes and behaviors. This is a time to tune into and exert more conscious control over the psychological defenses (e.g. blaming, justifying, minimizing, denial) that you learned and used in childhood to protect yourself and keep you safe and that you use in the present to avoid your feelings and your responsibility to take care of yourself.

STEP 4) Look at and start to understand your “attachment” to your shame in the present. Begin to clearly define the payoffs and benefits from your being willing to continue to experience shame in your current life. You wouldn’t hang onto the shame if there weren’t some very real payoffs that you have been getting from what you have been doing. Start to ask yourself and look at: ***“How is my shame ‘helpful’ or ‘useful’ to me at this point in my life?”*** Human behavior, whether destructive or healthy, is always purposeful (i.e. we do things for a reason). These payoffs may include things like:

- it’s easier and more comfortable to stay stuck in your old habits and patterns that you know so well and avoid taking the emotional and behavioral risks necessary to make important changes in your life;
- you can try to “stay safe” and protect yourself from being hurt in relationships by avoiding genuine emotional connection and intimacy with others;
- you can continue to blame other people or your “circumstances” for all your problems and use the shame as an excuse to avoid taking full and complete responsibility for who you are and how you are living your life in the present;
...i.e. you can continue to say to yourself, *“This actually isn’t my fault; I’m the real victim here”*
- you can avoid your “fear of the unknown” (i.e. *“What would my life be like without the shame that has been such an important part of me and how I have functioned up until now?”*);
- you can maintain and/or gain acceptance and approval from other unhealthy people around you (e.g. family of origin members; long-term friends and acquaintances) who might otherwise reject and abandon you if they see you changing this shame-based part of who you have been;

- you can cling to child-like “magical thinking” (e.g. “*If I just wish and hope hard enough, everything in my life will change for the better all by itself*”); and
- you can avoid the very real hard work that is necessary to actually change, heal, and grow as a human being.

STEP 5) Identify and talk or write about the original and ongoing sources of your shame. These are called “**GOVERNING SCENES**” and are most often found in your family of origin and childhood experiences but may also be found in your adult life. Governing scenes are the powerful and traumatic shaming experiences where your thought and behavior patterns related to the world around you were and are developed (e.g. scenes where you were neglected, abused, ridiculed, or victimized by caretakers, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, or other important people when you were a child or significant “losses” “failures,” or overt shaming by others in your adult life). Think about the messages you internalized from these times and how they have affected the way you look at yourself, other people, and the world around you in the present (e.g. that the world is a scary place, that you can not trust other people, that you have no right to have your feelings and to stand up for yourself with others). Work to transform your shame into emotional pain and allow yourself to get in touch with the feelings that you had to deny at the time of those original shaming scenes (e.g. the confusion, fear, hurt, disappointment, sadness, and anger you may have felt when you were being abused by a parent or peers or when you yourself made a significant mistake at some later point in your life). Journaling about the past and present on a regular basis can be very helpful in gaining a better understanding of your toxic shame, where it comes from, and how it operates in your life.

A second part of getting in touch with and expressing your pain from the past is to find a safe and effective way to confront the person or people who were shaming with you in some way. This can be done through letters you write (sent or not sent), role-plays in group or in individual therapy or with close friends, actual face-to-face meetings with the person himself or herself (if this can be done safely for you and for them), or even visiting a gravesite to say what you need to say to someone who has already died. A final option is to “go back in time,” through meditation, imagery, or visualization, to re-visit the reality of a governing scene that once existed and actively work to re-structure the incident in a way where you are able to see yourself becoming empowered and responding in a different and more effective way. This re-structuring process can actually alter the way that you look at and feel about the painful and shaming situation from the past in the present. It can also assist you in dealing more effectively with situations that mirror the traumatic event from the past that are occurring in your current life.

- For example, this might involve visualizing yourself actually being assertive with a past abuser and/or effectively removing yourself from that situation to protect yourself (there is a process for re-structuring your “governing scenes” other shame articles on this website).

Finding some way to develop these “confrontation rituals” is an important part of healing shame and assists you in acting and actually becoming more empowered in your current interactions with shaming people or anyone else in the present who evokes the same kind of shameful response in you that the original shamers did in the past.

Part of directly addressing the original shamers also involves working hard to forgive them for what they did to you in the past. Forgiving does not mean forgetting about what happened but, if you are not willing to work at forgiving, you end up carrying the thoughts and memories around as if they are still

happening to you today. Continuing to focus on, think about, and even “hate” that other person takes you out of living in the present moment and often means that you are still allowing that other person to exert significant control over you and your current life (it is as if they have “rented a space in your heart and your head”). Be patient with yourself in this endeavor and remember that forgiveness is generally a “process” that ebbs and flows and is not just one discrete event that “takes care of everything that happened to me.”

STEP 6) Develop and actively use an emotional support system to build back the “interpersonal bridge” that was ruptured and sometimes even completely destroyed when you were young and were hurt and/or disrespected by those important people in your childhood (and in your adult life) when your self-respect, trust, and safety were violated by the shamers. You now need to find nurturing and helpful people in your current life with whom you can feel safe. This safety in the present is absolutely critical if you are going to be able to be vulnerable and openly express your emotions and your pain from the past and the present in order to begin to let go of the emotional burden and the “emotional baggage” that you have carried by yourself all these years. This can happen:

- with close friends,
- with a partner,
- with parents or siblings who are supportive,
- with clergy or spiritual advisors,
- in support or therapy groups, or
- with a counselor or therapist.

Part of this process of self-disclosure about your past emotional pain involves being sure to address and deal with your unhealthy loyalty to your family of origin that is represented by that “no talk” rule from your shame-based childhood. Your learned desire to “protect” your parents or others who were hurtful, shaming, neglectful, and abusive with you and your unwillingness or inability to go beyond this stance can be the single most hindering factor in truly effectively moving beyond your shame. It is critical to be able to talk openly and honestly about who you are and how you became the person you are in the present. Having friends and confidant(e)s can help you do just that. In addition, having and using supportive people in your life can protect you from illness and even help you live longer.

Be in tune with and begin to trust the emotions you experience and start to get in touch with your “intuition” about what feels “okay” and “not okay” for you in your ongoing life. If you were shamed or traumatized in your childhood, you were generally given powerful messages that what you thought, felt, wanted, and needed were “not okay” and that you had no right to have them validated by anyone else. You need to figure out what makes sense to you in your life by tapping into that inner part of you which is strong, healthy, and wise (it is still there no matter how much trauma you have experienced). Part of this means allowing yourself to learn how to experience genuine emotional pain (e.g. sadness and fear) and to suffer in a healthy way instead of lapsing into self-pity and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, powerlessness, and victimization.

Work at actively and consciously choosing to be vulnerable and to share your thoughts and feelings in an ongoing way with the people whom you choose to trust in the present. Overcoming the shame in your day-to-day life cannot be done “in a vacuum” by you alone simply through gaining insight, reading, journaling, meditating, or praying. Just as developing your shame was an interpersonal

experience involving those who originally shamed and wounded you as a child, so too overcoming your shame is an interpersonal process and **must** involve other people who can be there for you in a caring, healthy, supportive, and healing way. This means that others must be willing to listen (being listened to is often useful and therapeutic in and of itself), be affirming, and offer helpful (and, at times, direct, honest, and difficult) feedback to you rather than judging and condemning you for who you are or for who you have been in the past. But you are the one who needs to “open the door” to those others and take the risk to share who you really are in order for this emotional connection and support from others to occur.

Use your “normal and natural” need for nurturance and emotional connection in a positive way and take the initiative to spend time with people who accept and are supportive of your recovery process. You do not need to be around people who continue to attempt to shame, judge, and condemn you in the present. Begin to make the assumption that the people with whom you choose to spend time in the present can be trusted and have positive and caring intentions toward you. This is the point where you need to intervene in your negative and cynical tendency to view everyone around you as a competitor, an “enemy,” or an adversary who is “just out to get me.”

STEP 7) Work hard to become aware of and actively re-claim the previously disowned and discarded parts of yourself. This means learning to appreciate, embrace, and re-parent both the spontaneous and playful “inner child” and the hurt and wounded “inner child” in order to become more connected with your thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and zest for living in the present.

- For example, if you withdrew to protect yourself and became passive and fearful as a result of growing up in a shame-based family, it means recognizing the need to become more assertive in your current life and then actually taking the risk to do this in situations wherever it is necessary. You might want to actually write a letter to this “inner child” to help begin this “re-parenting” process. Part of this process often involves working to forgive yourself for not being able to stand up for and take care of yourself as a child. Many people have the unrealistic expectation that they “should have been able to do something” when the original shaming or trauma was occurring (i.e. if they had just been a “better”/“stronger”/“more capable” person) and they now use this idea as an excuse to be demeaning and shaming with themselves in the present.

- e.g. thinking to yourself: *“the only reason that happened to me when I was a kid was because I was such a loser and a weakling”*

This also involves recognizing and reuniting with your “shadow side,” those “hidden” aspects of your character like your fear about connecting with others, viewing yourself as “fragile” or as a “victim,” your “temper,” your desire for revenge, or your tendency to become controlling and abusive. These are the parts of you that you often don’t want to admit to yourself or anyone else in the present and generally these were parts of you that you were taught to deny or suppress these as a child. If you are unwilling to recognize and assert control over these “hidden” parts of who you are, they will take over and control you and your current thoughts and behaviors with others. Recognizing and acknowledging this “shadow side” is a way to re-assert your own personal power over how you think and act with others in the present.

Becoming aware of and looking at the dreams you experience as you sleep can be one important way to get in touch with these hidden aspects of who you are. This process of embracing your “shadow side” allows you to get to know who you really are as a human being, with all your foibles, flaws,

character defects, and shortcomings. This is a part of understanding and claiming your uniqueness and “specialness,” along with how you are similar to others.

This is also a way to connect with your “true self,” who you actually are and want to be at your very core. This “true self” is the end result of rewriting your “life script” to become the person you were meant to be, not the person who was created by the shaming “life script” foisted on you by those who shamed and wounded you as a child.

Finally, work hard to identify, acknowledge, and respect the goals and “dreams” that you have and will develop for yourself as you get to know yourself even better. These include the hopes, desires, wishes, and aspirations that are part of your “true self” and can give meaning and purpose to your life (shame often saps any sense of purpose and meaning that we might have about who we are). These dreams often relate to things that were “missing” in your childhood experience, although they can also relate to important values that were actually present or modeled for you when you were young. Some examples could include:

- a desire for safety and security
- a desire for adventure
- a desire for personal power
- a desire for respect
- a desire for spontaneity
- a desire for fairness and justice
- a desire to travel and “see the world”
- a desire to be creative
- a desire to heal your pain from the past and create personal healing and growth for yourself in the present
- a desire to take time for yourself, slow down, and truly relax
- a desire to get in touch with your spirituality (however you define it)
- a desire to create structure and order in your life
- a desire to be productive, accomplish things, and be useful and “successful”
- a desire to be competent and capable
- a desire to leave a meaningful personal legacy to those whose lives you touch and to the world in general

STEP 8) Learn to become aware of and then replace your critical, cynical, hostile, judgmental, and abusive inner dialogue with more positive and affirming thoughts and self-talk about yourself and others. What you say to yourself is who you are and who you will become. Think about and tap into nurturing voices from the past and present (e.g. relatives, teachers, coaches, friends, counselors who were/ are helpful, encouraging, supportive, and positive with you) and start to use what they said or would say to you now when you make mistakes and when you do something well in the present. Shift from a shame-based to an empowerment-based system by beginning to see that, while your (and others’) actions or behaviors may need to change, you (and they) are still “okay,” worthwhile, capable, and lovable. Open yourself to the positive and affirming statements people say to you in the present and work hard to actually incorporate those compliments into the way you are thinking about yourself. Start to consistently view yourself and others with empathy and compassion. For more about the impact of negative and positive self-talk on shame and empowerment, see *The Cycles of Shame and Empowerment* on this website.

STEP 9) Another absolutely critical interpersonal skill to develop during this recovery process is to learn to become more assertive with others whenever this need arises in your current life. You have to be able to identify and “voice” your truth in order to truly “feel comfortable in your own skin.” Being assertive and finding and using your “voice” involves:

- identifying and respectfully stating your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs
...without having the expectation that others will necessarily respond exactly the way you want or think they “should” respond to you
- seeking approval, attention, support, and assistance directly, taking the risk to ask for what you want or need from others, and accepting and appreciating what others are willing to give you
...even if it is not exactly what you wanted or expected
- learning and putting into practice the difference between useful and productive anger, which involves setting limits and maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself, and hostile and abusive thoughts and behaviors, which involve trying to hurt, punish, demean, humiliate, intimidate, or control other people
- using “behavioral assertiveness” (see the assertiveness articles on this website for more about this step) to take the ultimate responsibility for yourself if your verbal assertiveness is not helpful in a particular situation

STEP 10) Slow down your moment-to-moment process and become more aware of and make conscious your patterns of responding to the world around you. This means stopping to observe your internal “workings” and your reactions to situations and people and to start to look at other people in a friendly, non-judgmental, and more gentle manner. Start to notice what you’re doing and why you’re doing it and start to clearly realize that you are continually making choices in your daily living.

Learn to take charge of how you react to and behave in everyday situations by slowing down and increasing your mindfulness and making conscious decisions rather than reverting to the naive notion that *“bad things just keep happening to me and there’s nothing I can really do about it.”* In an ongoing fashion, consciously monitor your interactions and patterns, staying alert for situations and issues, people, places, and self-talk which can activate old shaming scenes from the past that end up triggering shame and negative self-talk for you in the present. Shame can often be activated in you even when the other person does not intend to do so and is completely unaware that this has even happened for you.

- Learn to directly confront those who are critical, judgmental, and shaming with you in the present and spend less time with or avoid completely toxic people who continue to attempt to be harsh, disrespectful, controlling, and abusive with you.
- Become aware of feeling powerless and victimized in your daily life and develop the skills necessary to assess the reality of the situation and then to tap into your own “personal power” (rather than trying to exert “power and control over others”) when you need to do so in order to effectively address the issues that do arise around you.
- Learn to set clear short-term and long-term goals to move you in the directions you wish to go in your life. Then **TAKE ACTION** and actually follow through and **GO FOR THESE GOALS!**

This can be described as a process of becoming proactive rather than reactive, taking positive initiative to address your life issues rather than simply waiting for something bad to happen and then reacting in an unproductive and unhelpful way. Start to take healthy risks as a way to push yourself to heal and grow. Also remember, however, to have compassion for and patience with yourself and others as

you go through your day. You and others will make mistakes at times. There is no way to be “perfect” in an empowerment-based system either.

STEP 11) Learn to take healthy personal responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, actions, and your inaction (which is also a choice you make!) in past situations and in your current life. This allows you to feel guilt rather than shame when you look back on mistakes you have made in the past or say or do something that you regret in the present. Strive hard to actually live by the values that you say that you believe in and espouse. Learn to recognize clearly what your responsibility was in the past or is in the present and make amends or apologize whenever possible when you feel uncomfortable about something you have done. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways including:

- face-to-face contacts with other people,
- in a letter you write (sent or not sent),
- in a role-play,
- at a gravesite, or
- using visualization and imagery to create “healing rituals” for yourself related to mistakes you have made in the past.

In addition, don’t continue to carry personal burdens from the past (e.g. quitting school, being fired from a job, getting divorced, having to go the hospital for depression, filing bankruptcy, being arrested for domestic assault or some other legal infraction). Find a few trusted people with whom you can share these secrets that keep you locked in your shame. And don’t continue to add to the shame in your life today by not addressing and changing your current unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that build and maintain your shame. Begin to view your past and present experiences and mistakes as part of being human rather than a wholesale indictment of who you are as a person and view and start to use them as opportunities to learn, grow, and “stretch yourself.” Part of this involves actively working to forgive yourself for the hurtful and shaming things you have done with others over the course of your life.

STEP 12) Get in touch with and work diligently on your spiritual life and use it regularly in your daily living to develop a sense of inner safety, security, and peace within you. Use quiet time, prayer, and meditation in an ongoing way to create a peaceful space within yourself where you can feel “centered” and “grounded” no matter what is going on around you. With a connection to God or a “Higher Power” (however you define this for yourself), you are never really completely alone. Start to see yourself as part of a larger universe and also connected to other people through their humanity, which includes both their pain and their joy. Notice and focus on the commonalities that link you and all members of the human race (including the people closest to you).

As part of this connection to the larger universe, work hard on forgiveness and developing empathy and compassion for others and yourself.

- Work to forgive others who hurt you in the past and present;
- Work to forgive yourself for not being able to protect and nurture yourself during your childhood (and at later times as well) if you were shamed and abused on these occasions; and
- Work to forgive yourself for your past and current mistakes and for hurting and shaming others at times in your life.

And keep in mind that forgiveness is not necessarily a single discrete event that occurs at one moment in time but is rather an ongoing process that ebbs and flows as you continue on your life journey.

There may be times when you fall back into being harsh and punishing with yourself and others. At those times, it is important to remind yourself that, ultimately, forgiveness in your life is the real goal you are pursuing and then strive to move back toward that. For more about forgiveness in all three of those areas, see the other shame articles on this website.

STEP 13) Cultivate ongoing ways to nurture and take care of yourself as you go through your day-to-day life. These can include:

- reducing the “clutter” in your life, both physical (i.e. the material “things” that surround you) and emotional (i.e. old hurts and resentments) and working to decrease or completely eliminate your negative and destructive “habits;” in general, this means working to “simplify” your life
- staying busy with activities that are stimulating, satisfying, and fulfilling for you
 - ...self-esteem is more than just “positive thinking” and “happy thoughts”
 - ...it also involves making a commitment to make a real difference and leave the world a better place than you found it
 - ...i.e. look for and find purpose and meaning in your life
 - ...use your life to make a difference in your own and others’ lives
- noticing and intervening in your internal comparisons to others, which often leads to feelings of shame, defectiveness, and inferiority or to arrogance, grandiosity, and a sense of superiority
- keeping your worth and adequacy separated in a healthy way from what happens in the outside world
 - ...e.g. from “ups and downs” in your finances and the stock market; the contentiousness of the political process; crime in the streets; the destruction of hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, and other natural catastrophes; wars and genocide all over the globe
 - ...this does not mean that you cannot work to actually do something positive about what is happening around you but don’t allow that negativity to take over your thoughts and your daily living
- focusing on positive experiences and feelings, storing them in your consciousness, learning to affirm yourself from within, openly appreciating who you are and how you live your life, and experiencing a sense of **GRATITUDE** about who you are and what you have in your life
- identifying and then actually living by the values that you say are important to you
- staying aware of what you are doing well and giving yourself ongoing credit for doing these things
- consistently reaching out to other people and the world around you and offering assistance to those less fortunate than you are and using your talents to make a difference in life for yourself and others
 - ...raising your children in a positive and affirming way
 - ...serving as a teacher and mentor by sharing your knowledge to help others with their life struggles (e.g. teaching anger classes in the community; teaching English as a second language at a social service agency; “12-stepping” if you are a member of Alcoholics Anonymous or other support group programs)
 - ...volunteering your time and energy to offer assistance in a practical way (e.g. serving meals at a homeless shelter, volunteering to visit seniors in a nursing home, helping to build a “Habitat for Humanity” home)
 - ...taking mission trips to different parts of the world to assist others with medical, housing, or other pressing needs they may have
- building in tangible rewards for yourself on a regular basis
 - ...reading a special book, getting an ice cream cone, going for a walk, spending time with a good friend, watching a favorite movie, developing and doing hobbies that you enjoy
- developing and maintaining a warm and nurturing sense of humor about yourself and others and developing and using the ability to laugh in a non-shaming way at your own and others’ foibles, inconsistencies, and idiosyncrasies (we all have them!)

- being gentle with yourself and others in an ongoing fashion which means learning to like and accept yourself and the others whom you choose to have in your life