

## **THE SHAME-RAGE CONNECTION: Going From Feeling Defective and Inadequate to Becoming Disrespectful and Punishing**

Many people believe that punishing and disrespectful anger is a sign of power, confidence, and “being on top of your game.” In fact, this is not the case at all. Disrespectful anger and even all-out rage actually come out of a deep sense of powerlessness, inadequacy, self-doubt, insecurity, and despair.

Another word for that place is **SHAME!**

Shame is a significant part of all human misery. Shame can lead to a whole host of compulsive, addictive, irresponsible, and demoralizing attitudes and behaviors and is a major contributor to all sorts of emotional and physical distress that we as human beings experience. One primary indicator that shame is present in many peoples’ lives is disrespectful, punishing, or explosive anger that leads to destructive and self-defeating attitudes or hurtful and abusive actions toward themselves or others. When people basically feel “okay” about themselves, they do not feel a need to hurt and demean themselves or those around them.

Think back for a moment to your time as a child. For some, childhood memories involve chatter and fun at the family dinner table or at bedtime, sitting with your parents as they read stories to you, having parents and teachers show an interest in who you were and what you did, and playing happily in your backyard with your siblings and other neighborhood kids.

For others, however, the memories are not nearly so “rosy.” You may remember punishing and demeaning lectures directed at you by a parent or teacher whenever you did something they didn’t like or you made a mistake. You might remember hostile and abusive scenes whenever your parents fought with each other. You may also recall being picked on and ridiculed by other children inside and outside school. These kinds of experiences can lead to an almost constant state of anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurity. This second set of memories is what sets the stage for the development of toxic shame within you. Once the shame is there, some people end up converting this shame into anger and even rage directed at themselves and other people.

What you heard, saw, and experienced as a child is absolutely critical in shaping the way you look at yourself and your life today. The reality is that people generally learn to be negative, hostile, cynical, disrespectful, and abusive. And these attitudes and behaviors come directly from shame and the feelings of defectiveness and inadequacy that were often first instilled in you when you were young. If you think about it, your experience as a child is very much like being in a laboratory where you discover what it is to be human. This is where you learn who you are, how to relate to others, and how you fit into the world around you.

If you grew up in a hurtful, disrespectful, or neglectful family or you were the target of hostile and abusive treatment by peers or other adults, you received some very distorted and perverted messages about the way life is and the way life can be. **TOXIC SHAME** is the end result of these messages and can quickly lead to acting out your anger in some very hurtful and unproductive ways.

When toxic shame becomes a part of you, you end up experiencing a gnawing sense that something is vaguely and indescribably wrong with who you are and the way you are living your life.

Shame leads to doubts about yourself at your very core and to the idea that you are somehow flawed and do not quite measure up to your own or others' expectations. These beliefs lead to a tendency to harshly judge yourself and other people for mistakes and shortcomings. These judgments can also lead to feeling angry and even rageful at times.

You may have learned to face each day with a sense of fear and dread, which has gotten in the way of handling life's many challenges. You may have learned that other people cannot really be trusted and that you need to be constantly "on guard" so that others do not hurt or take advantage of you. If you can't feel safe with your parents and others who are close to you as a child, who can you really feel safe with throughout the rest of your life? Needless to say, this sets the stage for you to feel negative, hostile, cynical, and angry much of the time and gets in the way of developing truly close relationships with others as you age.

You may have tried a myriad of strategies to medicate the pain that you sense is there: drinking or eating too much, abusing illegal or prescription drugs, spending or gambling compulsively, acting out sexually to achieve a "quick fix," or working continually and trying to "be productive" at all times with little energy left for yourself and your family. Or you may have tried to confront and address people and problems around you with disrespectful, punishing, or explosive anger. None of these is actually effective in removing the internal emotional pain that shame creates. Saddest of all, it may seem like there is no way out of this vision you have of who you are and the ways things are in your life.

But there is an alternative. And the first step in moving beyond your shame is to understand what shame is and how it affects your day-to-day life. If you don't understand what shame is and acknowledge that it is present in your life, there will be no way to begin to change it.

Everyone experiences some shame simply by going through the process of growing up. Being smaller, less skilled, and not knowing as much as your parents, older siblings, and others creates a sense of shame: you are not as effective and knowledgeable as some of the people around you. In a nurturing, loving, and safe environment, however, this helps you develop a realistic appraisal of yourself: you are not perfect and you do not know everything. This realization ideally leads to a sense of **HUMILITY**, which can be very helpful in living a balanced and satisfying life. This assists you in realizing that you are not "better" than other people.

But that is not what I am addressing here. Rather, what I am talking about is **TOXIC SHAME**, an overwhelming belief and feeling that you are somehow defective and "never quite good enough." This belief, for many people, creates enormous stress and tension and the anger and rage that can often go along with it.

When you experience and internalize others' shaming, punishing, and demeaning messages directed at you as a child (and sometimes later in your adult life), toxic shame is created. It becomes your way of looking at yourself, other people, and the world around you. It also becomes a way of actually living your life which has, at its foundation, control, perfectionism, blame, reactivity, cynicism, despair, and stagnation. Shame is often initially created when you were hurt, wounded, and devalued by people who were important to you in some way in your childhood.

Shame develops through an interpersonal process. These wounds might have been created by your parents, if they were abusive or neglectful. They could have been created by your siblings or other children, if you were demeaned, put down, and bullied by them. They might have been created by

teachers or coaches, if you were humiliated in school or disciplined in a punishing and hurtful way. Or they could have been created by others, even perfect strangers, who treated you disrespectfully and acted as if you were insignificant and had no worth. Think back to things that were said to you by others. Do any of the examples below sound familiar?

- *“Hey lard ass/fat boy”*
- *“What a ‘retard!’”*
- *“You are ugly as sin”*
- *“You’re too stupid to come in out of the rain”*
- *“There are places for people like you”*
- *“How could you possibly think/do something like that?”*
- To a boy: *“You’re acting like a girl”/“You throw (run) like a girl”/“You look like a girl”/“Don’t be such a sissy”*
- *“Good little girls would never say something like that”*
- *“Shame on you”/“You should be ashamed of yourself”*
- *“Why couldn’t you have been a boy?”*
- *“You were an ‘accident;’ you don’t even belong here”*
- *“You never could do anything right”*
- *“Quit your crying or I’ll really give you something to cry about”/“Only little babies cry”*
- *“Why don’t you go out and play in traffic”*
- *“Grow up and stop acting like a baby; you’re always whining about something”*
- *“You shouldn’t feel that way”*
- *“Shut your face. Nobody wants to know what you think”*
- *“There are places for people like you”*
- *“You should know better than that. What the hell is the matter with you?”*
- *“If you think it’s so bad here, wait until you get out in the real world”*
- *“If you don’t like the rules I have in this house, you can hit the road”*
- *“You’re a damn loser and you’ll never amount to anything”*
- *“There is something really wrong with you”*
- *“You’ve ruined my life”*
- *“Nobody could ever possibly care about a person like you”*
- *“If it weren’t for you, I’d be somebody”*
- *“I wish you’d never even been born”*

These are the kinds of statements that destroy self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence and set the stage for toxic shame to overwhelm your sense of self. When people around you took out their life’s pain on you by saying things like those noted above or when they treated you like an object rather than a person with human dignity (e.g. using cuffing, ear-pulling, pushing, grabbing, hitting or other forms of intimidation with you), you were affected. You may have even noticed the effect at the time or you might not have wanted to admit it to yourself or anyone else. Or you might not have been clear about its impact on you. Or you may have simply struggled on, doing the best you could under the difficult circumstances.

When you were treated in a punishing and hurtful way or simply neglected and ignored, you may have taken these messages in and begun to believe that they were an accurate representation of who you really were: *“They say (or act like) I’m worthless and unimportant; so I guess I really am worthless and unimportant.”* These distortions and lies that others communicated to you became your vision for how

you looked at yourself and how you related to the world around you. They often created and became the roles that you took on and have played in your life over the years to the present.

Essentially, what happened in this process is that someone else wrote a **LIFE SCRIPT** for you. You were told, through the ways that you were spoken to and treated and how you saw others spoken to and treated, who to be and how to live. In a shame-based system, you do not really ever have the opportunity to figure out who you actually are and want to be, as you do in a more nurturing and safe environment. In this shame-based situation, you are certainly not allowed to be a part of actually writing your own healthy and functional life script.

It is literally as if you were enlisted to act out a role in a powerful, painful, and destructive drama that was written, directed, and produced by someone else. And unfortunately, that “someone else” didn’t have your best interests at heart. What makes this even worse is that there is a lifelong commitment to this production with no “escape clause.” You are expected to live and die with this contract that was created for you by the original shamers, whoever they happened to be.

Exactly what is the contract you had with the writers, the directors and the producers of this script? The contract is based on a set of **DISTORTED AND RIGID CORE BELIEFS**. These are the unrealistic rules and values that you attempt to live by that were passed on to you by other people around you: what you expect from yourself, other people, and the world around you.

Everyone has core beliefs. These are the values that are important to us. Unfortunately, if you were shamed, yours were developed and shaped by the negative and disrespectful messages you received from the people who hurt, demeaned, and devalued you. These messages communicated in a clear and powerful way to you, even up to the present, that you, as a human being, are defective, inadequate, flawed, powerless, incompetent, unloveable, and completely alone. Being put down, ridiculed, or ignored by others gave you the message that you didn’t really “count” and that you were unimportant and of little value. This does not help you feel very good about yourself. And it has the potential to create intense depression, anxiety, anger, and even rage within you.

Often, people will vow to themselves, unconsciously or sometimes even consciously, that they will never allow others to treat them in any way that they perceive to be similar to this again. And, as adults, they are big, strong, and powerful enough to go right back at that other person, even if it means becoming disrespectful, explosive, and abusive themselves.

These shaming messages also communicated to you that the world around you is a frightening and dangerous place. You end up feeling like you never quite belong and “fit in” and have great difficulty finding anywhere that feels truly comfortable or safe. That means you cannot really trust other people. You need to be constantly wary and “on guard” to avoid being hurt, disrespected, and taken advantage of by others in the present. You start to believe that, in order to be okay, you need play a role that presents a facade to everyone around you. Sadly, along with this role, there is an intense fear that, at some point, others will actually see through this false image and realize how “bad” and flawed you truly are. Then you believe that it is only a matter of time before they will judge, disrespect, or abandon you (as you may have experienced by important people in your childhood). This makes it very difficult to connect in an emotionally meaningful way with just about anyone in your adult life.

What fuels the contract and keeps the script alive in your day-to-day life is your own negative thought process. You have accepted the shaming statements and actions by others as your reality. It is as

if they have found a place in your head and your heart and have taken over your way of thinking and feeling about yourself and the world around you. You have learned the “lines” that you were expected to know and say and rehearsed them over and over again. Now it is no longer even necessary to be around the original shamers in order to carry on the painful legacy of what you have been handed.

Your **SELF-TALK**, the words, phrases, and sentences that you think to yourself, becomes negative and punishing. This creates an atmosphere within you where you continually judge and condemn yourself and others for differences, shortcomings, and mistakes. You have now fully integrated the role that you were expected to play in that life script that was produced for you by those original shamers. This is the ultimate internalization of the shaming things that were said or done to you as a child. You may even find yourself saying the very same words and phrases to yourself that you heard from others so many years ago. You may call yourself “stupid,” “fat,” “ugly,” or a “loser.” If part of your life script is to be the **“ANGRY YOUNG MAN (or WOMAN),”** you may end up thinking about other people in equally disrespectful and demeaning ways.

Continuing to live the shame-based script that was foisted on you can turn your ongoing life into a catastrophe. Your sense of defectiveness leads to a variety of negative outcomes based on what you think and how you behave as you go through the motions of your life, the shame-based drama that you are living out for someone else. This can include negative and hostile attitudes that only get worse as you age and end up driving away even the people who try to be close to you. True intimacy and emotional connectedness seem beyond your grasp. The shame script keeps you from being able to truly connect with others in a honest, authentic, and meaningful way. The idea of actually being close to someone else is just too scary. You tend to expect that they will end up hurting you in the same way that you were hurt in the past. And this expectation often sets up “real-life” situations where that is exactly what happens. A profound feeling of loneliness and estrangement follows. And you may not even know why.

Shame-based people experience an interruption of spontaneous behavior, a loss of energy, immobilization, and eventually paralysis and stagnation in their life story. It takes an enormous amount of energy to play roles that contradict who you really are and have the potential to be. This saps your motivation, creativity, and energy and often limits your ability to take positive risks. It frequently leads to feeling trapped or “stuck” in your personal or professional lives.

Shame is often accompanied by the belief that you are powerless and being victimized by everyone and everything around you. This only increases your anger, hostility, and desire for revenge and control. This belief also decreases further your willingness to actually do something positive to move your life in a more healthy direction. Sadly, however, shame often does promote your willingness to take negative and self-destructive risks such as drinking and driving, spending or losing money you don't have, and verbally and physically assaulting others which only creates significant consequences for you and even more shame for you to carry around with you in the present (this also creates shame in the people with whom you do these behaviors).

The end result of this role you have taken on is an overwhelming sense of despair, cynicism, hopelessness, and stagnation. This is one dramatic production where it is critical to review the part you've been playing up to now, to work hard to discover your “true self,” and then to start to consciously and proactively live out that true self in your daily life.

Often, beginning to recognize and address your shame feels overwhelming, depressing, and shaming in and of itself. It is not a pleasant task. But identifying the roles chosen for you by others and then actually rewriting the life script you have been given into a script you actually wish to play is the process that has to occur in order for anything to actually change. And you are the only one who can do this (with the help of others who truly care about you in the present).

As you understand more about what shame is and how it may be affecting you, start to know and embrace the characters and roles that have kept you stuck in your life up to this point. If disrespectful, punishing, controlling, and explosive anger is an issue for you, do not deny it! If you deny that you are an angry and controlling person when, in fact, you are, the anger takes on a life of its own and it controls you rather than your making the necessary decisions to remain in control of it. Work hard to accept anger as part of who you are and who you have been and set out to change the messages you still carry that created this script in the first place and keep it alive within you today. You may feel frightened and overwhelmed as you begin to uncover how you have been shamed and how it has contributed to the disrespectful anger you have all too often directed at others. But this journey is worth the pain.

Take a look below at some examples of life scripts that angry (and other) people play out in their lives. You may recognize yourself in these or you might see others you know in them. Even if they do not seem to fit, think about the script and the roles that you may be playing out and try to identify, very specifically, how they have affected your life (see the questions at the end of this unit for specific ways to identify and address your life script).

- The perpetually **GOOD LITTLE GIRLS/BOYS** who reacted to the shaming by seeking to please and placate others. They get resentful when no one seems to appreciate and value everything they are trying so hard to do to make life better for themselves and everyone around them.
- The arrogant and “powerful” **REBELS** who reacted to the shaming by flaunting authority and seething about the way things are. They spew venom on others and act out in self-destructive and hurtful ways whenever they perceive that someone is trying to disrespect them, control them, or tell them how to live and what to do.
- The hard-working, ambitious, and successful **SUPERACHIEVERS** who reacted to the shaming by becoming “busy,” “productive,” and seeking to accomplish as much as is humanly possible to try to feel better about themselves and to get others to respect and love them. They become tense, stressed, and angry when their multitude of achievements and successes never seem to really allow them to truly feel okay about themselves, when there is never any time for themselves and those they say they love, and when the accolades they receive never quite seem to be “enough.”
- The self-sacrificing and long-suffering **MARTYRS** who reacted to the shaming by devoting their lives to looking after and taking care of others, especially people who don’t seem to want to do anything for themselves. They become annoyed when they don’t get the credit and thanks they think they deserve, when no one around them seems to change despite all their efforts, and when there is no one there to help take care of them.
- The self-righteous **SAVIORS** who reacted to the shaming by taking on the job of “rescuing” those around them who seem to be continually floundering in their lives. They become irritated when those they are “saving” don’t appear to appreciate the “saving” they are trying to do for them and never

seem to be willing and able to take care of themselves so that the saviors can actually find time to focus on and live their own lives.

- The passive and overwhelmed **VICTIMS** who reacted to the shaming by feeling constantly persecuted by others. Their anger is manifested by their ongoing cynical and fearful view of life and the self-fulfilling belief that others will always end up disrespecting and hurting them (which leads to continually ending up with unhealthy and dysfunctional people in his or her life).
- The underachieving and self-destructive **LOSERS** who reacted to the shaming by never seeming to be able to “get it all together.” They actively or passively undermine and sabotage their efforts to move forward in their lives and feel furious, depressed, or anxious that their lives are not turning out the way everyone else seems to be living.
- The humor-filled **CLOWNS** who reacted to the shaming with jokes and laughter that hide the emotional pain of living day-to-day. Their anger develops when their humor starts to drift into sarcasm and hostile teasing, distances even those who want to be close to them, and no longer effectively shields them from their underlying emotional pain.

It is critical to realize that the original shaming you experienced was not your fault and that you did not deserve to be shamed (no one does!). You were not responsible as a child for the shaming script that others produced and wrote for you. As all children do, you believed what you were told by parents, teachers, peers, and the other directors in your life. This is especially true when the shamers were the people you were supposed to be able to count on. Your vulnerability and fear kept you captive in the shame-based drama. You identified with the people doing the shaming in order to “survive;” to belong and “fit in;” to be emotionally connected, loved, valued, and appreciated; and to gain some sense of power in a chaotic and dysfunctional world (this is the reason that even children who are abused try so hard to stay connected with and loyal to the people who are abusing them).

In the present, however, you are the one who is responsible to change your life script. No one else will or can do it for you. **Your shame is ultimately your responsibility as an adult; continually blaming and focusing on “what others did to me” (in the past or the present) is not helpful in healing, growing, and moving forward with who you want to become.** And disrespectful anger, toward yourself or others, and the other unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that flow out of the shame are your responsibility as well.

Begin to imagine and write a new story for yourself, through your current thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions, about who you really are inside and who you truly want to be. Your disrespectful anger in the present only creates more shame, for you and others. Make a commitment to yourself and to those who love you that you will take the necessary steps to change how you experience and express your anger and other parts of your life that interfere with who you can really be in this life.

If disrespectful, punishing, and explosive anger is a part of your own shame-based drama, it needs to change if you are ever going to be able to address and change the underlying shame and feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness that fuel it. If you make the choice to do this, it can create an enormous difference in your own life and in the lives of those around you.

## **SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:**

- 1) Think about some examples of what others said or did when you were young that hurt or demeaned you and gave you the sense that you were defective or “not good enough?”
  - Who said or did these things to you?
  - How are those things you have identified related to anger triggers you experience in the present?
  
- 2) When you make a mistake or when you do not live up to your own or others’ expectations in the present, what words come to your mind?
  - What are some of the words or phrases that you use to put yourself down today?
  - What are some of the words or phrases that you use to hurt or demean others today when you are angry with them?
  
- 3) Think and write about the destructive life script you were given and about the parts you were taught and expected to play by others. How have you played this script out in your life (i.e. what have you done to maintain and build on this original script that you were given)?