

UNDERSTANDING PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT

The next step in moving beyond your shame is to understand what personal empowerment is and to commit yourself to making empowerment-based living an integral part of your day-to-day life.

EMPOWERMENT is a way of looking at yourself and others and the world around you and a way of living your life based on awareness, conscious decision-making, respect (for yourself and others), accountability, proactivity, and optimism. Empowerment is closely connected to a more positive and affirming thought process that you actively create and nurture as you go through your days. Empowerment allows you to take healthy responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (including those that hurt you and others) and promotes self-understanding, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-respect, and the potential for personal growth and genuine intimacy in your relationships with others. You are the person who is ultimately responsible for doing what is necessary to help yourself become more empowered in your adult life by re-writing the damaging and destructive “life script” that your original shamers foisted on you as a child.

The following chart clearly distinguishes the important differences between shame-based and empowerment-based ways of viewing yourself and the world around you. Look at the two lists and see where you (and others in your life) fit.

A SHAME-BASED SYSTEM:

Attacks and condemns “you” as a person (which leads to intense negative and painful feelings about who you are at your very core)

Presumes that you are bad/worthless/inadequate/defective/flawed/unloveable and that nothing will ever be different in your life

Presumes that you are not responsible for your thoughts, feelings, and actions through the use of psychological defenses like blaming, denial, minimizing, and justifying

Is based on a system of perfectionism which breeds isolation, despair, fear, discouragement, and, ultimately, more and more shame

Involves an external locus of control which leads you to continually seek outside approval and validation and often to feel powerless, helpless, victimized, and completely “out of control”

Attacks uniqueness and individuality (you have to be the same as others and to do what is “expected” of you)

AN EMPOWERMENT-BASED SYSTEM:

Evaluates and assesses your behavior (which may, at times, lead to negative and painful feelings about your actions but also opens up the possibility that you can learn from what you have done)

Presumes that you are human, that you have “flaws,” problems, and shortcomings, and that you will make mistakes at times (which you can then remedy if you choose to do so)

Presumes that you are responsible for your thoughts, feelings, and actions (and your inaction!), which includes mistakes that you make

Is based on a system of accountability which leads to personal growth, healing, and a respect for your own and others’ rights

Involves an internal locus of control which leads to a belief that you are “in charge” of yourself and your life and have the ability to stay aware, see your options, and make conscious and healthy choices in your life

Affirms uniqueness (you and others have the right to be different from one another and to be “your own persons”)

A SHAME-BASED SYSTEM:

Leads to increasing rigidity, the development of a false “image” or “facade,” and an intense desire to be in control of yourself and others and of everything that happens around you

Creates no possibility of repairing the “damage” done to others and relationships are always “in jeopardy,” leading to a profound sense of terror, loneliness, and alienation

Leads to being **reactive** toward the world around you

The purpose of shame is to avoid change, to judge and punish yourself and others, and to perpetuate the shame cycle

The shame-based system screams out: “I am a bad and rotten person and I will never truly be okay”

AN EMPOWERMENT-BASED SYSTEM:

Leads to compassion and empathy for yourself and others, increased flexibility, and a deepening and modification of positive and useful core values learned as a child

Leads to amends, remedies, effective conflict resolution, forgiveness, intimacy, and enhancement of your relationships with others

Leads to being **proactive** in the world around you

The purpose of empowerment is to promote and produce change, growth, and healing in yourself and those around you

The empowerment-based system states clearly and assertively: “I am a worthwhile, competent, and loving person, even when I make mistakes and have parts of me that I need to recognize, work on, change, and improve”