

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR TOXIC SHAME

The first step in beginning the process of overcoming your shame and moving beyond being a shame-based and “emotionally-stunted” person is to understand what shame is, where it comes from, and how it has affected and is currently affecting your life.

**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 based on control, perfectionism, blame, reactivity, negativity, cynicism, despair, fear, disconnection, and, in the end, paralysis and stagnation. It profoundly affects who you are and how you feel about yourself and others and is closely tied to the negative thought process you have going on inside your head. **Toxic shame:**

- ...causes you to experience strong doubts about yourself at your very core;
- ...creates the belief that there is something vaguely and indescribably “wrong” with you as a person and how you are living your life;
- ...triggers a powerful inner sense of worthlessness, hopelessness, and powerlessness;
- ...creates an intense feeling of being somehow “defective” as a human being;
- ...stops you from growing and being who you really are and want to be (i.e. it keeps you from finding and becoming your authentic and genuine “true self”); and
- ...causes you to avoid and disconnect from meaningful and intimate relationships with others because truly being close to someone else is just too frightening.

Shame first becomes a part of who you are and how you function when you are “wounded,” hurt, and devalued by important people in your childhood. When these shaming situations occur, you are given the message by others that you are somehow inadequate, incompetent, unworthy, and unloveable. It is as if other people (the “shamers” in your early life) have written a destructive “life script” for you, which you are then expected to live out in your adult years, no matter what the cost to you and those around you. The shame you carry with you is increased in your adult life when others continue to shame you in what they do and say with you and when you think and behave in ways that undermine your own or others’ respect and dignity.

### SOME SOURCES OF SHAME OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR LIFETIME:

**DIRECT SHAME:** This type of shame involves trauma that is aimed at you (or at those around you which you observe) by an important person in your life (e.g. parents, teachers, coaches, relatives, peers, partners, friends, bosses, co-workers) when your (or others’) thoughts, feelings, or body itself are invaded and disrespected in such a way that you come to believe that you (or others) are “bad,” stupid, worthless, unimportant, defective, or unloveable. Direct shame occurs when you and those around you are treated like an object or a “thing” rather than as persons with human rights and dignity. Direct shame can include the following:

**Active shaming** includes:

- Emotional harassment, humiliation, or abuse  
...e.g. harsh, threatening, and intimidating gestures, looks, and actions; having others appear or actually act disgusted and dismissive with you
- Verbal harassment, humiliation, or abuse  
...e.g. name-calling, put-downs, insults, cursing and swearing directed at you; racist, sexist, xenophobic, or homophobic comments aimed at you
- Physical harassment or abuse  
...e.g. “discipline” that involves pulling hair or ears; being pushed or grabbed; being cuffed, slapped, or punched; being hit with objects like belts or sticks; being forced to do humiliating things by others (e.g. being told to stand in a corner)
- Sexual abuse  
...e.g. sexualized comments about boys and girls in adolescence (e.g. statements about boys growing pubic hair or young girls developing breasts); sexualized touch like hugs that last too long or feel “uncomfortable;” incest; sexual assault/rape; sexual harassment (e.g. in the workplace or elsewhere)

**Passive shaming** includes:

- Having your physical and emotional needs discounted, dismissed, or completely neglected  
...e.g. parents showing little or no interest in their children’s thoughts, feelings, and activities; being ignored by the important people in your life
- Being physically or emotionally abandoned or rejected by the people who are supposed to care for you and be there for you  
...e.g. the withholding of verbal or physical expressions of love and affection when important people are angry with you or preoccupied with other things in their own lives
- Being given the message that you are of little importance, don’t really matter, or are of “no value”  
...e.g. the absence of nurturing and emotional connection, especially with the important people in your early life

**ENTITLEMENT SHAME:** This type of shame involves families where a child is treated like a “golden boy” or a “little princess” by their over-involved, enmeshed, and doting caretakers. These children are given the clear message that they “can never do anything wrong” and have little or no responsibility for themselves when problems do arise in their lives. They may be overly protected by their caretakers and are seldom, if ever, allowed to experience any real or meaningful consequences when they make mistakes or do something that is hurtful, irresponsible, or destructive. They may see themselves as their parents’ “favorite child” (and this may actually be true). As a result, they develop an inflated sense of self-importance and feelings of personal entitlement, arrogance, and grandiosity that lead to the belief that “*the world owes me whatever I want whenever I want it*” (“*in the same way I have always been treated in a special way and been given special treatment by my parents [my friends, the community-at-large]*”). They tend to become self-absorbed, self-centered, and narcissistic with little thought, regard, or empathy for anyone else. They believe that others merely exist to do what they want them to do and to benefit them in whatever way they see fit and they develop the expectation that others will be there for them, do for them, and give them whatever they want or need (without their even having to ask).

This shame has the potential to arise in the future within them when caretakers and other important people in a child's life:

- Have few or no real expectations for their child (e.g. helping around the house, doing chores)
- Continually intervene in their children's natural consequences related to a child's misbehavior in order to "protect" and "shield" them (e.g. at school, with friends, with neighbors, on sports teams)
- Buy or give their child anything that he or she wants, expects, or demands
- Treat their child as if he or she never makes mistakes (i.e. that it is always someone else's fault)
- Make their child the "center of the universe" with little or no accountability or responsibility to anyone else

This type of shame, and the feelings of unworthiness or defectiveness, are triggered when other people (including partners, friends, and employers) don't treat them as the "golden boy" or "little princess" that they imagine themselves to be. This can then lead to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and also to anger, frustration, and resentment, which they may direct toward the those around them, who do not offer them what they believe they are just "entitled" to receive.

A sub-set of this type of shame involves people who seem to have "the Midas touch" in the way that they experience and live their lives. Everything they try and everything they do seems to "turn to gold." They get whatever they want; life seems completely easy and effortless. It may be getting all A's in school without having to work very hard, being a star athlete in one or more sports, becoming the homecoming king (or queen) or the student body or class president, dating and marrying only the most desirable and attractive partners, getting into the "best" schools and academic programs, and being hired for and being successful in only the "best" jobs. They start to believe that they are literally "gifted" and "blessed," which can then lead to their thinking that they are "better" than anyone else and entitled to "only the good things" in life.

Shame can arise for these individuals when they eventually experience "bumps in the road" as they age. This can involve having stressful and difficult times in their lives, not always being and having "the best of the best," other people not agreeing with them that they deserve what they believe they are entitled to receive because of their "specialness," or when they are not treated by partners, children, or others as the unique and special beings that they believe themselves to be. This can likewise lead to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and subsequent anger, frustration, and resentment, which they then may take out on those around them.

**CROSS-GENERATIONAL SHAME:** This type of shame involves trauma or problems which occurred in your family or community even before you were born and are "carried over" from generation to generation. This shame builds and generates tension, anxiety, and more shame because people refuse to talk honestly about what is or has been going on and attempt to keep everything "hidden" and "secret" in a misguided effort to be "loyal" to the family or community. This means avoiding effectively addressing the very real issues that do, in fact, exist (with thoughts or statements like *"Don't ever 'air' the family's 'dirty laundry,'" "We just don't talk about things like that,"* or *"What happens in our family is nobody else's business"*). The family or community often feels "cursed" or "jinxed" to individual members and they frequently experience intense

fear and tension, but no one identifies these feelings or discusses them openly and the secrets and trauma “take on a life of their own,” which often sets up the next generation to experience or “act out” the shame in a similar or, at times, in a completely different way. Examples include:

- Growing up in poverty which may be a result of financial mismanagement and irresponsibility or not having a real opportunity to make enough money to live comfortably, which can lead those in the next generation to feeling like “losers” and “second-class citizens” with little success in academic, work, or financial endeavors or to a blind pursuit of money, power, and success no matter what the cost
- Emotional illnesses like depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, or schizophrenia and behaviors like suicide that are never adequately addressed and can lead future generations to fear that they will slip into mental illness and that nothing can be done about this (which may result in their not seeking help and/or their killing themselves) or who completely deny mental health symptoms and needs that might otherwise be effectively treated and who, as a result, live in perpetual misery and unhappiness
- Ongoing alcohol or drug abuse which can lead future generations to seeing chemical use as the “right” way to handle and medicate life’s problems and issues or to becoming a “teetotaler” who has rigid and unrealistic expectations of everyone around him/her regarding alcohol or drug use and other life issues
- Extramarital affairs which can lead current members to fear that it is never really safe to become truly intimate with a partner and who act this out by becoming overly dependent, suspicious, possessive, and jealous (which may destroy their relationships) or by continually looking for future partners even while they are still involved a primary relationship, leading to having affairs themselves or to abruptly leaving relationships when issues or conflicts do arise
- Pregnancies outside of marriage or “early births” of the oldest child in the family which can lead to someone in the next generation becoming pregnant because no one talks about healthy sexuality or to such harsh and restrictive beliefs about sex that family members are ill-equipped to have a healthy sex life in their partner relationships or marriages
- Accidents or deaths in the family where someone in the family believes that they were to blame or were being “punished” (e.g. by God) which creates a fear in the next generation that these same sorts of things will continue to happen to those in the family and may set the stage for this to actually occur
- Emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse that occurred in the family which can lead current members to believe that abuse is a normal and natural part of everyone’s family life, which means that they are likely to become either perpetrators or victims of abuse in their own adult relationships

**CULTURAL SHAME:** Cultural shame involves the overt and covert messages that you receive from the society-at-large that communicate clearly to you that you are somehow failing to live up to society’s notions or standards of what it is to be a man or woman in the culture or of what it is to be a competent, successful, and worthwhile person (i.e. a person who has really “made it” in his or her life). These powerful signals continually bombard us through radio, television, the movies, newspapers, magazines, and the internet and through societal institutions like places of worship, your place of employment, the military, and the government. This type of shame tells us who we are supposed to be and can also include the need to avoid being “different” in any way from what the mainstream and dominant culture communicates to us about what are the “normal” and “preferred” ways to be. In our society this might mean not being white, not being male,

not being Christian, being “uneducated,” not being heterosexual, not being “attractive,” having a disability, getting divorced, being unemployed or underemployed, being poor, being “old,” being overweight, being an immigrant. Examples include:

- The internet and advertising that tells you what you should drive; what you should drink; what sort of partner and friends you should have; how many friends you should have; how you should look; what kinds of activities you should be involved with; and how to make yourself more attractive and stop or even reverse the aging process by doing certain things like losing weight, re-making your body through exercise or various cosmetic surgeries, and growing a new head of hair
- Television programs and movies that communicate values about relationships, success in life, anger, how to resolve conflict, and what male and female roles are “supposed to be”
- Infomercials that tell you how easy it is to make lots of money, how much money you need to have to be a truly happy and successful person, and what your lifestyle should look like
- Spiritual leaders and self-help “gurus” who tell you what you should think and how you should behave in order to become the person you are “supposed to be,” according to them

**SUSTAINED SHAME:** Sustained shame involves passively or actively finding ways to increase and build on your childhood shame in your own life or in your relationships with others in the present. This may occur either through your own shaming and destructive thought patterns or your own compulsive, irresponsible, disrespectful, and abusive attitudes and behaviors that are self-defeating and undermine your own and others’ respect and dignity. These are the things that you do to yourself and to others that only add to the reservoir of shame that you already carry with you in your life journey. Examples include:

- Having negative, despairing, competitive, cynical, hostile, vengeful, or entitled thought patterns (which can lead to depression, anxiety or disrespectful anger, arrogance, and grandiosity)
- Being emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually abusive toward others around you
- Becoming and staying involved with addictive and self-destructive behaviors like compulsive gambling, shopping, or spending; over-eating (or becoming anorectic or bulimic) to dull your emotional pain; hurting or injuring yourself (e.g. “cutting,” hitting yourself), sexual acting-out including compulsive use of pornography or masturbation, having affairs, or going to strip clubs; the compulsive use of your cell phone, video games, your computer/tablet, the internet, and television; alcohol and drug abuse; being totally consumed with your work, making money, and the idea that you need to be continually busy and “productive;” compulsive exercise or excessive time playing competitive sports by which you measure your worth

**EXISTENTIAL SHAME:** Existential shame occurs when you experience a major loss or a lack of a significant purpose (**defined by you in your own terms**) in your life, which calls into question who you are and how you have been living your life up to that point. This type of shame leads to the belief that you are “stuck,” “adrift,” “directionless” and “going nowhere.” It may coincide with cultural shame related to losing a specific societal role (e.g. being laid off from your job where you lose your status as a productive worker or having your partner divorce you where you lose your identity as a spouse and full-time parent) but this type of shame also speaks to the powerful need that we as human beings have for meaning and purpose in how

we live our lives (i.e. it represents a loss of your dreams, a loss of hope, or the loss of a personal identity). Examples include:

- Suffering an unexpected or debilitating physical illness such as cancer, a stroke, a heart attack, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, or a significant physical injury (e.g. being in a major car accident where you are badly hurt) which literally “stops your life in its tracks”
- Experiencing the onset of a major mental illness (e.g. depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder) which interferes with what you expected and wanted your life to be
- Remaining in an boring, frustrating, or unsatisfying job solely to maintain a certain income, a set of benefits, the belief that you are “important” as a person, or a sense of security but which ultimately leads to feeling like you are “selling your soul” for “a set of golden handcuffs”
- Being laid off or terminated from a job and then being unable to find stimulating or challenging work (or a job that pays you enough money to live comfortably) to replace this position you have lost (or being unable to find any work at all)
- Staying in an unfulfilling and unhappy relationship where you are clear that “nothing will ever change” but you are also fearful about taking the risk to leave and go out on your own (e.g. thinking to yourself that you don’t deserve any better, that you will never find someone who truly loves you and treats you very well anyway, or that you could never be truly happy and fulfilled on your own)
- Being a career homemaker and having all your children leave home and then losing your identity as a mother and a caretaker
- Retiring from a job that has been meaningful and important to you and having few other life interests, hobbies, or activities, which leads to a sense of feeling useless, unproductive, unimportant, and stagnant as a result