

## SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF YOUR FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND YOUR CHILDHOOD ON THE REST OF YOUR LIFE:

### Understanding How Your Early Life Experiences Can Affect The Development Of Toxic Shame In Who You Have Been In The Past And Who You Are Now

Use the following questions as a means to “transport yourself back in time” to assist you in remembering what your childhood was like and to help you identify where you developed your toxic shame and your current unhealthy and dysfunctional patterns, attitudes, and behaviors. This can also help you develop a new blueprint for what you would like to change about yourself at this point in your life. The goal in this exercise is not intended to simply blame or “bash” your parents or the others who influenced you during your childhood related to who you have become in the present. Rather, it is intended primarily as a way to understand how you have become the person you are today (i.e. the “life script” that was written for you by the important people in your life). It is recommended that you sit down and take time to think and write about whatever these questions trigger for you.

- 1) List and describe your family and all its members (including anyone who lived with you or was important to you or your family (including your parents, caretakers, siblings, extended family, neighbors, friends and other peers, hired help, exchange students) when you were a child.
  - Include names and ages of everyone, descriptions of each person, and what you like(d) or dislike(d) about each person, both as a child and in the present.
  
- 2) Who took on these **ROLES** in your family/extended family and how were they played out? There may be some “cross-over” in these roles.
  - a) **caretakers:** person(s) who were focused on taking care of others’ emotional and physical needs
  - b) **high achievers:** person(s) who continually tried “to accomplish great things” and “to be the absolute best” to make your parents and family proud and to distract from the family’s tension and emotional pain
  - c) **scapegoats:** person(s) who “acted out” your family’s pain and/or who was/were the “target” of the family’s anger, disdain, and disapproval
  - d) **lost child(ren):** person(s) who seemed “out of it” and/or seemed “lost and adrift in his/her own world” with little significant emotional connection to others
  - e) **people pleasers/“good little girls and boys:”** person(s) who sought to please and placate others around them and “always do the right thing” and who tried to do everything possible to get others’ affirmation and approval and to avoid others’ anger and disapproval
  - f) **clowns:** person(s) who joked around and/or used humor to try to try to hide their own emotional pain and to decrease the tension in your family
  - g) **rebels:** person(s) who flaunted parental and other authority and refused to do (in an aggressive, passive-aggressive, or passive way) what was asked or expected of him/her
  - h) **losers:** person(s) who actively or passively undermined and sabotaged their efforts to move forward in a positive way in their lives and became underachievers and self-destructive
  - i) **martyrs:** person(s) who devoted their lives to looking after others, who became resentful that others never seemed to change and then tried to instill shame and guilt on those who were not doing what the martyr thought they should be doing

- j) **saviors:** person(s) who took on the role of “rescuing” and “protecting” those around them who seemed (to the savior) to be continually floundering in their lives
- k) **victims:** person(s) who seemed passive and completely overwhelmed in their lives and felt constantly “persecuted” by others around them and who developed a cynical and fearful view of life and the self-fulfilling belief that others will always end up hurting and disrespecting them which led them to becoming involved with and staying with unhealthy and dysfunctional people in their lives

**How have the roles you played in your family affected your relationships with your partner, your children, and others in your adult life?**

- 3) How would your family look if you made it into a sculpture or a drawing (e.g. how and where would people be standing/sitting/lying in relation to one another, what would their facial expressions be) both when you were growing up and in the present?
- 4) What **VALUES** were prized and important in your family? Check the ones below that fit, add your own if you can think of some others and think and write about how these values relate to you and your family members now and in the past. Also think about whether what was said about these values was different from the way others actually behaved. Also, think of other values that are not listed below and were important to your family and have affected how you have lived your life to the present.

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|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Don't be honest</b>                            | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make a lot of money</b>                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be tough and strong</b>                        | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Go to school/be and act “educated”</b>              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Don't be emotional</b>                         | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Have a lot of material possessions</b>              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be the “best” at whatever you do</b>           | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be completely self-sufficient</b>                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be religious</b>                               | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Never make mistakes</b>                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be and act “intelligent”</b>                   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Don't take responsibility for yourself</b>          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Don't talk about personal/emotional issues</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Always be “fair” to other people</b>                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be “right” at all times</b>                    | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be in control of people/situations around you</b>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Work hard and be “productive” at all times</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be “loyal” to the family no matter what happens</b> |

**How have the values that were prized in your family affected your relationships with your partner(s), your children, and others and how you look at yourself and the world around you?**

- 5) What were your family's **“RULES”** (both talked about and demonstrated through peoples' behavior) about:
  - a) **how boys and men were viewed and treated**
  - b) **how girls and women were viewed and treated**
  - c) **how children were viewed and treated**
  - d) **how language was viewed and what was acceptable for whom in the family**

**Are there any other rules that stand out for you? How have the rules you learned in your family affected your relationships with your partner(s), your children, and others?**

- 6) What was it like being around your house on a “typical” day. What was the “atmosphere” like? How did it feel being around home? How did you spend your days? What was it like to eat meals with your family?

- 7) Describe your relationship with your father and your relationship with your mother (including what each of them was like as a person).
- 8) Who were your mother's and father's "favorite" children? Who were your grandparents' "favorite" children? How did you know this? Why were they (or you) the "favorite?" If you were not the "favorite," how did this affect you and how you felt about yourself?
- 9) Think about and describe your parents' relationship with one another:
  - a) How did they emotionally "connect" with each other?
  - b) Did your parents spend time together/enjoy activities together? If so, describe these.
  - c) How did they express caring and affection for one another?
  - d) How did they treat each other emotionally? How were emotions expressed between them?  
Did they tend to avoid certain emotions in their interactions with each other or with you and your siblings?
  - e) How did they discuss issues that arose for them and for the family?
  - f) Who was the "boss" in the household and who generally had the "final say" in decisions?
    - How were these decisions enforced?
  - g) Was there anyone in the family who was "always right?"
    - Did your parents or caretakers ever apologize for what they said or did with each other, with you, or with your siblings? If they did, give some examples of what they said and how they did this.
  - h) How did they argue or engage in conflict? Who usually "won" these fights? Whose "side" did you usually take?
  - i) Were your parents emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually abusive with each other or with you and your siblings in any way? If so, in what ways?
  - j) Are your parents still together? If not, when and how did they decide to end their relationship (i.e. what happened)?
  - k) Do you look at their relationship any differently now from what you thought about it in the past? If so, how?

**How is your relationship with your current partner (and past partners) similar to and different from the relationship you saw your parents have with one another?**

- 10) How did your mother and father express affection toward you and your siblings? How did they let you know that you were cared about and an important person to them? How were you praised and given credit for who you were and what you did?
- 11) Who were the most important people in the family to you? Why were they important to you?
- 12) To whom did you feel close among your siblings and from whom were you distant? Why did you feel close to or distant with them? With whom did you compete? How was affection and caring expressed between you and your siblings?
  - At present, how much and what kind of contact do you have with your siblings and to whom are you close and with whom are you distant? Why?

- 13) Who in your family gave you the feeling that you weren't wanted or cared about?
- What did they say or do to trigger this feeling in you?
- 14) How was anger experienced and expressed in your family (by whom, at what times, where)?
- What were conflicts like and how were they resolved in your family (between your parents, between you and your parents, between your siblings and your parents, between you and your siblings)?
  - Was there anyone who was always “right” and how did this get played out in the family?
  - Did your parents or caretakers ever apologize for things they said or did with each other and with you and your siblings?
  - How were other feelings experienced and expressed in your family (e.g. sadness, hurt, joy, fear, disappointment, confusion, love)?
  - Were some emotions “OK” and others “not OK” to experience and express in your family during your childhood? If so, which ones fit into each of those categories?
  - How often do you allow yourself to feel sad and cry today (and throughout your adult life)?
- 15) How were you and your siblings disciplined when you or your siblings did something “wrong” or something that your parents didn’t like? What was considered “bad” behavior in your household (i.e. what were you punished for and how were you punished)?
- Was physical punishment used by your parents? If it was used, what was done, how often, and for what sorts of “misbehavior?”
  - Who was the primary disciplinarian in your household?
    - Were objects (e.g. belts, rulers, spatulas, sticks, boards) used to punish you and your siblings?
    - Who did the physical disciplining if this was done?
    - How was it decided that physical discipline was to be used?
    - Did you ever think that your parent(s) seemed “out-of-control” when they were disciplining you or your siblings in this way?
    - How did you feel about yourself and about your father and/or mother when they were physically disciplining you (if they did this)?
  - What other sorts of discipline were used with you and your siblings? How was it decided to use them rather than physical punishment? Who used these other types of discipline?
  - Were boys and girls disciplined differently? If so, how? Were there different standards for boys and girls that were used regarding discipline (if so, what were they)?
  - How did you respond to the anger, discipline, and punishment you received from your parents?
  - What was the difference between discipline and abuse to you then? What is the difference to you now?
    - How did you feel about the discipline you received as a child and now (in looking back)?  
...e.g. did you believe that you “deserved” what you got if you were abused?
  - How do you currently discipline your own children (if you have any)? Do you use physical discipline with them? Why or why not? How is your parenting and discipline and your attitude about it similar to or different from what was done with you and your siblings as you were growing up?
- 16) What did your father do for work and with his leisure time? What did your mother do for work (inside and outside the home) and with her leisure time?
- Were there any problems in these areas (e.g. often changing jobs, getting fired from jobs, moving frequently, not having enough money to pay the bills, working all the time)?

- Did your family have vacations and family outings? What were they like?
  - What did you enjoy doing with your father and with your mother?
  - What did you dislike doing with your father and your mother?
- 17) What were your successes and “failures” while you were growing up? How did you and your parents and other family members respond to these?
- 18). What were the psychological “defenses” and survival mechanisms you learned in your family in order to “simply get by?”  
How much have you used your defenses in your adult life and how have they interfered with your relationships with other people?
- e.g. withdrawal; staying busy, “useful,” and “productive;” denial; blaming; justifying; rebelling
- 19) Did you have family pets? If so, how were they treated? Who played with them? Who took care of them? When and how did they die and how were their deaths handled by your family?
- 20) What are some of the **mottos and phrases** that you remember your parents and other family members saying (e.g. “*the first hundred years are the hardest,*” “*it's a great life if you don't weaken,*” “*only babies cry,*” “*why don't you go out and play in the street,*” “*grow up,*” “*act like a man/adult,*” “*if you don't like it here, don't let the door hit you in the ass when you leave*”)?
- What did these phrases mean to you and how have they affected you in the past and in the present?
- 21) What were and are your family’s **“secrets?”**
- i.e. sources of shame and things that you or other family members want(ed) to keep “hidden” from each other and from the outside world?
- 22) What major losses (e.g. moving and leaving friends, separation, divorce), illnesses (e.g. cancer, heart attack, stroke, chronic and debilitating sickness), significant medical procedures, and/or deaths (e.g. family members, friends, neighbors) did your family experience?
- How did you and the rest of the family react to and handle these losses?
- 23) What sorts of emotional difficulties (e.g. “nervous breakdown,” depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, alcohol or drug abuse/dependency) did you or other family members experience when you were growing up?
- Did anyone ever receive chemical dependency or mental health treatment for any of these issues?
  - How did you and other family members react to and handle these experiences?
- 24) What sorts of behavioral problems (e.g. running away, truancy, vandalism, legal or criminal difficulties) did you or your siblings have during childhood?
- How were these situations handled by you and the rest of your family?
  - Did either of your parents experience any sort of legal trouble as you were growing up?
  - Did anyone experience any consequences as a result of these problems?

- 25) How were you treated by peers in your neighborhood and in school, by adult neighbors, by your parents' friends, by relatives, by teachers, by coaches, and by others outside your immediate family?
- Did you have friends when you were a child? If you did, what were your relationships with your friends like and what did you talk about and do together? If you didn't have friends, why was this the case?
  - Were you hurt, shamed, ridiculed, bullied, or "picked on" by other children and/or adults? If so, what happened, how did you respond, and how did this affect you and the way you felt about yourself at the time and in your adult life?
  - Did you "pick on" or bully other children? If you did, what did you say or do to others and how did these other children respond to your doing this with them. Have you "bullied" other people in your adult life (e.g. your partners, your children)? If you did this, in looking back, how do you feel about bullying others when you were young and as an adult?
- 26) Who in your life treated you in a respectful and nurturing way and let you know that you were a special person and cared about, including your parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, and others?
- How did they let you know that they cared about you and thought that you were important?
  - What would they say to you now if they knew that you were struggling with emotional difficulties?
- 27) What were your favorite activities as a child, both inside and outside school?
- How did you spend your time?
  - With whom did you do these activities?
  - How and why were they important to you?
  - How much did you watch TV, play video games, or spend time on your cell phone or the internet  
...what did you watch or play?  
...what messages did you get from these activities about what it meant to be a boy/man or a girl/woman?
- 28) How was sex talked about and handled in your family and where and how did you learn about sex?
- How have your attitudes toward the opposite sex been affected by what and how you learned about sexuality when you were young?
- 29) Describe your relationships with childhood girlfriends or boyfriends.
- Was there unhealthy control or abuse (emotional, verbal, physical, sexual) in these relationships. If so, what types (be specific) and how did these affect you and the relationships that you had?
  - How and why did these relationships end?
- 30) When and how did you and your siblings leave the family to move out on your own?
- How were these decisions made?
  - Were the leavings "smooth" or difficult? In what ways?
- 31) Were you or other family members involved with illegal or criminal activity (e.g. vandalism, shoplifting, physical fights or disorderly conduct, burglary, robbery) during your childhood?
- If so, what happened and did you or others experience any consequences as a result of these activities?

- 32) If there was dysfunction, neglect, or abuse in your family of origin, did you talk with anyone at any time in your life about this (e.g. friends, relative, neighbors, teachers, coaches)?
- If you did, what was the other person's response to you? If you didn't, why weren't you willing to do this?
  - Did anyone inside or outside the family try to protect you from the dysfunction in your family or tell you that you didn't deserve to be abused or neglected?  
...if someone did this, how did they do this with you?
- 33) If there was dysfunction, abuse, or neglect in your childhood, have you confronted or addressed this in any way with the people who did these things to you?
- If you have addressed it, how did you do it and with whom and what was your experience in doing this?
  - If you have not addressed it, why haven't you done anything and would you like to (or be willing to) do something about it at this point in your life?
- 34) Who among your family of origin members (**INCLUDING YOURSELF**) were (in the past) or are (currently):
- controlling**
    - how were/are others controlled?
    - how has this affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - emotionally and verbally abusive, shaming, threatening, and/or intimidating**
    - give some specific examples
    - how has this affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - abusing or dependent on alcohol or drugs**
    - what chemicals were used, how were they used, and what would happen when they were used?
    - how has this affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - suffering from depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, or other mental health issues**
    - what are these emotional issues and for whom?
    - how have these affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - involved with other addictive or compulsive behaviors** (e.g. gambling, sexual acting-out, shopping and spending, working too much, being on the internet/playing video games, watching TV)
    - how have these affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - physically abusive**
    - give some specific examples
    - how has this affected your own or other family members' lives?
  - sexually abusive**
    - give some specific examples
    - how has this affected your own or other family members' lives?
- 35) How would you like to relate differently to your parents and siblings in the present?
- Are you willing to take the risks and do the things necessary to actually behave differently around them? If so, what do you need to do and how will you do that?
  - What do you need to change about yourself in the present to do this?
  - What would you like to see different about your parents and siblings?

- 36) To whom did you feel closest in the family when you were growing up? Why?
- To whom do you feel closest to in your family of origin now? Why?
- 37) Who influenced you the most to become the person you have become as an adult? How did they influence you?
- 38) How are you similar to the kind of person your father was (is)? How are you similar to the kind of person your mother was (is)?
- **How have the similarities to your parents affected your relationships with your partners, your children (if you have any), and others?**
- 39) What do you want (or did you wish you had the chance) to say to your father, your mother, or other important people from your childhood about your “growing-up” experience?
- **Write each parent or important caretaker a letter** sharing what you thought and felt about your childhood, what you would have liked to be different and why, how your childhood has affected your adult life and your relationships with others, and how you felt/feel about your parents in the past/present.
  - You can also write letters to other people who have been important to you (in a positive or a negative sense) from your childhood (and from your adult years), if you wish.
- 40) How does your childhood and your “growing up” experience affect who you are as a person in the present (e.g. what you think and feel and how you act)?
- How does what you thought and felt as a child growing up in your family relate to your self-talk and how you feel about yourself as a person in the present?
  - What do you want to change about what you learned in childhood and how do you plan to do it at this point in your life?