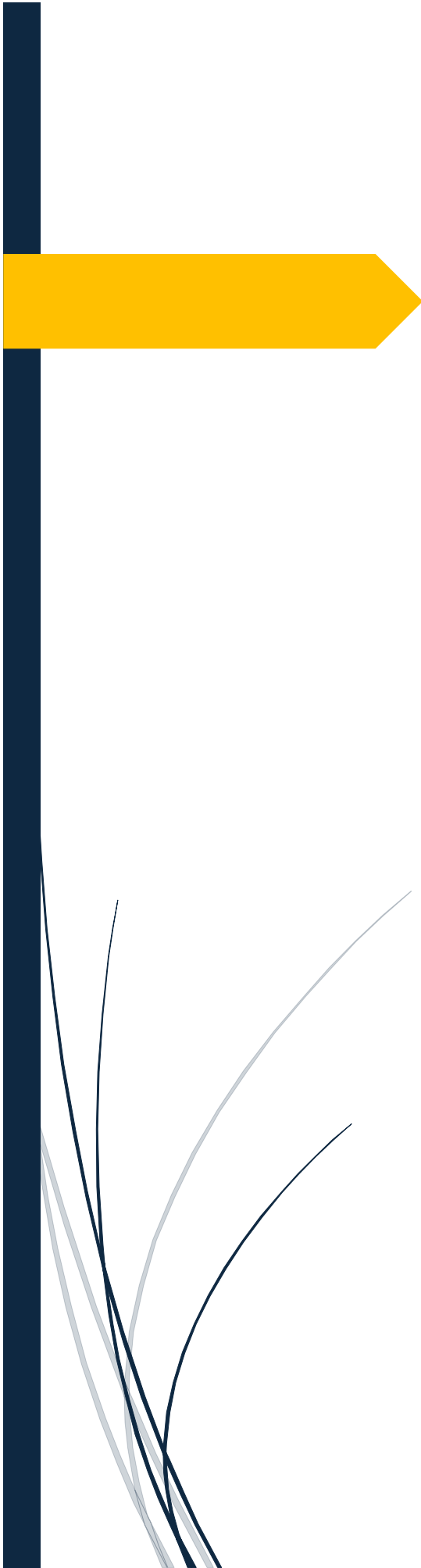




Shame

When the Problem Becomes
“Me”

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Shame is a powerful emotional experience that can shape how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and what we believe we deserve.

Shame can develop after something we did, something that happened to us, something we believe about ourselves, or something we learned from other people.

It may sound like:

- **“There is something wrong with me.”**
- **“I'm not good enough.”**
- **“If people really knew me, they wouldn't accept me.”**
- **“I should be different.”**
- **“I don't belong.”**
- **“I'm a disappointment.”**

Shame often moves beyond evaluating an experience or behavior and turns the evaluation toward the **self**.

Instead of: **“Something went wrong.”**

It becomes: **“Something is wrong with me.”**

Understanding that difference can be an important first step in changing our relationship with shame.

Guilt vs. Shame

Guilt and shame are related, but they don't necessarily do the same thing.

GUILT = “I did something bad.”

Guilt tends to focus on a **behavior, choice, or action**.

Healthy guilt can provide useful information.

It can encourage us to:

- Take responsibility
- Apologize
- Repair harm
- Change our behavior
- Reconsider a decision
- Act more consistently with our values

Guilt can help us ask: **“What did I do, and what can I do about it?”**

SHAME = “I am bad.”

Shame shifts the focus from the behavior to our **identity and worth**.

Instead of: **“I made a mistake.”**

Shame says: **“I am a mistake.”**

Instead of: **“I failed at something.”**

Shame says: **“I am a failure.”**

Instead of: **“I hurt someone.”**

Shame says: **“I am a terrible person.”**

That distinction matters.

We can often repair a behavior.

It becomes much harder to solve the problem when we believe **we are the problem**.

How Shame Develops

Shame doesn't come from one place.

It can develop through experiences, relationships, environments, expectations, and the meaning we make from them.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN

We may have learned:

- Don't make mistakes.
- Don't embarrass the family.
- Don't show weakness.
- Don't talk about problems.
- Don't disappoint people.
- Don't be too emotional.
- Don't need too much.
- Don't be different.

RELATIONSHIPS

Shame can develop when we experience:

- Criticism
- Rejection
- Betrayal
- Humiliation
- Bullying
- Abandonment
- Comparison
- Emotional invalidation
- Repeated messages that we are “too much” or “not enough”

CULTURE & ENVIRONMENT

Messages about:

- Success
- Money
- Achievement
- Appearance
- Gender
- Masculinity/femininity
- Parenting
- Relationships
- Sexuality
- Religion
- Education
- Career
- Status

All of these messages can become internal yardsticks for determining whether we believe we measure up.

OUR OWN EXPERIENCES

Shame may also become attached to:

- Something we did
- Something we didn't do
- Failure
- Addiction or problematic behaviors
- Relationship mistakes
- Parenting mistakes
- Financial decisions
- Career setbacks
- Academic struggles
- Our body
- Mental or emotional struggles
- Something that happened to us

Over time, an experience can become a conclusion about identity.

“This happened” → “This says something about me” → “This is who I am.”

Shame Loves Labels

Labels can turn complicated human experiences into global conclusions about ourselves.

- **I failed → I'm a failure.**
- **I lied → I'm a liar.**
- **I struggled → I'm weak.**
- **I was rejected → I'm unwanted.**
- **My relationship ended → I'm unlovable.**
- **I don't know → I'm stupid.**
- **I made a bad decision → I'm irresponsible.**
- **I'm overwhelmed → I'm incapable.**
- **I need help → I'm broken.**

Notice what happens. A **behavior, event, limitation, emotion, or experience** becomes an identity.

The label becomes a junk drawer. Everything gets thrown into it.

Instead of becoming more accurate, the story becomes larger and more absolute.

Ask: **What actually happened?**

Then ask: **What label did I attach to myself because of it?**

Shame's Favorite Words

Shame often speaks in absolutes.

Listen for:

Always

Never

Everyone

No one

Should

Shouldn't

Normal

Failure

Weak

Broken

Enough

Unlovable

Embarrassing

Disappointing

Pathetic

These words can signal that we've moved away from describing an experience and toward judging the entire self.

Try replacing: **“What does this say about me?”**

with: **“What does this experience actually tell me?”**

Those are very different questions.

What Shame Makes Us Want to Do

Shame is uncomfortable. Our system often tries to protect us from that discomfort.

Shame may encourage us to:

HIDE = “If people don't see it, they can't judge me.”

- We withdraw, conceal, avoid, minimize, or keep secrets.

DEFEND = “If I'm wrong, something must be wrong with me.”

- We explain, justify, argue, blame, rationalize, or refuse responsibility.

ATTACK = “I don't want to feel small, so I'll make someone else smaller.”

- We criticize, become angry, shame someone else, or redirect attention toward their failures.

PLEASE = “If everyone is happy with me, maybe I'm okay.”

- We overfunction, say yes when we mean no, avoid disagreement, seek reassurance, or make ourselves responsible for others' emotions.

PERFORM = “If I accomplish enough, no one—including me—will see what I fear is underneath.”

- We pursue achievement, perfection, productivity, appearance, money, status, or competence as evidence of worth.

NUMB = “I don't want to feel this.”

- We distract, overwork, isolate, scroll, eat, drink, use substances, shop, gamble, sleep, or find other ways to temporarily escape the experience.

These responses aren't random. They may be **protective measures**.

The important question becomes: **What is this behavior trying to protect me from feeling or believing?**

The Shame Cycle

Shame can create its own reinforcing loop:

1. **Trigger** = Something happens that activates vulnerability.
2. **Meaning** = “I failed.” Or “I disappointed someone.” Or “I don't measure up.”
3. **Shame** = “There is something wrong with me.”
4. **Protective Response** = Hide | Defend | Attack | Please | Perform | Numb
5. **Consequences** = Disconnection | Conflict | Avoidance | Exhaustion | Secrecy | Resentment
6. **More Shame** = “See? This proves something is wrong with me.”

The protective strategy can unintentionally create more evidence for the original shame story.

The goal isn't simply to tell yourself:

“Stop feeling ashamed.”

Instead, learn to interrupt the cycle.

Find the Trigger

Shame often arrives quickly. You may notice the reaction before you understand what activated it.

Consider when shame tends to show up for you.

I experience shame when...

- I make a mistake.
- Someone criticizes me.
- Someone is disappointed in me.
- I don't know something.
- I need help.
- I compare myself to others.
- I disappoint my partner.
- I struggle professionally.
- I don't meet my own expectations.
- I feel rejected.
- I experience sexual rejection.
- I lose control emotionally.
- I don't feel productive.
- I think about something from my past.
- My body doesn't look or perform how I want.
- I feel like I'm failing as a partner or parent.
- Someone sees something I try to hide.

My common shame triggers are:

Where Did I Learn This?

Not every belief we carry about ourselves started with us.

Sometimes we inherit the yardstick we use to measure ourselves.

Ask:

- **Who taught me what “good enough” looked like?**
- **What happened when I made mistakes growing up?**
- **What emotions were acceptable in my family?**
- **What happened when I needed help?**
- **What qualities received praise?**
- **What qualities received criticism?**
- **What did I learn about success, appearance, relationships, parenting, money, strength, intelligence, or achievement?**

Then ask: **Do I still want to use that yardstick?**

Shame vs. Accountability

Reducing shame does **not** mean avoiding responsibility. In fact, shame can sometimes interfere with accountability.

If admitting a mistake means: **“I am a terrible person,”** our system has a strong incentive to defend itself.

We may:

- Deny
- Minimize
- Blame
- Explain
- Avoid
- Hide
- Counterattack

Accountability becomes easier when we can separate: **WHO I AM** from **WHAT I DID**

Healthy accountability allows us to say:

- **“I did something I don't feel good about.”**
- **“My behavior affected someone.”**
- **“I want to understand why I did it.”**
- **“I can take responsibility.”**
- **“I can repair what I can.”**
- **“I can make a different choice next time.”**

We don't need to destroy ourselves to take responsibility for ourselves.

What Is Yours to Carry?

Shame can cause us to take responsibility for things that aren't entirely ours.

Ask: **ME**

What actually belongs to me?

- My choices
- My behaviors
- My words
- My impact
- My values
- My repair
- What I do next

Ask: **NOT ME**

What may not belong to me?

- Another person's expectations
- Someone else's emotional reaction
- Another person's choices
- Cultural expectations I don't agree with
- Family rules I no longer accept
- Someone else's judgment
- Outcomes I couldn't control
- Things I didn't know at the time

This doesn't remove responsibility. It makes responsibility **more accurate**.

The goal isn't: **“Nothing is my fault.”**

The goal is: **“I will own what is mine without carrying what isn't.”**

Separate the Facts from the Story

Shame often fills missing information with conclusions. Try separating what happened from what you made it mean.

- **THE FACT:** What objectively happened?
- **THE STORY:** What did I tell myself this means about me?
- **THE LABEL:** What did I call myself?
- **THE EVIDENCE:** What evidence supports that conclusion? What evidence does NOT support it?
- **THE MORE ACCURATE STORY:** What is a more complete description of what happened?

Accuracy is often more useful than forced positivity.

The goal isn't: **“I'm amazing and everything is fine.”**

It may simply be: **“I made a mistake in this situation. That is different from being a mistake.”**

Shame Hates Context

Shame often removes context. It looks backward using everything we know **today** and judges the person we were **then**.

Try asking:

- What did I know at the time?
- What didn't I know?
- How old was I?
- What resources did I have?
- What capabilities had I developed?
- What was happening around me?
- What pressures was I experiencing?
- What options did I believe were available?
- What was I trying to accomplish, avoid, or protect?

Context doesn't automatically excuse behavior. Context helps us **understand behavior accurately**.

Understanding creates more opportunity for change than condemnation.

From Shame to Curiosity

- Shame asks: **“What's wrong with me?”**
 - Curiosity asks: **“What happened?”**
- Shame asks: **“Why am I like this?”**
 - Curiosity asks: **“What is this behavior doing for me?”**
- Shame asks: **“Why can't I just get over this?”**
 - Curiosity asks: **“What keeps getting activated?”**
- Shame asks: **“Why do I always screw things up?”**
 - Curiosity asks: **“What pattern keeps showing up?”**

Shame closes the investigation. Curiosity opens it.

Bring Shame Into the Light

Shame often grows through secrecy. It tells us: **“Don't let anyone see this.”**

But carefully sharing shame with a safe person can create a corrective experience.

The objective isn't to disclose everything to everyone. Ask: **Who has earned access to this part of me?**

Look for someone who can:

- Listen without immediately fixing
- Stay curious
- Avoid minimizing
- Hold complexity
- Offer compassion without removing accountability
- Respect confidentiality
- See you as more than one behavior or experience

You might begin with:

- **“There's something I'm embarrassed to talk about.”**
- **“I'm worried you'll see me differently if I tell you this.”**
- **“I don't need you to solve this. I need somewhere safe to say it.”**
- **“I'm realizing I've turned something I did into a judgment about who I am.”**

Being seen accurately can challenge the belief that being known automatically leads to rejection.

Build a More Complete Identity

Shame narrows identity. It takes one experience and allows it to become the whole story.

One antidote is to intentionally broaden the evidence.

Ask: **What else is true about me?**

- I am someone who:
- I care about:
- People can depend on me for:
- Capabilities I have developed include:
- Times I have handled something difficult:
- Mistakes I have learned from:
- Ways I have changed:
- Qualities other people experience in me:
- Parts of myself I am still developing:

A difficult chapter can be part of your story without becoming the title of the entire book.

Working With Shame

When shame shows up, try moving through the following sequence.

1. NOTICE “I'm experiencing shame.”

Notice your body, thoughts, urges, and behavior.

2. NAME What is the shame story?

“I'm telling myself that _____.”

3. LOCATE Where did this belief come from?

“I learned that _____.”

4. SEPARATE Separate behavior from identity.

“What happened?” versus “What am I concluding about myself?”

5. CONTEXTUALIZE

What else was happening?

What did I know then?

What resources and capabilities did I have?

- 6. OWN** Is there something I genuinely need to take responsibility for? **If yes:** acknowledge it.
- 7. REPAIR** Is there something I can repair, apologize for, change, or do differently? **If yes:** act.
- 8. RELEASE** What am I carrying that no longer belongs to me?
- 9. RECONNECT** Reconnect with your values, capabilities, relationships, and broader identity.
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Build Your Shame Map

Take one experience that tends to activate shame.

- **THE TRIGGER**
 - What happened?
 - **THE SHAME STORY**
 - What did I make it mean about me?
 - **THE LABEL**
 - What do I call myself when I think about it?
 - **THE ORIGIN**
 - Where might I have learned this standard or belief?
 - **THE PROTECTIVE RESPONSE**
 - Do I tend to: **Hide | Defend | Attack | Please | Perform | Numb** = How?
 - **THE COST**
 - What does this protective response cost me?
 - **THE RESPONSIBILITY**
 - What part is genuinely mine to own?
 - **THE NOT ME**
 - What am I carrying that isn't mine?
 - **THE REPAIR**
 - Is there anything I can do now?
 - **THE MORE COMPLETE STORY**
 - What else is true about me?
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Moving From Shame Toward Self-Respect

The opposite of shame isn't believing you're perfect. It isn't avoiding accountability.

It isn't convincing yourself that everything you've done was acceptable.

A healthier destination is **self-respect**.

Self-respect allows us to say:

- **I have strengths and limitations.**
- **I have made good decisions and poor ones.**
- **I have helped people and hurt people.**
- **I have succeeded and failed.**
- **I have things I am proud of and things I wish I had done differently.**
- **I am responsible for my behavior without reducing my entire identity to my worst behavior.**

We are complicated. A healthy sense of self has enough room to hold that complexity.

Final Reflection

When shame tells you: **“This proves who you are.”** Pause.....

Ask:

- **What actually happened?**
- **What did I make it mean about me?**
- **Where did I learn that meaning?**
- **What is mine to own?**
- **What isn't mine to carry?**
- **Is there something I can repair?**
- **What have I learned?**
- **What else is true about me?**
- **Who do I want to be moving forward?**

You don't need to erase the past to change your relationship with it. You can acknowledge what happened. You can take responsibility where responsibility belongs. You can repair what can be repaired.

You can learn.

You can change.

And you can refuse to make **one behavior, one experience, one failure, one loss, or one chapter the definition of your entire self.**