

A Space to talk about ...

Understanding Shame

Shame and how it differs from guilt

Shame is thought to be one of the most painful emotions as it can make us feel as if we have no value. When in the grips of shame, we imagine that we are seen in this way by others too which intensifies the experience of being 'not good enough'. To escape feeling shame, we may try to be perfect. This never works as none of us can avoid getting things wrong or making mistakes! Shame can lead us to getting stuck in a vicious cycle as shown below.



Another type of shame cycle we can become caught up in is to give up when we feel worthless. However, this is also harmful as we then shame ourselves even more for not trying! You can see how shame is self-destructive and serves no real purpose. *(The above illustration was downloaded from the internet. Search **Images of the Shame Cycle** to see examples of different versions of this.)*

Guilt, on the other hand, does help us to make progress. We feel guilty when we know that something we've said or done is wrong as it goes against our values or our moral code. Guilt is necessary. It prompts us to learn from our failures or mistakes and, when appropriate, to make amends. In contrast, shame is an unhealthy state of mind which can contribute to low self-esteem and a lack of belief in ourselves. The causes of shame often become personal secrets which, if not talked through and understood, fester, leaving emotional wounds which do not heal. Not only do we feel alienated from others when we're feeling shame – we also feel cut off from our healthy, well-functioning parts. No one needs to feel shame – none of us are 'all good' or 'all bad'!

Common causes of shame

We all have parts of ourselves or our personal history which cause us discomfort. In fact, no individual or family is without flaws no matter how good they might look from the outside. In the past, many forms of emotional and mental pain were viewed as something to be ashamed of. Aspects of identity such as sexual identity, race and class background could also be a cause of shame in days gone by. Aileen Alleyne, a black psychotherapist, describes how a black client saw themselves:

“Shame told me there was something fundamentally wrong with me and those who looked like me. Society said so and I accepted that I was inferior; I was the Other; I was a mistake. Life then became a task to do rather than a journey to enjoy. I had bought into the lie.” *(From the book **Shame Matters** edited by Orit Badouk Epstein, published by Routledge).*

As the quote above shows us, if we let shame take over, it can affect our self-belief. We can feel shame about:

OUR SELF e.g. our differences, aspects of our identity, our family history or current circumstances (which may include incidents of parental drug/ alcohol misuse and/or sexual abuse), our own failures, times when we've let others down, our actions/ wrong choices, our online activity etc.

OUR BODY e.g. how we look, our body shape or size, our skin colour, how we treat our body (over/under eating, over/under exercising, drug or alcohol use, self-harm etc), feeling we are in the wrong body and so on.

OUR PRIVATE THOUGHTS e.g. we can feel ashamed of thoughts even though no one knows about them such as cruel or revengeful feelings towards others, hateful/murderous thoughts, sexual wishes and fantasies etc.

OUR FAMILY e.g. our parents/carers' difficulties, suicide / mental illness in the family, a family member's criminal activity / their time in prison, family poverty etc.

OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD e.g. feeling we don't belong because of who we are, feeling 'less than' because of our race/religion/culture/ parents or carers' level of education etc.

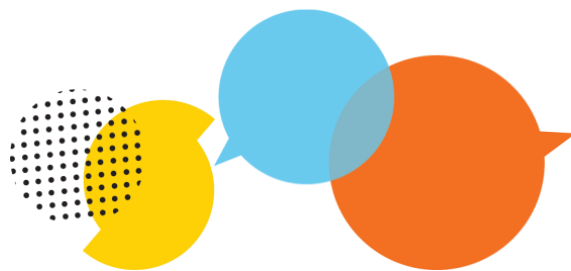
Everyday experiences

We can also feel shame about more everyday experiences. Here are some common instances when we might automatically feel shame:

- We might miss a social cue, saying or doing something that makes us stand out.
- Perhaps we give a wrong answer or are exposed in some way in front of others.
- A friend could drop us or a partner break up with us.
- We may believe we are being treated unfairly (e.g. our parents/ carers seem to reject us in favour of a sibling or we are never recognised by them for who we are).
- We don't get the academic results or the job offer we'd hoped for.

See if you can give some examples of your own.

It helps to remember that everyone can feel shame. Learning to tolerate times when shame surfaces is part of building our emotional resilience. When we feel this way, it is vital that we talk it through so that we can learn to see ourselves in a more compassionate light.



Self-Compassion & Sharing Heals our Shame

Trying to block out our shame and what has caused it is a natural response. However, it doesn't go away but stays under the surface, affecting our self-image and damaging our confidence. We may even begin to feel like an imposter and imagine that if people saw our shameful parts, they'd reject us! *Give some examples of how shame leads to low self-esteem.*

To heal shame, we need to practice self-compassion and understanding. If we're no longer trying to escape from our shame, we can stay with difficult thoughts and feelings, becoming curious about them. Putting things in perspective is part of this. *Come up with affirming statements that you can use in your self-talk as a way of practicing self-compassion.*

Recognising our shared humanity makes it easier to accept our flaws, vulnerabilities and mistakes. This, in turn, enables us to share our shame-based thoughts with someone we trust. It takes courage but exploring together like this always pays off. It can lead to feeling more connected with others rather than isolated and on our own. Research confirms the very positive effect self-compassion and sharing has on reducing shame. Well known individuals such as those below have spoken out about shame and how important it is to move on from it. Letting go of shame is liberating, enabling new possibilities for our relationships with our self and others!

bell hooks: *Shame produces trauma. Trauma produces paralysis.* Born into a working class African-American family, bell hooks was an author, theorist, educator, social critic and professor. Taking her maternal great-grandmother's name and putting it in lowercase letters was her way of conveying that what is most important is her work, not who she is. She had much to say about shame and how to move on.

Carl Jung: *Shame is a soul eating emotion.* Carl Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, wrote about the importance of getting to know the 'shadow self' which includes our hidden, unacceptable parts, especially those linked to shame.

Brené Brown: *If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive.* An American professor, author and podcast host, Brené Brown is known for her work on shame, vulnerability and leadership.

Barack Obama: *Making your mark on the world is hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it. But it's not. It takes patience, it takes commitment, and it comes with plenty of failure along the way. The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.* As the 44th President of the United States, Obama had his own struggles to overcome including working through social perceptions of his multiracial heritage.

Learn more by doing some internet research of your own. The website [Self-Compassion – Dr. Kristin Neff](#) is a good place to start. You'll also find blogs reflecting on the topic of shame on Psychology Today: [Identifying the Root Causes of Shame | Psychology Today](#)