

## Managing Shame and Guilt

**Guilt** = an emotion that is experienced when a person believes that he or she has broken his or her own standard of conduct or has violated a moral standard, and bears significant responsibility for that violation. Guilt affirms morality.

**Shame** = goes beyond guilt and involves deep feelings about our sense of self. Shame is feeling bad for what or who you are, and it focuses on your sense of character and is slower to change than guilt. It is a deep feeling that originates from feeling flawed when you believe that only perfection is acceptable.

The spectrum of feelings in the territory of guilt and shame includes:

- Inadequacy – sense of being unfit, useless, not up to the task, inferior, mediocre, worthless, less than, devalued
- Humiliation – embarrassment, disgrace, degradation, loss of face, slap in the face
- **Guilt** – I did something bad; the focus is on behavior
- **Shame** – I *am* something bad; the focus is on self
- Remorse – contrition, regret over wrong-doing, feeling abashed, self-reproach, conscience-stricken

These are powerful, sometimes crippling emotions. There is a place for healthy remorse in a moral person. But for most people, the shame spectrum of feelings is far too prominent in their psychology – typically, not so much in terms of feeling chronic shame, but in terms of how they pull back from fully expressing themselves to avoid the awful experience of a shaming attack.

### Shameful Beliefs:

Belief:

This belief comes from:

\_\_\_\_\_ I cannot take risks.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm not allowed to be seen or heard.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm invisible.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm not allowed to ask for what I need.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I must treat myself negatively because I'm bad.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ My beliefs about myself are all negative.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I must be perfect.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am inferior to others.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a disappointment to \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ If something goes wrong, it's my fault.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not as good or honorable as I used to be.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am less intelligent than I thought I was.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am unworthy of love or affection.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I am ugly, disgusting, or deficient in some way.

\_\_\_\_\_

## Where Does Shame Come From?

- The controlling/enmeshed/abusive families or social groups
- Perfectionistic families or social groups
- Environment filled with chronic stress (including chronic illness, financial stress, high risk, instability)
- Alcoholic families or social groups
- Environment where parents or support is emotionally unavailable
- Any shame-based environment
- Certain religious perspectives or cultural beliefs

## Questions to Explore Shame:

1. How did it feel to look at and write about the ways you blame yourself and the shameful feelings you have about yourself?
2. What are the three most powerful and shameful beliefs in your life?
3. Can you look at each of these beliefs at their source? Who said them first?
4. Can you identify a healthier belief to substitute for this shaming belief?
5. Are you able to identify three strengths about yourself?
6. How does it feel to list your strengths? Do you feel like you are boasting? Do you think it's egotistical to take pride in yourself and your accomplishments?
7. How can you work towards decreasing the amount of guilt and shame in your life?

# Overcoming the Paralysis of Toxic Shame

Bernard Golden, Ph.D.

As an anger management specialist, I've witnessed the powerful impact that shame can have in fueling anger arousal as an adult. Some direct their anger outward, while others focus it inward. Each moment of anger directed in this manner can provide a powerful distraction from experiencing shame or the feelings that may accompany it. Shame, like guilt and embarrassment, involves negatively judging ourselves when we believe we've failed to live up to either our own standards or the standards of other people (H. Lewis, 1971).

Recall a time when you experienced shame, whether it was a reaction to judgment by others or your own. You most likely experienced intense discomfort, feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness and the desire to hide (M. Lewis, 1995). And you most likely felt anger toward others or with yourself.

I agree instead with Dr. Brené Brown, who describes healthy shame as being guilt (Brown, 2012). Guilt can be healthy in moving us toward positive thinking and behavior. It is specific in its focus. Shame, when toxic, is a paralyzing global assessment of oneself as a person. When severe, it can form the lens through which all self-evaluation is viewed. As such, some words used to express the emotion of shame include feeling insecure, worthless, stupid, foolish, silly, inadequate or simply less than.

Everyone experiences shame at some time, but not everyone is ruled by toxic or overwhelming shame. Some researchers suggest that shame comes about from repeatedly being told, not that we did something bad, but that we are something bad. Consequently, it can close us off from accepting any form of positive regard from others or ourselves.

Paralyzing shame can lead us to feel undeserving of such regard. It can undermine being fully present with others and with ourselves. This makes perfect sense—it takes a lot of energy to protect us against our vulnerability to feel shame. Most importantly, difficulty with shame leave us prone to anger-anger that results when natural desires for love, connection, and validation are inhibited by the impenetrable barrier of shame.

## **Developing sensitivity of shame**

Developing heightened vulnerability to experience shame most often occurs in our early years. It can form the foundation for feeling unlovable and undeserving and for a harshly self-critical inner dialog. And while single events can yield shame, it is often the result of more pervasive experiences.

Some children may experience shame in response to interactions that express disgust. This was the case with one of my clients, Jeremy, who was plagued by his father's facial expression when he saw that six-year-old Jeremy had wet his bed. Jeremy's intense pain was only further exacerbated when his father called in his brothers and sisters to observe the bed. This was just one of many ways in which he had been shamed as a child.

We may experience shame as a result of global criticism as a person, rather than feedback that is specifically focused on a behavior. For example, one four-year-old who accidentally spills his milk may be told by his compassionate parent "That's an accident. We all cause accidents—we're human and not always perfect. Let's clean it up together. And next time—just try to be more careful." By contrast, another child who causes the same accident may be told, "You're so clumsy! You do that all the time. You just don't pay attention."

One reaction labels the specific behavior. The other labels the child as whole. Fast forward in time. Suppose the first child is in a class and informed by his teacher that, "Your paragraphs are excellent. You may want to consider using your dog's name, Buddy, instead of he in that second sentence." More than likely, he would be receptive to the feedback and be able to consider the teacher's suggestion without feeling any sense of personal threat.

Contrarily, the child who was shamed earlier would once again be quick to experience it again. And, his natural reaction might be to become angry rather than recognize and sit with feeling shame. Consequently, he would likely become irritated with the teacher-become withdrawn, remind himself that he hates school, or even rip up his assignment.

Shame may also be cultivated by the belittlement of our efforts, achievements or ideas. These may be conveyed in repeated statements such as “Why are you doing it that way?” “What were you thinking?” “That won’t work” or, more directly, “No matter how much you try, you won’t be as good as your brother (or me).”

Toxic shame may also arise as an outcome of physical, sexual or emotional abuse as well neglect as a child. A child may initially feel both puzzled and angry when a parent abuses him, whether emotionally or physically. When neglected, the lack of sufficient parental availability and presence can be interpreted by a child to mean, “I’m not worthy of love and attention.”

And yet, being completely dependent on his parents, he may become fearful of such anger and quickly experience shame for doing something to upset his parent. This can lead to shame regarding his anger and, worse yet, his minimizing or even denying his deep hurt—including sadness, betrayal, and powerlessness. He may subsequently conclude that his parent knows best—would not do anything to harm him—and that he is truly wrong.

Certainly, traumatic experiences as an adult can contribute to toxic shame. This may occur, for instance, following actions taken during military combat-actions that lead to shame and even Post-traumatic stress disorder. Or, it can occur, as it did for one of my clients, as a result abusing alcohol, and subsequently racing through a stop sign and causing an accident that left the other driver physically disabled.

### **Its impact**

Eluding shame can become a lifetime pursuit. Anger may become the go-to response in reaction to the slightest arousal of shame or thoughts and feelings that might trigger it. As such, some individuals use alcohol or drugs as a form of self-medication to reduce the potential for being more fully present with their shame. Shame may yield to a harshly self-critical dialogue that acts as a policing power, meant to serve and protect oneself from yet again experiencing it. This may entail a script, internal guidelines that support highly unrealistic expectations, which may include the need for perfection and to always be right. In an effort to escape feeling shame, they’re intent on proving others wrong.

As with anger, in general, a mindset associated with unhealthy perfectionism involves a perceived threat and inner pain. Tough love and unrealistically high standards may reflect a preemptive effort to avoid the castigation by others and, ultimately, being overwhelmed by shame. Unfortunately, the more frequently we engage in such dialogue, the more prone we become to both fear the devastating experience of shame and any circumstances that might arouse it. Being argumentative and overbearing are just two ways they manage this internal conflict. Rather than recognize and accept self-doubt or shame, they may use anger to influence others to concede or back away from a discussion or conflict.

### **The power for change**

As revealed by neuroscience research in recent years, the more we engage in certain thoughts and behavior, the more we become prone to having such thoughts. In essence, such thoughts become habits. The research is solid. While we may believe that our thoughts are a permanent part of our personality, we in fact have greater flexibility in the ability to cultivate new habits of thinking and, consequently, how we feel about ourselves. The term “plasticity” refers to this capacity to change the brain. Engaging in new thoughts and behavior helps to increase the number and strength of nerve connections in the brain. This increases the likelihood of having such thoughts and engaging in such behaviors.

Breaking through the bubble of shame requires the cultivation of awareness, self-reflection and some degree of optimism that, in spite of the thoughts we experience, we can ultimately loosen their hold.

## **Key tasks for overcoming the paralysis of shame**

Overcoming toxic shame requires you to:

1. Become attuned to the script of your inner dialogue and expand your capacity to observe, but not react to it.
2. Develop greater inner compassion with yourself—being able to choose compassion as an alternative to cultivate a dialogue of increased self-acceptance of your humanity. This means recognizing that, like all humans, you have flaws and weaknesses, make mistakes and suffer. We are not alone, even when we feel that we are.
3. Become a “witness to” and mourning your wounds. This requires the ability to identify and sit with the pain associated with your hurts—current and past.
4. Forgive yourself for feelings, thoughts or actions of your “former selves”. It is easy to beat yourself with hindsight about the insight that you lacked at an earlier age. However, you can only act from the awareness you have at any given moment.

## **Key Strategies for Overcoming Toxic Shame**

1. Formal mindfulness meditation is a powerful strategy to become less reactive to thoughts or feelings we experience.
2. Practicing informal mindfulness can strengthen your sensitivity to recognize the inner-hostile voice as an expression of anger and as an effort to avoid shame. Do a daily check-in—observe your thoughts for 1-2 minutes, several times a day.
3. Expand your compassionate self by cultivating a more compassionate inner dialog that can serve as an alternative to a harshly critical voice. This involves the gradual cultivation of a vocabulary that reflects forgiveness and self-acceptance, even when you are not always feeling it. Identify what words of compassion you would have wanted to hear as a child and what you need now. This might include, for example, “I’m sorry for your pain.” “You didn’t deserve what happened to you.” “You’re only human—we all make mistakes.” or “It’s okay to feel what you feel.”

## **Opening ourselves to compassion and breaking through the paralysis of shame**

Being open to self-compassion involves actively recognizing and accepting the hurts aroused from your past wounds—those that may contribute to the tendency toward shame. It often calls for making peace with an earlier version of yourself. It calls for acknowledging that it is easy to beat yourself with hindsight over the limited awareness you may have had in your past. Developing compassion as an antidote for shame requires patience and commitment. But it is an essential challenge to address in order to decrease your vulnerability to destructive anger. Unfortunately, shame itself can undermine your practice of self-compassion. It can force you to reject compassion from others or, even, from yourself. As such, addressing this challenge may require the assistance of a mental health professional.

At a larger scale, I believe we need to help children embrace self-compassion as an antidote to shame. When not addressed, difficulties with shame can impact social interaction, self-worth and certainly academic performance. A background of toxic shame undermines the psychic energy needed for focused attention. Whether through specific programs, integrated in teacher-student interactions or discussed by the use of literature and composition, shame and anger need to be openly explored and discussed. Doing so leads to increased emotional intelligence when dealing with this potentially debilitating emotion.

Overcoming the paralysis of toxic shame fosters self-assertion and expression. It both enhances our capacity to be more fully present with ourselves and others. It reduces our vulnerability to anger and, ultimately, it helps us to live a more fulfilling life.

References H. Lewis, (1971) Shame and Guilt in Neurosis. New York: International Universities Press. M. Lewis, (1995) Shame: The Exposed Self. New York: Free Press. B. Brown, [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame)



## 10 Suggestions for How to Cope with Feelings of Guilt –

1. Face the feelings of guilt. Release feelings of guilt by talking about them, sharing, confessing, getting honest
2. Learn to forgive yourself. – Do you judge yourself too harshly?
3. Examine the origins of your guilt – Is the reason that you feel guilt *rational* and *reasonable*? Inappropriate or irrational guilt involves feeling guilty in relation to something that in reality you had little or nothing to do with.
4. Change the related behavior so that the action or actions triggering feelings of guilt and remorse cease. Simply put: If something you are doing is causing you to feel guilty, then stop doing it and you will no longer have a reason to feel guilty any longer.
5. Clarify new values for yourself and take realistic action in the present instead of dwelling on the past. Think about positive action you can take in your life now to feel better. What can you do to improve things going forward?
6. Practice forgiving others, helping others and doing good for others. Learning to empathize and forgive others can help you to learn to forgive yourself.
7. Apologize or just seek peace. Is there something you can say or do in order to try to show that you are willing to make peace where there has been hurt, conflict, or disagreement?
8. Let go - The past is the past, so at some point, even if there are things you have done to hurt others, if you are sorry now, you need to let them go. Or, if you are truly remorseful over something you have done wrong in the past and you tried to make peace or amends, you can still forgive yourself even when others do not forgive you. By the same token, if someone who hurt you is sorry, learn to let it go yourself so you can forget about the hurt and then focus on moving forward
9. Was there a legitimate cause for your past actions that was beyond your control at the time? For example, perhaps you hurt others while you were experiencing untreated mental illness or as the result of active drug or alcohol addiction that you are now making efforts to properly care for. If your behavior was influenced by substance abuse and/or untreated mental health issues then you should give yourself some slack with regard to judging yourself too harshly with regard to whatever you might have done when you were not well. Instead focus on behavior change which will influence better decisions in the present and future
10. Avoid Shame – See below –



**Shame** – Is a basic feeling of inferiority. Shame involves the perception of oneself as a failure or feeling unacceptable to others. Shame can involve feeling “flawed” “unworthy” or “not good enough”

Shame often involves forgetting or disregarding the fact that we are human and we make mistakes but that alone does not make us less of a person. Shame is about self-blame and is directly linked to low self-esteem. Shame most often comes from the negative messages we may receive as children from our family of origin. (People who were put down or insulted as children, either directly or indirectly, may end up much more prone to shame-based thinking as adults)

**Irrational thoughts and beliefs can fuel shame and inappropriate guilt** – These untruths can perpetuate negative feelings we have about ourselves –

- I must get everyone’s approval
- I must be perfect
- Mistakes are bad
- If I am not like \_\_\_\_\_ then I am not a valuable person
- Everyone can see my faults
- I am not worthy of forgiveness

## The Opposite of Shame—Self Worth:

Let's begin at the destination – the **sense of self-worth** is the opposite of shame. Its core elements are:

- A clear-eyed, reality-based seeing of the true mosaic of oneself: the strengths, the good intentions, the successes, the accomplishments, the thousand small unrecognized daily deeds of goodness
- Self-respect
- Self-esteem
- Confidence
- Inherent sense of value as a person, with the *right to be just as you are*
- Fundamental independence of external approval:  
As the 8<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan sage, Shantideva, said: "Why should I be pleased when people praise me? Others there will be who scorn and criticize. And why be despondent when I'm blamed, since there will be others who think well of me?"
- Ultimately, a sense of an innermost being that transcends categories of shame or worth

## Why it's worthy to feel worthwhile:

- Simple fairness
- Increases well-being and quality of life
- Increases health – you are more likely to invest in medical care and good wellness practices if you feel you are worth caring for
- Builds the self-confidence that supports making the sustained efforts that lead to accomplishment, which creates positive cycles that build self-worth
- Helps others by (a) not being insecure and needing endless reassurance, and (b) frees internal attention and energy for being of benefit to them

## Other Strategies for Coping with Guilt and Shame:

- Recognize your guilt vs. your shame, and understand that shame is *not* your fault
- Replace shame with mature guilt
- Give yourself time and freedom to feel better (change will take time and small steps)
- Accept your limitations, ideally without shame
- Talk about your feelings of guilt and shame (be vulnerable)
- Treat yourself with respect, empathy, and self-compassion
- Make amends to others who you may have hurt and seek forgiveness
- If this is pertinent, create a "new family"
- Engage in opposite action activities



## Companion Worksheet

# I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Telling the Truth about Perfectionism, Inadequacy and Power

(Gotham, 2007)

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## Recognizing Shame

The first element of shame resilience is recognizing shame and understanding our triggers. Men and women who are resilient to shame have this capacity. This enables them to respond to shame with awareness and understanding.

When we can't recognize shame and understand our triggers, shame blindsides us. It washes over us, and we want to slink away and hide.

In contrast, if we recognize our shame triggers, we can make mindful, thoughtful decisions about how we're going to respond to shame—before we do something that might make things worse.

Shame has physical symptoms. These might include your mouth getting dry, time seeming to slow down, your heart racing, twitching, looking down and tunnel vision. These symptoms are different from one person to the next. So if you learn your physical symptoms, you can recognize shame and get back on your feet faster.

I physically feel shame in/on my \_\_\_\_\_.

*My shame symptoms include:*

I know I'm in shame when I feel \_\_\_\_\_.

If I could taste shame, it would taste like \_\_\_\_\_.

If I could smell shame, it would smell like \_\_\_\_\_.

If I could touch shame, it would feel like \_\_\_\_\_.

## Exploring Triggers and Vulnerabilities

Our unwanted identities dictate our behavior every day. It's worth it to figure them out and get real about them. Often, you'll see that the perceptions you want to have and want to avoid are totally unrealistic.

To get at shame triggers, figure out how you want to be perceived around a specific identity. So for example, with regards to motherhood, one might want to be perceived as calm, knowledgeable, educated and not perceived as overwhelmed, stressed out, unable to balance career and mothering, too ambitious. When we write these down and look at them, we understand the perceptions that make us vulnerable to shame. In the process, we learn a lot about ourselves.

To start, pick a shame category (body, work, motherhood, parenting, etc.) Then, answer the following questions.

### 3 - 5 Ideal Identities

I want to be perceived as:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### 3 - 5 Unwanted Identities

I do NOT want to be perceived as:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



continued...

Looking at your list of unwanted identities, answer the following questions next to the identity:

1. What do these perceptions mean to us?
2. Why are they so unwanted?
3. Where did the messages that fuel these identities come from?

Looking at your list of unwanted identities, complete the following sentence:

If you label me and reduce me to this list of unwanted identities, you will miss the opportunity to know that I'm complex and that I have many strengths, including:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Strategies of Disconnection

1. We have learned to move away by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves and secret-keeping.
2. We have also learned the strategy of moving toward. This can be seen when we attempt to earn connection by appeasing and pleasing.
3. We have developed ways to move against. These include trying to gain power over others, and using shame to fight shame and aggression.

Reference: Hartling, L., Rosen, W., Walker, M., and Jordan, J. (2000). Shame and humiliation: From isolation to relational transformation (Work in Progress No. 88). Wellesley, MA: The Stone Center, Wellesley College. To learn more about the work being done at the Stone Center and the Wellesley Centers for Women, visit [www.wcwonline.org](http://www.wcwonline.org).

I use the strategy of "moving away" when:

I'm most likely to "move away" with:

I use the strategy of "moving toward" when:

I'm most likely to "move toward" with:

I use the strategy of "moving against" when:

### Connecting

We are wired for connection. It's in our biology. As infants, our need for connection is about survival. As we grow older, connection means thriving—emotionally, physically, spiritually and intellectually. Connection is critical because we all have the basic need to feel accepted and to believe that we belong and are valued for who we are.

As you work through *I Thought It Was Just Me*, remember to reach out and stay connected. I recommend reading the book with a trusted friend or family member. You can also read-along on my website at <http://www.ordinarycourage.com/itiwjm-read-along/>.

As you make this journey, I'll leave you with this affirmation. It's something that I try to remember as I travel my path.

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as  
spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities  
is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and  
belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable.  
Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness  
will we discover the infinite power of our light.

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