UNDERSTANDING SHAME

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Shame is an underlying problem associated with addictions and mental health issues. How do we recognize it? It's very complex and often subconscious, and there are many negative and self-defeating messages associated with it. We do not experience shame every moment of our lives. However, when we are emotionally triggered, those critical shameful thoughts and feelings arise.

Shame involves feeling isolation and disconnected from others. We often feel as if our problems are so unique and others do not understand our struggle, or they have never experienced it. The truth is that shame is a universal human condition and we all have experienced similar struggles. Yet, most of us have been socialized not to talk about our problems and feelings. Thus, we feel more isolated, disconnected, and shameful. When we share our pain with others and feel validated and connected, the shameful feelings become eradicated. However, many times, we share our story, and we end up receiving advice that doesn't relate to our circumstances. As a result, we feel minimized. It becomes obvious that others are uncomfortable as they try to steer away from the conversation. They may normalize the problem or try to fix it. When this happens, we feel misunderstood and even more shameful.

What is the difference between shame and guilt?

When we fail to meet our own expectations or values, we feel guilt. If we receive a gift and forget to say "Thank you," we can fix this by reaching out to the gift giver. The problem is solved. When we feel guilt, we recognize that we are human; and we sometimes make mistakes. Thus, we can learn and grow. Guilt involves objective thinking and focuses on the behavior, and not the person.

When we fail to meet expectations that others (family, society, organizations, etc.) place on us, we feel shame. Their expectations usually go against our values, so we are caught in a "no win situation." For example, your boss calls you back to work during the COVID-19 pandemic and you work in a company where there is not enough space for social distancing; and your coworkers work in the cubical next to yours. You do not feel safe or comfortable going back to work. You are afraid to express your opinion because your concerns have been disregarded and invalidated in the past. Going along with company expectations does not feel safe or acceptable to you. Yet, due to past experiences, you recognize that there will be consequences if you speak up or "rock the boat."

When we are in groups, organizations, or relationships with others and we are constantly being disregarded, minimized, criticized, etc., we learn that communication does not resolve issues. We may start to question our judgment and blame ourselves. Consequently, we feel shame. If this often occurs with our boss, spouse, parent, or other significant persons in our lives, we end up feeling stuck. We want our job, marriage, and relationships to work out. However, they trigger so much pain, and we cannot escape it without consequences. As previously mentioned, we are in a "no win situation." We begin to feel anxiety, depression, and even physical symptoms, such as stomach distress, and tension in our body. We might turn to addictions, including alcohol/drug use, gambling, sex, food, shopping, etc. These behaviors help us to temporarily escape our negative thoughts and feelings connected to our predicament. But they do not resolve the underlying issue: SHAME. We feel powerlessness and victimized.

When we are children, we *really* are powerless in many ways. We rely on the adults to take care of us, and we are in survival mode trying to get our physical, emotional, and safety needs met. We have limited control over our environment, so we use many defensive mechanisms to survive. We may deny problems and/or try to please our parents so that they are happy with us and take care of us. We forget about what we like or want because it goes against what they want. We lose our sense of self trying to please others.

When we become adults, we sometimes forget that our current environment and situation is different than it was when we were children. Now, we have options. We get to choose where we want to live and work; and we are able to define the type of relationships we want in our lives. Our conscious mind knows this. However, our subconscious mind takes over when we are emotionally triggered, and we feel shame and powerlessness. We feel like something is innately wrong with us, and we personalize problems.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating is a form of public shaming and ostracizing of one or more individuals from a group. This occurs in dysfunctional families, organizations, social groups, etc. Bullying is a form of scapegoating. The leader of the group externalizes his/her anger and frustration and targets individuals who are the most consciously aware of the dysfunctional system. When this occurs, other members of the group join in on the scapegoating behavior because they: 1) identify with the leader, 2) are unaware of the dysfunction system and they want everyone to get along within the structure of the system, and/or 3) are too afraid to speak out and are more comfortable remaining silent.

If you are the target or victim, you may not understand this dysfunctional dynamic and begin to question your judgement about the situation. You may think that since you are the common denominator and everyone else seems to be okay with the group, you must be the problem. However, in healthy environments, everyone is part of the group or team, and different viewpoints are accepted. The leader makes a conscious effort to show support and encouragement towards the members. Communication is clear and consistent, and creative solutions are used to resolve problems. In dysfunctional systems, the regular group norms are violated, such as including all group members in important meetings or functions. Behaviors

are out of context. For example, in public, the leader might say that the targeted person was invited. But in reality, the targeted person didn't get the invitation until the meeting was almost over. This is another example of unrealistic expectations that lead to feelings of powerlessness and shame. In many cases, scapegoating is an intentional act to gain power and control by targeting an individual, and intimidating the other group members to go along with the structure of the system.

Shame involves unrealistic expectations that are placed on an individual by a group (family, organization, or social group). The unrealistic expectations could be manipulative and intentional or not, and they may or may not involve scapegoating. However, (intentional or not) these expectations often lead to feelings of shame and powerlessness.

Oftentimes, individuals experience shame, and they are not aware of it. They might not understand it or know how to heal it. The first step for targeted individual(s) is to understand the dynamics of the dysfunctional system, and to be patient and compassionate with themselves. Regaining a sense of self is a process.

Strategies for Self-Care

These are general strategies for addressing and decreasing shame. Please assess if your situation is safe and free from abusive consequences when implementing these strategies. Identify and utilize any of these self-care strategies that works best for you. Healing is a process; and there is no required timeline to accomplish any of these strategies.

1) Take time to heal pain from the past and invest in reclaiming a sense of self.
2) Engage in healthy behaviors, such as counseling, exercise, yoga, meditation, support groups, etc.
3) Increase your awareness of self-help and healing topics by reading books, articles, and other literature.
4) Define your values and required objectives.
5) Be intentional when upholding your values.
6) Be selective, and decide who to trust and when it is safe to share your story.
7) Assess your relationships, and ask yourself if they are fair, balanced, and does communication lead to problem resolution?
8) Establish healthy boundaries. When you feel safe, secure, relaxed and connected in relationships, you are less likely to experience stress. Thus, you are decreasing the chances of developing mental health issues and/or physical symptoms.
9) Seek support from others who have had similar experiences and have done healing work. Oftentimes, they are able to validate your pain and experience(s).
10) Keep in mind that no one is perfect, and others may not be present or available all the time. Focus on overall patterns, intentions, and how you feel in relationships. Are interactions positive most of the time?
11) Develop assertiveness skills, and express yourself when appropriate even if others do not validate or agree with you. Having your own voice leads to feelings of empowerment.

12) Be mindful that self-empowerment does not involve hurting or taking advantage of others.
13) Advocate for yourself by meeting your own needs, as much as possible.
14) Maintain positive attributes from your family or origin, and change ones that are unhealthy.
15) Make choices that you are comfortable with, and try not to make decisions out of obligation.
16) Learn to trust your inner voice. Other people often give advice based on their experiences or worldview. Decide whether or not it is applicable to your situation.
17) Focus on becoming aware of the "big picture" associated with your struggles.
18) Put your energy and attention on the *process* of navigating through your struggles and toward your goals, and not the end result. Multiple steps toward your goal will lead you closer to it. Stay present and focused on the process and steps, and try not to get discouraged if the desired outcome takes time.
19) Think about a person you care about and imagine this person has had your life experience and your current struggle. What advice or supportive feedback would you provide this person? Apply this advice/ feedback to yourself.
20) Create a life that emulates your sense of self.

Shame often involves layers of negative thoughts and feelings. As previously mentioned, it's sometimes subconscious, and leads to feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) counseling helps to undercover roadblocks or subconscious critical thoughts and messages that keep you feeling stuck. Removing the roadblocks can lead to constructive decision making, healthy coping mechanisms, and self-empowerment. All goals and new behaviors start with creative thoughts.