

There's Nothing to Be Ashamed Of

The first step is to differentiate between shame and guilt

Many people feel comfortable taking responsibility for a mistake they made. While they may feel some guilt, they acknowledge their mistake and move on. "I accidentally dropped the plate, I'm sorry."

When those events touch much deeper places in our past, our core-selves, we don't apologize for the specific event, rather we apologize for our very existence, "who we are". That is the shame. It is created in our minds for different reasons: external appearance, socio-economic status, family history, gender identity, sexual orientation, accent, religion, belief system and more.

Shame says we are not good enough, and leads to fear of rejection. If this fear is strong enough, it leads us to either change who we are, or to look for another place that accepts us as we are. The attempt to modify ourselves and adjust to demands of others leads to an inner conflict, tension due to incongruence, and eventually has implications on our physical and emotional well-being.

It may surprise you, but **we encourage shame**, many times unconsciously.

As human beings, in order to make a better sense of our environment, we tend to create structures and patterns, and then associate people with them. For instance, we expect athletes to have extraordinary skills, function at their best, and whenever possible - break a record with each performance. The media exacerbates this messaging, increasing an athlete's feelings of stress and pressure.

These patterns we use create our "truth," which is ever-evolving as we absorb more data from our environment and our surroundings. When someone or something challenges our "truth," we often feel disappointment and surprise, and tend to revert to our old ways of being. For example, if a person dedicates most of his time and energy towards advancing his career, others will expect and encourage him to continue to do so, even though he may think he reached his limit. As a result of this external pressure, he may push himself over his limits and burn out. Sometimes, others expect us to perform and be different than we truly feel inside. Not meeting these expectations can lead to shame and loss of self-value.

Shame is acquired. We learn what the environment expects, and we respond accordingly. It begins in infancy through interactions with our parents and continues throughout childhood and adolescence as our social circles continue to expand as we get older. When we cannot meet others' expectations due to criticism and lack of control, shame creeps into our lives. When mocking another child or bullying him or her - shame. When a teen secretly identifies with the LGBTQ+ and hears their friends make jokes about that community - shame. When feeling uncomfortable letting those you care about know you struggle emotionally or financially - shame.

Shame often manifests itself in depression with low self-value. Another manifestation is anxiety resulting from fears of others' criticism. Shame is also common in PTSD; we take responsibility for a "traumatic event" and interpret it as "something is wrong with me". Experiencing some PTSD symptoms, such as bed-wetting, rage, and self-destruction, can lead to shame as well.

There is a solution

Shame can lead to low self-worth, and even, suicidal ideations. The more we don't talk about our shame, the more significant it becomes. Unfortunately, there are people who choose death over living with the unbearable shame. As the shame is not talked about and thoughts are kept bottled up, family and friends end up being shocked that the person did not reach out for help.

Shame reaches every part of our society. It's relative. To prevent it, we must promote openness, authenticity, reduce sarcasm and encourage us to talk through our differences. There are better ways to strengthen oneself rather than weaken others.

As a therapist I see shame as the source of many problems. In order to heal that person, they need to feel you are willing to accept them as they are. That person would need to take a risk, be vulnerable and share feelings and sensitive experiences. In return, they must sense empathy to relieve their shame.

Dr. Brene Brown, one of the leading experts for decades in the research of shame, claims "that everyone is affected by an experience of shame in their lifetime". She goes on to state "If you put shame in a petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment. If you put the same amount of shame in a petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive".