

Shame is one of those emotions that really tends to isolate people and contributes heavily to a sense of desperate aloneness. When shame is actively working within our psyche, it has the effect of causing us to hide what is occurring from others. Because shame tends to go hand in hand with disgust we do not want others to know what we are experiencing on the inside. Not only do we shrivel up when shame is activated but our world view becomes bleak.

I have written before on the differences between [shame and guilt](#). Its important to not confuse the two. Shame is about the self, guilt is about the behaviour. For instance, shame might say "I am bad". Guilt would say, "I did something which was bad".

It should be noted that there are a lot of factors which go into shame. It is a difficult emotion to deal with. To heal from shame requires a lot of patience and persistence. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but it might provide some insight into why shame can be so difficult to deal with;

- Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the intensity of the feelings involved. For instance, powerful experiences of grief and sadness can arise when contacting shame.
- Sometimes we feel completely empty and think we have nothing of worth to contribute. Literally shame often taps into our most negative states.
- We try, and pass shame off unto others thus not owning our own reactions and feelings. We often [project](#) onto others and see them as the fault for our negative states.
- It is quite possible and even probable that we initially feel worse when getting in touch with our shame. This is important to recognize and to be prepared for. Because shame is an emotion which centres around our identity, it often brings with it feelings of inadequacy
- We can act out some ways of being which are not in our best interests. For instance, its not uncommon for anger and resentment to well up as shame is contacted. We then act in the world with anger and resentment, so that what is felt on the inside is expressed on the outside. Acting out makes us feel even more shame and we repeat the cycle over and over.
- Powerful body memories can be activated. Most people don't realize that as human beings we have two types of long-term memory - implicit and explicit memory which are stored in different regions of the brain. Our explicit memories revolve around conscious information, events and experiences. Explicit memories are what we usually think of when referring to memory. Implicit memories are unconscious and pre-verbal. They do not feel like they have occurred in the past. A simple example would be the autonomic responses involved in driving a car. Most of our habits and patterns are examples of implicit memory at work. There patterns can involve intense emotions

which often do not involve explicit memory. They operate at a more bodily instinctual level.

Self-Compassion as the Natural Counter to Shame

Although dealing with shame can be difficult work, the benefits of healing from shame are powerful and life altering. A person who was once depressed begins to embrace life and begins to find joy and harmony on a consistent basis in life. A reason for the change is that the orientation to self begins to shift into something more positive. Shame morphs into a new way of being.

The natural counter to shame is self-compassion. Remembering that shame typically revolves around our ideas of self, then it makes sense that if those ideas are changed into something more positive, a different outcome would be obtained. We would be training our brains to react in a different manner. Ideally, this should incorporate the cognitive and emotional and physical levels.

How this might work in practice is:

1. Notice the triggers for shame. Good old self-awareness is essential in this process. Sometimes there will be related thoughts and emotions, noticing these with a view to challenging the associated belief systems is a method for unbinding our shame.
2. Once noticed, also notice how your body has responded. For instance, even before thoughts related to shame appear, muscles in the body have tensed up or different sensations might appear. One former client of mine described an almost imperceptible sickening feeling in the stomach. Paying very close attention to our body signals is a way of paving the foundations for healing to occur.
3. There is a fundamental rule for life which applies across a wide spectrum of behaviours, thoughts and emotions which is highly relevant to shame. The rule is that we want to 'starve the negative' and 'feed the positive'. As it applies to shame, when we notice ourselves thinking shaming thoughts, or experiencing shame, we place our attention on something else - generally something more positive. For instance, if we notice shame, we might go for a brisk walk, or practice some mindfulness or we might journal. Other examples might be spending some quality time with a friend or watching our favourite tv programs.
4. As we notice a small shift away from shame, we bring in self-compassion where there should be emphasis on nurturing the self.

When I use the term self-compassion I do not mean it in a narcissistic, hedonistic sense. It

more like developing a mindset of loving kindness and gentleness towards oneself.

Self-compassion is generated when we can change our self-talk into something more positive. At first this might just occur at a cognitive level but ultimately it should affect our entire being - the emotional, the cognitive, the physiological and the psychological.

Occasionally I run across someone who has been trying to change their inner chatter for years without success. When this occurs it's usually because there is an unconscious intrapsychic blockage which is keeping a destructive pattern in place. People tend to push down unpleasant emotions and bodily sensations. When these unpleasant experiences are repeatedly pushed down they are relegated to the realm of the unconscious.

It's important to understand that they still affect and influence behaviour even though they are no longer in conscious attention. Think of how a person learns to drive a car. At first driving is cumbersome, but over time as proficiency in driving is developed the set of behaviours becomes automatic. This same type of automation occurs with negative set of behaviours if repeated enough. The unintended consequence of repeatedly pushing things down to the unconscious is that the original unpleasant negative emotion/thoughts results in an automated negative response pattern.

When shame becomes tenacious and difficult to deal with it's a good idea to seek out some professional help. Irrespective of whether professional help is sought or not, self-compassion always carries with it some benefit. It is the single best thing a person can do to help heal from shaming patterns. It not only helps to disrupt the negative pattern, but also establishes a way of self-care which encompasses kindness and tolerance towards self.

Despite the benefits and virtues of self-compassion, many people resist encompassing it in their lives. The reasons they resist are many and varied. One of the more common reasons is that they equate self-care, kindness towards self and developing a milieu of self-love as too 'new age'. This proposition does not carry with it much weight as the benefits of developing self-compassion and self-care have been rigorously tested by science <http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/the-scientific-benefits-of-self-compassion-infographic/>

Another reason people often give for resisting self-compassion and kindness is they do not know how. One of the ways around that resistance, is to begin to treat ourselves as we would a dear friend or valued family member. We often find it easier to be kind and caring towards others than ourselves. But we can utilize that same intention and turn the focus inward so that we start to treat ourselves as valued and worthy.

Like anything else we need to be patient, persistent and tenacious with it. It cannot just be at those times when we are feeling low. To heal from shame means that the practice of self-compassion needs to occur day in and day out, until it becomes our second nature. As we develop more self-compassion our hearts begin to open, and we begin to connect with others in more positive manner. The more we touch our own inability to nurture and care for ourselves the more we find we can give to others. The price and toll of shame is high, but conversely the development of self-compassion can impact favourably on our lives.

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