

Overcoming Toxic Shame

By Tova Gabrielle

Toxic shame is different from guilt and undermines mental health and recovery, How Shame Causes Relapse; and How to Recognize and Treat It in Oneself or Others

I know I'm not the only one who suffers from dreams of being caught naked in public. But my toxic shame would tell me that I am. And not only that, but that I am a fool to even disclose myself in writing and furthermore, not to ever write anything personal again. In fact, that doing so proves--- BUT WAIT! I don't want to GO there ANYMORE!

Such recurrent dreams and automatic thoughts are symptomatic of Toxic Shame: a core belief in one's defectiveness-- an incredible enemy to all levels of health. Shame blocks developmental progress, invites and underlies most addictions, and can present formidable obstacles in normative relapse prevention. Familial and cultural shaming create emotional paralysis, prolong isolation (one of the triggers for relapse) and interrupts spiritual, personal, and professional development.

Excessive ("toxic") shame, not only causes chronic emotional, mental and relational problems, but it is a major cause of relapse to women, in particular.

Toxic shame is mostly driven and passed on from one generation to the next . Lasting recovery requires breaking the pattern by replacing toxic shame with normal guilt and healthy shame.

Guilt

"Guilt", writes Potter-Effron, "lets you know when you've violated your own values". While shame is about "one's shortcomings as a total being", guilt is about a "transgression, a reaction to what is deemed an inappropriate action." For example: my parakeet gets sick and dies. Toxic shame tells me I'm an uncaring person; that I kill everything I touch. But guilt tells me I move too fast and failed to notice the bird wasn't eating. Healthy guilt related the cause to what happened, and not to "me" as "bad".

"While shamed persons fear abandonment, guilty people fear Punishment." ."[Potter-Effron] Shame makes sweeping generalizations: "...because I did this, everyone will know I'm not responsible and will never trust me again"[abandonment]. But guilt, a higher level, healthier interpretation, judges one's actions rather than one's intrinsic self, i.e.: "Now my spouse won't buy me anything that is alive" [punishment]. Guilt "lets us know when we've gone too far or harmed others—it causes us to wish we didn't do that."[ibid.]

Toxic shame tells us "we're going to fail to reach our goals in life". It begets more shame, causing "paralysis, faltering energy, escapism, withdrawal, including people-pleasing and hiding behind a mask, perfectionism, criticism, and rage." [ibid.]

Healthy Shame

Healthy shame can serve as a constant reminder to harm no one and attend to how one interacts with the world. It forces narcissistic people to practice boundaries, and compulsive people to slow down. But too much shame and its accomplice, not enough shame (shamelessness, a symptom of disassociating from toxic shame) pressures people into acting compulsively and recklessly. Healthy shame aids in relapse prevention by demanding that people constantly examine and challenge their reactions.

Shaming begun in early childhood causes a sense of emotional starvation and neediness which demands to be fed. It inappropriately and greedily, gorges on stolen attention. Healthy shame allows recovering people to focus on age appropriate tasks. These tasks, including working and relating in new ways can replace a pervading sense of failure that is the hallmark of the shame-based addict. The sense of failure cannot be eliminated until it is seen in a broader perspective: namely, that the shame results from no less than "soul murder" by the dominant culture in which the person was unable to thrive: To thrive, is the privilege of those who have not been ravaged by shame as a result of prejudice, abuse and abandonment, which, in its wake, condemns of the self as foul, by its being viewed and hence internalized, as immoral, impulsive, and selfish beyond forgiveness.

Before shame-based people can develop new identities, they must disentangle their identities from the strangulation of toxic shaming and the affects of what Kaufman, calls "a sickness of the soul".

One can then develop a sense of healthy shame. John Bradshaw defines healthy shame as "a source of spirituality". Good shame, Potter-Effron writes, "tells us when we're in trouble in relationships with the world and to do something about it"--it tells a person "you're too vulnerable with these people"--and asks "are they trustworthy? What's going on with you right now? ...we're limited, need help, that we aren't God."

Ongoing Recovery Work:

1) Meaning-Making/Re-framing

Research shows that people who survived and recovered from the holocaust were those most able to derive meaning from their experiences. To put a new frame around an old experience is called re-framing. I.E.: A psychologist shared a re-frame, in response to my concern about a client who suffered from manic depression, saying that in his country (India) there is no such illness. There, people with manic depression are viewed as being "touched by the Gods". He inferred that by divine design, they have been blessed with higher highs and deeper lows.

Another example: Tom, a professor told a gifted but depressive student who felt doomed to never find her place professionally, that in Native American culture someone like her would have had no trouble finding a role—she would have been a Shaman. The Shaman would not have been expected to fulfill a typical worker's role, but rather, would have been revered for her gift of insight.

Toxic shame and its imposed displacement, affects not only people in recovery from addictions, but those whose brain chemistry has a different rhythm and pattern than others who meet the cultural norms. i.e. artistic and intuitive types. Modern western civilization favors the left brain (logic) over the right (imaginal, intuitive and artistic nature).

2) Awareness, Imagery, Creativity and Re-Scripting

In putting a stop to the devastating effects of toxic shaming it is necessary to educate the addictive systems about the causes and effects of it.

The recovering person must also develop awareness of when she is feeling shamed and to consciously interrupt her negative thought patterns with new positive ones (i.e. in the first paragraph of this article, I demonstrated doing this). Over time this will cause a positive change.

Gershon Kaufman writes that in time, "clusters of shame are bound in images that are intensified by affect and interpretation" ('89 Harper). We take with us, from shameful or traumatic scenes, "snapshots" that effect how we relate to future situations--situations that unconsciously bring back the experience of being shamed. We can however, rework our internal movies and change the scripts through self-hypnosis, meditation, or with a therapist who is familiar with imagery work. In reworking shame scenes, the neuro-pathways in the brain become re-aligned, and more positive currents and chemistry can actually begin to flow. Imagery is much different from fantasy. It is less arbitrary and more reality-based, and it occurs spontaneously, like a dream that exposes underlying feelings.. It is congruent with Buddhist teachings: to observe sensations and thoughts, and in so doing heightens awareness necessary for change. Changing the imagery of "movies in the mind" that get triggered automatically/unconsciously, is of primary importance: images are primal and pre-verbal.

3) Ego repair

Develop creative expression, meaningful or positive work habits, personal supports, and ego psychotherapies. Track and replace negative internal dialogue: what we tell ourselves under stress.

4) Kinesthetic/Spiritual Repair

...practicing loving kindness towards oneself and others through actions, meditations, and contemplation

5) Name and Return Shame

Recognize that at certain times what you feel is toxic shame and name it as such. Understand that you inherited toxic shame from others who "dumped" their own shame onto you.

Next, mentally refuse to carry that load any longer (i.e. imagine giving the shame back, as in handing back an unopened box to the person who shamed you).

6) Understand the abuser

Consider how the shaming person had also been shamed.

7) Repetition

Reminders/affirmations from self and others that you are neither mad nor bad.

8) Avoid Negatives/Triggers/ Build Supports

When the ego is still fragile, it is necessary to avoid or to leave behind triggers, including people who have a shaming affect; replacing them with not only internally accepting scripts/imagery, but recovery groups and new acquaintances, work settings, places to go, and friends.

9) Strengthen Internal Boundaries

Build boundaries against shaming, messages that can arise from the addictive system as one gets better and thus threatens that shaming system.

10) Practice and Build Frustration Tolerance

Shame-based people tend to be outwardly focused on finding a "quick fix", because they have been taught to mistrust and fear what is inside themselves. Build awareness of when one's frustration tolerance is low and practice tolerance. This can enormously strengthen the ego.

Conclusion

Balancing self-expression with healthy boundaries aids a person on the path to recovery as a renewed sense of ego strength helps recover the once uncorrupted Self. Feeding the positives, i.e. the healthy aspects of oneself, aids in the converse attrition of the negative self image, and helps a person to gain a foothold in and actualize, a more true, benign reality. Consciously holding an image of the whole, healthy person in recovery, kindles the spark that restores the spirit; like oxygen to a pilot light that can feed and sustain a person through the changing weather patterns up the steep mountain to lasting recovery.

Source: *Authors Den.com*