



Toxic Shame: A Common Issue

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Toxic Shame: A Common Underlying Issue

Many people are confused about the issue of shame. They often mistake it as guilt or as just being ashamed of an action they have done; but that is only a fraction of the issue.

There are a variety of levels of shame, but today we will focus on toxic shame. Shame is a lethal issue which can paralyze someone if it is not addressed. Claudia Black defines it as “Painful feelings that come with the belief that there is something inherently wrong with you.” In my practice, I find that most people struggle with this issue on some level. Shame is a “spectrum issue,” meaning it has a range of intensity on a continuum. It can be a thought process of “I am never good enough” to “I am worthless and unlovable.”

Shame vs. Guilt

People often label a feeling as guilt when they are actually “under the influence of shame.” Shame and guilt are similar in that they are each a reaction to a mistake. They are different in that guilt focuses on the action, where shame focuses on the person. It is common for someone feeling guilty to feel bad, be genuinely remorseful, be sorry for his or her action, and feel the need to make amends. A person feeling guilty can still believe they are a “good” person even though they made a mistake. A guilty person would say, “**THAT** was stupid.”

Shame is different because the person gets caught up in over personalizing who they are with what they do. They derive their identity from their actions. For example, “I am what I do.” Therefore, they would believe, “If I make a mistake, I **AM** a mistake.” A shame-based person would say, “**I’M** so stupid” rather than “That was stupid.” Guilt can be a

healthy response to our mistakes. Shame is a toxic belief that can spiral into negative thinking.

How Shame Impacts Your Thinking

Shame can control a person's thinking and perspective. It is a slippery slope. Once it starts, it can spiral into a deep, dark place of a person's thoughts. Most of the time, people aren't consciously having the thought run through their mind of "I'm worthless," "I'm a failure," or "I'm inadequate." It usually starts with negative self-talk or an internal critic, which turns into beating yourself up or being too hard on yourself. Then it can spiral into more extreme statements. Shame can cause people to replay conversations in their heads and have an internal dialogue about what happened. It can cause insecurity, anxiety, and anger.

Shame is also related to perfectionism. The compulsive and sometimes obsessive thoughts that come with perfectionism are rooted in shame. It results in a person subconsciously self-sabotaging himself. Perfection is impossible. So if you set high standards of being perfect, you are sure to fail. Since shame believes you are bad, this reiterates shame's perspective that you are not good enough because you are not perfect. Perfectionism doesn't always have to do with cleaning as most people think. It is often characterized by things having to be done in a certain way. Perfectionists often struggle with "all or nothing" thinking.

"All or nothing" thinking (also described as black and white thinking) is another common way shame can take over a person's thought process. "All or nothing" thinkers tend to want immediate results. They can become paralyzed by the high standards they set (i.e. all) when they do not come to fruition. When this happens, they plummet into a negative place internally (i.e. nothing). An example of this is a person who goes on a diet and wants to lose 25 pounds immediately. They start off doing well but once they make one choice off their diet, the rest of the day is ruined. An example of this thinking is, "I ate healthy for breakfast, but didn't for lunch. So I think I'll just order a pizza for dinner and have some ice cream, too." In this example, since the person didn't eat "all" healthy, they shifted into "nothing" being healthy.

Being a procrastinator is also commonly a result of shame issues. Procrastinators don't feel good enough, so they avoid trying. Their mindset is "why bother." They believe their efforts won't make a difference.

Other common traits of shame-based thinkers include: people who compare themselves with others, people who are always wishing for something more, and people who believe that the grass is greener on the other side. They often struggle with body image and self-esteem issues. Shame can cause you to have trouble feeling comfortable being yourself. Sometimes people under the influence of shame feel the need to cut off and run--resulting in them being emotionally withdrawn. One might also find they frequently use the words "Should" and "Must." Addictions are commonly used as coping mechanisms when shame is triggered.

How Shame Impacts Relationships

Not only can shame overtake a person's thinking, it can also overtake a relationship--especially when it involves communication. Shame can warp a person's communication abilities. It is similar to the game of Telephone you will see kids play: a phrase is whispered on one end of the circle and by the time it reaches the other side, it is something totally different. Shame puts a filter over our ears and eyes, which will often twist the messages a person is sending into something attacking. Communication will often result in defensive reactions when shame is triggered. Things will repeatedly be taken personally, and these people will be extremely sensitive to any criticism.

The reactivity of shame can often come in the form of an angry outburst. This rage keeps people from getting too close. If someone gets too close, it could reveal one's insecurities and imperfections. Anger will turn people away.

Shame can also cause other issues in relationships such as being overly controlling, setting high expectations, or being critical of a partner. Many times, the one struggling with shame can become the "shamer" in relationships.

Where Does Shame Come From?

There are many factors that can contribute to someone having shame issues. It usually stems from being shamed at key points in development. The older the child is when the offense occurred, the less deep the shame will be. When someone is put down, called names, rejected, abandoned, made to feel unworthy, or set apart for a period of time, it is going to have an impact. This doesn't always have to come from parental relationships. Being teased by peers or siblings can have just as powerful of an impact. Feeling chronic embarrassment can also evolve into shame.

It is important to know that we are not born with this toxic shame; it is learned. Many kids have such high expectations set for them, that they feel no other option but to fail. They are pressured to do things right in order to get approval and to not be rejected. The foundation of a person's shame may come from things like negativity, criticism, nagging, blaming, sarcasm, abuse, emotional distancing, or conditional love that feels as if it needs to be earned.

How to Heal Shame Issues

If you identify with any of the above information or you see your children starting to exhibit some of these traits, it is important to seek help before shame spirals out of control. At Renewed Horizon, I walk with people through healing their shame every day. There are many creative techniques and ways to reduce the power it has on your life. First, it is important to get to know your shame and its triggers. You might start to realize what its favorite words are and notice when it is sneaking into your thought process.

It is also important to heal shame by accepting your humanness. We all make mistakes, so forgiving ourselves for being imperfect is key. Learning that "some" can be acceptable rather than "all or nothing" is helpful to the recovery process. Realizing that shame is a liar is also a powerful shift in thinking. We challenge clients to ask themselves when the shame-based belief was not true. This gets people out of absolute and "all or nothing" thinking. Also, developing empathy for your inner child can create a hostile environment for shame. Doing creative work with shame--such as giving it a persona that you can visualize--can often help people know the difference between their own thoughts and shame thoughts.

Shame is a painful, toxic issue that can take over your life if not addressed. If you relate to this article, contact Renewed Horizon today for more information, resources, and to set up an appointment.

About Renewed Horizon

Renewed Horizon is a Christian counseling practice that serves individuals, couples, families, and teens to address difficulties in life. It is a place to find guidance, healing, and hope when life feels hopeless and unimaginable.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” ~ II Corinthians 5:17



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