

Summary

Shame is a powerful emotion that protects us from acting contrary to our set of beliefs. When we do so, we feel ashamed about what we did. Children from abused backgrounds have a sense of shame, not about what they do but what they believe they are. This has a profound effect on these students' ability to learn.

The Development of a Sense of Shame

Early abuse creates the 'feeling memories' of the young child. These are the pre-cognitive memories. At about age three, when the hippocampus is developed, the child starts to develop a sense of reason about the world. Of course it is obvious that as soon as they are born children start to manipulate their environment to suit themselves. They learn to reach out and move things cry to get attention. But it is at about three the use of language takes over. They develop a cognitive capacity; they learn to think in concepts and language. Self-talk puts reason on their sense of themselves in the world.

From birth a child is totally egocentric. They believe that they are the centre of the world and it revolves around them. In a sense this is true however, by being egocentric these infants take on the total and unrealistic responsibility for all that happens to them. This view of the world presents no problem for the child who grows in a healthy, loving environment. They are the centre of the families' life and they are loved unconditionally 'because they deserve it'. They are and should be loved unconditionally.

This outside esteeming develops a healthy self-love in these children. In healthy families young children are never 'punished'. They are incapable of deliberately doing the wrong thing. Mistakes are just part of learning and good parents know this.

However this egocentricity has tragic implications for children born into abusive homes. When the family hits, rapes, smothers, yell at or whatever the child believes this only happens because they deserved it. They are responsible for the abuse. Soon they come to understand that they must be a very bad person. Why else would all these people have to do these things?

Now, as their basic relating need is to integrate themselves with the rest of the world, this causes a problem. They still have to act to get the attention they need. But at their core they develop a belief they are not worthy of belonging to any community. They develop a sense of shame about themselves a shame that will follow them for years into the future.

Shame

Shame is an emotion based on the underlying dynamic of rejection from other people. Like all emotions shame is perfectly healthy. It allows us to check our behaviour relative to other people. If we act in a way that repels other then we must understand that we can't keep behaving that way.

Healthy Shame

Healthy shame is the emotion that protects us from hurting others through our behaviour. It stops us from doing things that will have our fellow humans rejecting us.

Healthy shame also reinforces our humanity. Because we are not and can never be perfect, we will do things that hurt others. Not because we want to, we just make mistakes. Knowing this keeps our feet on the ground and stops us from believing we are God. Healthy shame also allows us to understand the imperfection of others. Other people will do things to us that are hurtful and will make us want to push them away. It will make it much easier to forgive them if we accept the imperfection of ourselves. If we never experience shame then we are either God itself or the Devil, we are either divine or totally corrupt.

Toxic Shame

The prolific author Lewis Smede, in his excellent book "Shame and Grace" accurately describes the shame these children feel. He calls it toxic shame and it poisons any healthy development of the child.

Toxic shame is a feeling of community rejection that is not based on reality but is built on the message we were given when we were developing our sense of ourselves. Toxic shame is not the shame of what we have done it is the shame of what we are.

This sense of shame has been put on us when we believed that the abuse we endured was our fault, we deserved it. This is not the case; no child deserves to be abused, no human, no living creature deserves to be abused. But any time a child is abused they will believe it happens because they deserved it. This is a violent rejection of the child and the resulting shame has been put on them by others for no reason.

Toxic shame is a chronic, permanent state of being. Smede says it best "Toxic shame pervades our whole being. It has no aim or focus. It leaves us feeling like an unidentified, undifferentiated, free floating failure".

Toxic shame has a major impact on the behaviour of those who live with it. Because they believe they are so faulty they are ready to accept any criticism about their behaviour.

When these children go to school they will be expected to take part in the work provided. They may well be talented in some field or another however they will ignore any positive talents they have. They will only take notice of criticism. For example the teacher may say that the child has done really well at some activity, it may be a better attempt than anyone else. But, if the teacher mentions just one thing that was wrong with the project, this will be all these children hear. They don't listen to compliments they only hear criticism. They translate the criticism of what they do into what they are. They have done something wrong therefore they are wrong.

Instead of accepting that we are all flawed in some way people living with toxic shame judge themselves against perfection. If it's not perfect it is wrong and if it is wrong then they are wrong. Watch these children tear up all of their work if they make a mistake.

Effect of Toxic Shame on Behaviour

People with toxic shame live in anticipation of this rejection. This is coupled with the hyper-vigilance; the continual scanning for danger is what they need to exist. They 'read' their shame into other's minds. They know that you know they are bad and will therefore reject them. Many believe it is safer for them to anticipate the rejection by others. They 'get in first', give the adult a reason for pushing them away. Then they will know why they were rejected. This is better than being rejected just because of what they believe they are.

This is the tragedy of the abuse. These children keep punishing themselves as if they deserve it. They never did yet they keep it going. At least it is familiar, somehow safe.

One student I have taught came from a particularly abusive family. Eventually the authorities took this child out of the family home and placed him in foster care. These placements would start out well, the child was received unconditionally. Now having a toxic sense of himself he 'knew' that the family would eventually find out about how 'bad' he was. Therefore he would get in first; he would act in a way that would guarantee his rejection. This boy went through twelve foster placements in six months. He eventually turned fifteen and drifted out on to the streets where he will no doubt continue to act in ways that will ensure his endless rejection and maintain his unceasing pain.

The child from the abusive family will grow carrying this toxic shame as their sense of themselves. Decisions on how to act will be controlled by the beliefs they have about themselves. Even though they have a dislocation from their community, they will still be driven to be accepted by others. They attempt to hide their sense of themselves from others. The techniques they use are based on concealing their view of the truth about themselves.

As these children grow they believe they are basically bad. They 'know' to be good you have to be perfect and because you're not perfect it follows that you must be bad. These children have their proof. Therefore, because they can never be 'good' they never bother going after anything they may want or need. To do this would not only be a waste of time, they know that others are much more deserving, everyone else is good.

These children never make decisions for themselves. If they go to traditional counselling they will make 'excellent' clients. They will agree with anything the counsellor says. The counsellor will obviously know what is best. However, even though the advice may be excellent these people will not act on the suggestion; even though they will agree to do so. To change is too threatening. They know the rules where they live. In a sense they are at least safe living the lie they believe they are.

So they never have fun, never enjoy life. They keep all their feelings under check. If you observe the children growing up with this sense of shame the only time they display any 'happiness' is when they see others in trouble. It is at these times they can feel the spotlight off them.

In a vain attempt to hide the shame from the world these children develop behaviours that will protect them. From about the age of three they learn to act in ways to manipulate others. They develop an inner dialogue, their self-talk, that takes on a self-destructive tenor. "Just give in. It's easier than getting into an argument", "You have to do what he/she wants or there will be trouble"

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not important anyway’ “you should” ... “You shouldn’t”, “You better”. This self-talk, this belief system, combined with the feelings that come from deep in your mind form a potent force when making decisions about how to act. They are powerful and almost automatic particularly in times of stress.

This destructive self-talk is the discussion we carry out in our mind when faced with any situation. The continual chatter will have a direct bearing on the emotional approach we take to any situation that challenges our sense of self. Randall Clinch is a self-styled ‘Attitude Coach’ who brings profound insight into the effect self-talk has on individual’s emotional reaction to any situation and the choice of behaviour we select to deal with the situation we find ourselves in. Clinch calls the self-talk the ‘chaps in the top paddock’. These chaps are a manifestation of our previous experiences. It is the answer to the question ‘What is this?’, ‘What’s happening here?’ The self-talk is our subliminal assessment of what is presented to us. It is the answers to the questions presented. The self-talk is our assessment which must be grounded in our memory.

As the stimulation is received it impacts firstly on the individual’s memory bank. The memory consists of experiences previously associated stimulations that have a similarity of the current situation. Whether by nature, or by conditioning, it seems that people have a bias to select painful memories to build the association link with the contemporary stimulus. When the association is initiated we are more likely to recall memories of guilt, failure, frustration, pain, etc. This will evoke a negative emotional reaction.

The memories of the past will initiate similar ‘imagined’ outcomes for the current situation and, combined, they create a perceived, visual picture of the future. If the memory is painful, the imagined outcome will instil a sense of fear. Because the projected future is failure the person will invariably be inclined to act to protect their sense of self. The threatening perceptions will drive the action.

The sequence can be followed in a three step cycle. First there is the initial perception of the actual event; the distribution of the incoming stimulus. The brain directs this stimulus to the designated part of the brain where meaning is incited from previous, similar experiences. These experiences will be located in the part of the mind which has previously deal with the situation.

This is the memory phase. At this time the person will see the outcome of the event based on past experiences. They see what has happened. The domination of the memory on perception soon gives way to the imagined future outcome. The person involved will allow their imagination to dominate their perception of what will happen in the current situation. The associated emotional response will then dominate the decision on how to act.

Even in the most damaged child there will be pleasant memories that can be linked to the current situation. The students I have dealt with have very poor records with learning. When they are placed in a class, their ‘chaps’ start up. “This is stupid”, “I can’t do this”, “everyone will find out how dumb I am”.

How successful they become at their endeavour to develop behaviours that will allow them to hide their core sense depends a lot on the family they come from. Some families are abusive, but abusive

in a consistent pattern. They do the same thing to the child all the time. Others are less predictable in how and why they punish their children.

Predictable-Harsh Parents

These parents are at least consistent in their abuse. These parents demand certain qualities from their children. They believe they know what is best and the child had better measure up. The problems are at least two fold. In the first instance the measure they must live up to is the adult's perspective of success.

I see this all the time at the sport's field. I see children, who play a particular sport, not because they want to but to please dad they are acting in a way to avoid rejection. It doesn't matter if the child has a natural ability or even a desire. They must play and they must play the game 'like a man'. You see the tragic sight of small kids being brutalized in contact sports. The fear of being hurt in a tackle is nowhere near the fear of being disapproved of by dad. This is an example of where the drive to be loved far outweighs the drive to survive.

The only children who survive this are those who have the equipment to succeed for their parents. Unfortunately these children will also grow to become severe personality types. They have learned the rules and so it's relatively easy to hide their sense of shame. These children adopt these 'safe' behaviours to hide from rejection.

These behaviours are the 'walls' which will keep the others from finding out what they are really like. The tragedy of these walls is that, even though they are excellent for keeping others out they trap the child and the subsequent adult, behind the wall. You never get a chance to get your needs met if you live behind a wall.

I believe the use of protective behaviours, these walls is a major cause of the so called mid-life crisis. It is at the time of mid-life we undertake a life review. It will be obvious to these people that the behaviours they have chosen to hide behind have stopped them from pursuing their dreams. The boy who developed into a footballer to please dad may have a desire to be an artist. The energy of living the lie about football leads to exhaustion, it brings on the crisis. It is at this time suicide rates increase dramatically, families break up. The walls come down. It is common to see these people trying to recapture their youth, to somehow attempt to have another go at life. Unfortunately, unless these people get effective help they will only develop another type of wall.

The majority of kids cannot live up to the immoral demands of these parents. Their failure causes rejection and they feel abandoned. Their inner self is left with the message of anguish, they are not good enough. They are faulty goods.

Unpredictable Dysfunctioning Parents

Today many parents of children are completely dysfunctional. They are the product of an addictive society. The parents are addicts and so they have little or no time to consistently reinforce a child's behaviour.

John Bradshaw gives an excellent scenario of how this inconsistent but abusive parenting works. He tells the story of a little girl whose mother is an alcoholic. Now we understand that we learn to act to achieve or avoid a type of consequence. In this example the action of little girl is to walk into the room where her mother is.

This starts early in the day when the mother is suffering a severe hangover and the desire for a drink. The girl enters – “I hate you, you have ruined my life, I wish you were dead!” Now that is not a nurturing consequence but a realistic one for too many of our children.

Later in the same day mother has had a few shots of cheap wine and is feeling a little better. The child repeats the action, she walks into the room. “Well look who’s here. Have you cleaned up your room? What have you been up to?” Now this mother has given some option for the child to belong. A clean room would meet with approval and there has been some interest in her.

Still later in the day mother is really “juiced up” and is planning to go out for the night. The girl re-enters the room. The mother, with some conscience knows she will leave the child unattended while she goes to the bar. “Well how is my little girl? You really are mother’s little helper. Come and give me a great big hug.” Now this mother is a big improvement on the others. Now walking into the room seems to be a good move.

The mother is then driven to go out again, to have an attempt to gain some happiness. She must again leave her daughter. “You’re such a good girl. I know I can leave you by yourself. Let’s get a video, you pick, and a pizza for your dinner. You’re like a sister to me such a good girl”. This is a mother who is saying that she is a good girl, all she wants to be.

Later that night mum arrives home, drunk with a strange man in tow. The girl enters the room. A guilty, drunk mother, trying to impress an equally dysfunctional partner is all sugar and niceness. “Hallo my darling. This is Bill he has a car and will take us all to Wonder World soon. What have you been doing? I saw some new bikes in the sports store. You’re big enough to get a bike now I’ll get you one next week. Why don’t you get to bed now?”

Now this entering a room really seems to be a good move.

The next morning the girl again enters the room, and you guessed it, the first mother was back. The child has had to deal with five mothers. She has no way of knowing how to act to get the love she so badly needs. This child is lost and completely destroyed. Her environment offers her no predictable avenue to get her needs met.

These children cannot find a predictable behaviour with which to protect themselves so they act in an uncontrollable manner. Because they have had no way of building walls of behaviour they have no way of hiding their sense of shame. They realise you know what they are like, they have no defences.

These are the children who give up as teenagers. They are the ones who are easily seen by society. They are the ‘bad kids’ of the school. These are the kids who die young. Not just through suicide but

because they have no sense of value about themselves they will participate in high risk activities with no fear of the consequences.

The Predictable Behaviour of Dysfunction Children

Children from dysfunctional families have very difficult behaviour to predict. About the only thing that you can predict is that their behaviour is extreme. There is nothing much moderate about them. Pia Mellody presents the best model for these kids. She divides the behaviour into five categories. These are the characteristics of esteem, dependency, reality, vulnerability and moderation. The children take positions in these categories on the extremes.

For mature, functioning adults the above issues are dealt with a sense of moderation. A functioning adult has healthy esteem; they don't think they are better than or worse than anyone else. They realise they are individuals who are precious and cannot in anyway be compared to others. They are moderately dependent they need people around them on who they can rely but they are not completely dependent on anyone.

Their grasp on the reality of their own behaviour is realistic. They know that they can never be perfect. This is an impossible condition however they also know that they are not bad people. Many things they do are a bit anti-social but often they go out of their way to help others. Mature people allow themselves to be a bit vulnerable they take chances on others yet they are not totally reliant on the whim of others.

Finally they have appropriate maturity for their age. If they are teenagers they act like teenagers. If they are forty they act like forty year olds. Sometimes they kick their heels up and have a "teenage" good time but only in moderation.

However, these issues are a clue in discovering the dysfunctioning behaviour of others. These issues are discussed below.

Esteem

This is an experience of feeling less than or better than others. People who have very low self-esteem suffer from a wounded core. They think they are worthless - that everyone is better and more valuable. They cannot see the point in trying.

To hide this some will put up 'the wall', they must present as 'better than'. Remember to be good you have to be perfect. These people will present as those who think that everyone is there for their benefit. They are the only ones who matter and the world owes them. They know what is best.

Both characteristics make it difficult for these people to have functioning relationships with others. Without walls who could love me, so why try. If they have walls they can't really share their secrets with their partner. If they find out about their humanity they will leave you. So stay safe, behind the wall.

Boundaries

In the world we are vulnerable. This is easy to see when you consider the physical world. Our need for survival drives us to design our environment to minimise this vulnerability. We don't take unnecessary risks. The same applies to the world of human relations.

To integrate ourselves with the outer zone we expose ourselves to potential pain. For the child without boundaries, without walls, the pain they suffer is extreme but they know no way of avoiding this. They take no protective behaviour. These are children, who share needles, have unprotected sex, with numerous partners. Anyone who wants to use them is 'free to do so'

Those with walls however take no risks. They let no one in. Because of this they never develop intimate relationships with each other. They go through life alone.

Dependency

At one extreme you have those who are completely dependent on others for their worth. In my work I see this most tragically when teenagers have a romance that breaks up. It is normal for teenagers to fall in and out of love but for some it is such a tragedy when the one they depend on so much rejects them. They are lost for years or until someone else comes along to be the centre of their dependency.

The other extreme are those who depend on no one. These are the cold fish who isolate themselves from all others. Society often depicts them as the strong, independent type but in reality we all need others. It is part of our human drives. To deny dependency is to fail to meet your need to belong in a healthy way.

Reality Issues

Children of dysfunctional families have difficulty in facing the reality of their lives. At one extreme, the children are obviously in trouble. You witness behaviour that is extremely rebellious or "bad". These are the delinquents I deal with. They act in such a way as to confirm to the world their flaws and imperfections. These people are a constant menace to society and are forever in trouble with the law. Their actions draw attention to their beliefs about themselves.

The other extreme is the people who strive to be good or perfect. They live in constant fear of others discovering 'what they already know' that they are frauds, failures. Often these people are the pillars of society. Yet it is just this behaviour that is at the root of our mid-life crisis. To maintain this stance takes so much energy. At about forty the opportunities and the effort diminish and their world tumbles down around them.

Moderation

Finally there is the issue of moderation. For some of these people they remain in a constant state of confusion. They are totally 'out of control'. Their behaviour is childish, often chaotic. Because they have developed their adaptive behaviours in an unpredictable environment they have no rules to live by. They never gain a sense of choice in the behaviours they use to get their needs met. The other extreme is the over mature person. They are always in control and believe they can control every situation. The loss of control would bring down their walls exposing their sense of shame.

You can never control anyone else. To understand this is perhaps one of the most liberating truths you can hold. The only control you have is over your behaviour. The consequences of this and the actions of others are not yours to mandate.

It is this shame based sense of self which, when combined with the feelings that reside deep within the psyche, handicap these children and the adults they develop into. They have no sense of the perfection of being human, being imperfect. They are never satisfied with being a normal person.

Not only do they suffer from the overwhelming feelings at times of stress, they believe they are unworthy of getting their needs met, truly unworthy of belonging in any society. Yet being human they must live in society and be constantly reminded of their beliefs about themselves. They are the sad grey masses that are so easily exploited by others.