

From Shame to Self-Worth

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Introduction

Our topic is the sometimes difficult but always rewarding path from shame to worth.

The spectrum of feelings in the territory of shame includes:

- Inadequacy – Sense of being unfit, useless, not up to the task, inferior, mediocre, worthlessness, less than, one down, devalued
- Humiliation – Embarrassment, disgrace, degradation, loss of face, slap in the face, comedown
- Guilt – I did something bad; [I know it]
- Shame – I am something bad; [they know it]
- Remorse – Contrition, regret over wrong-doing, feeling abashed, self-reproach, conscience-stricken

These are powerful, sometimes crippling, even lethal emotions (e.g., people killing themselves for the blots they think they placed on their family's honor).

There is a place for healthy remorse in a moral person. But for most people, the shame spectrum of feelings is far too prominent in their psychology – typically not so much in terms of feeling chronic shame, but in terms of how they pull back from fully expressing themselves to avoid the awful experience of a shaming attack.

In this article, we will look at where shame comes from, in human evolutionary history, and in personal development. There also are three quite powerful exercises in seeing through, releasing, and replacing (with worth) any feelings you may have along the shame spectrum. And at the end, we've attached a handout from the class that lists 21 ways to feel good about yourself.

A Word about Experiential Exercises

This article will have some experiential exercises. Sometimes exercises bring things up – especially if a person has had traumatic experiences in the past, or is currently in the middle of a difficult relationship.

As we've written before, when we do any experiential activities, feel free to opt out of them if you feel overloaded or uncomfortable. This is a course in inner skills, not therapy, and it is no substitute for professional care of body, mind, or spirit.

Be kind to yourself first and foremost: "First of all, do no harm." Feel free to skip an exercise, pull out of it once it starts, or deliberately take a fairly superficial and safe slice at it. And if anything comes up for you that is significantly difficult, we invite you to contact us.

Some of the exercises will suggest that you try to become aware of something, or do something, within your own mind. If you are unable to become aware of or do that something, that is alright. Maybe that is a sign to yourself to be cautious and take your time with that particular material. Or a sign to investigate it further, on your own.

The Opposite of Shame: Self-Worth

Let's begin at our destination, the sense of self-worth that is the opposite of shame. Its core elements include:

- A clear-eyed, reality-based seeing of the true mosaic of oneself: the strengths, the good intentions, the successes and accomplishments, the thousand small unrecognized daily deeds of goodness
- Self-respect, self-esteem
- Confidence
- Inherent sense of value as a person, with the right to be here just as you are
- Fundamental independence of external approval. As the 8th century Tibetan sage, Shantideva, said: "Why should I be pleased when people praise me? Others there will be who scorn and criticize. And why be despondent when I'm blamed, since there will be others who think well of me?"
- Ultimately, a sense of innermost being that transcends categories of shame or worth

Why it's worthwhile to feel worthy:

- Simple fairness
- Increases well-being
- Increases health: you are more likely to invest in medical care and good wellness practices if you feel you are worth caring for

- Builds the self-confidence that supports making the sustained efforts that lead to accomplishment – which creates positive cycles that build self-worth
- Helps others by (A) not being insecure and needing endless reassurance (can get annoying), and (B) frees internal attention and energy for being of benefit to them

Evolutionary Neurobiology of Shame

[As we go through this somewhat intellectual material, try to make it real for yourself by relating it to your own everyday feelings of inadequacy or guilt.]

Have you ever scolded a dog and seen him or her look guilty?

Obviously, animals do not have the elaborated textures of thoughts and feelings that humans do. But our emotions, even the most subtle ones, have their roots in our ancient evolutionary history. By understanding that history better, we do not reduce our feelings to animal instincts, but instead find illuminations from our past that paradoxically give us more choices in manifesting ourselves as fully human.

We can find two sources of shame spectrum emotions in our evolutionary history.

First, many animal species live in social groups with clear dominance hierarchies. Once those pecking orders are established, it can be lethal to challenge them. Consequently, many species have developed ways of signaling submission to the established order of alpha-males and -females. Consider how dogs losing a fight will bare their throat, or chimpanzees will display gestures of deference.

Birds, and especially mammals, have rudimentary forms of the brain circuitry that produces emotion in humans. Those circuits would not have developed, consuming lots of metabolic resources, if they did not produce reproductive benefits.

Emotions function in the brain to motivate and guide behavior. We can't read the mind of a chicken, sure, or that of a dog or an ape, but it seems like a very efficient way to keep these animals in line if they are experiencing emotions or attitudes that are the equivalent of feeling less than the Big Dog of the pack.

Second, taking this one step further, pack animals evolved cooperative behavior. Think penguins huddling together in the Antarctic winter, and cattle circling around their calves in response to wolves hunting in packs. But in most cases, their cooperation does not involve personal sacrifice for the good of others.

That comes in, big time, with primates, who appeared around the middle of the Cretaceous period, roughly 80 million years ago – so they had lots of time to evolve

altruistic behaviors such as food sharing. And the full flowering of altruism – giving to others with no immediate tangible reward – is really seen in humans.

But how could altruism evolve when it would seem to confer reproductive disadvantages on the one who was altruistic? This has been a thorny question in sociobiology, with some interesting answers.

What they have found is that altruism makes sense from an evolutionary perspective when three conditions are present:

- People (including our hominid ancestors several million years ago) lived and predominantly bred within social groups (typically around 20 – 200 members). Consequently, even if a person's altruism led to her not passing on her genes, close relatives would live and pass on their own, and would be more likely to do so, given her sacrifice.
- Social groups competed intensely with each other for scarce resources in the wild, so ones that worked well together – including because of personal, altruistic sacrifices of some group members – would have their reproductive advantages make a big difference.
- The reputation of individuals would be known to others. So if someone became known as a non-reciprocator – a taker, not a giver – then he risked others no longer sharing food, shelter, etc. So people developed a natural interest in their reputation, in what others thought of them.

An unpleasant emotion that punished individual tribe members for not stepping up for the tribe in fights with other tribes, and for not reciprocating today for help offered yesterday, would help a tribe succeed in its brutal competition with other tribes. And as a variant on that theme, an unpleasant emotion that enabled tribe members to train their young quickly in proper behavior – proper in central Africa, a million years ago, or during the last Ice Age, say 15,000 years ago – would also confer advantages to that tribe.

Thus the origins of shame and guilt in the long slow grind of evolutionary history.

Development of Shame Spectrum Feelings in Childhood

Shame is thus a very primal emotion, one that has a lot of traction in the mind.

As we grow up, from infants to adults, shame elaborates many nuances, like the branches and twigs growing from a single trunk.

Let's consider four common sources of shame spectrum feelings.

First, consider a young child who is continually signaling her state of being and her needs. Maybe her caregivers respond routinely with attunement, empathy, and skillful responsiveness: this sends messages, associated with positive feelings, of existing for and mattering to her caregivers, of being inside the circle.

Or maybe her caregivers ignore her signals, or continually misinterpret them, or simply have a kind of dismissive tone – “I’ll put up with you if you don’t ask too much of me” – or even punish her for expressing her needs at all: this sends messages, associated with negative feelings, of not mattering (and sometimes not even existing), of being outside the circle. As many such experiences get layered on top of each other, there is a growing sense of being unwanted, of lacking value.

In the extreme, in cases of severe neglect and abuse, there can be a global sense of worthlessness.

More commonly, a kind of bargain is struck, in which the child learns that as long as she walks inside certain lines – and inhibits certain forms of expressing her true self (her true needs, her true feelings, her true perceptions of her world) – then the supply train keeps coming and all is well. But step outside those lines and *wham*, it’s the chilly exile or the hot attack.

Second, a child’s environment – both adults and peers – will praise certain qualities and behaviors and criticize or punish others. Those behaviors and qualities get associated with feelings of worth – or shame.

For example, the psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, described shame in terms of Freud’s stages of psychosexual development, as the emotion that arises naturally when that which should be hidden (e.g., excretions, private parts) is exposed. But how would a child know that certain natural aspects of life should be hidden without messages from his environment.

So what is it that gets criticized? Certainly, it is specific behaviors, and there is a place for that in healthy child-rearing. Examples include hitting your kid brother, lying, or stealing another kid’s cookie. Even if the criticism is not so wholesome, as long as it stays at the behavioral level, it’s not so bad.

But it rarely does. It’s a short hop from “That was so stupid” to “You’re so stupid,” from criticisms of actions to criticisms of persons.

That criticism is often conveyed implicitly, as a communication of disdain, disrespect, contempt, scorn. Think of the power in human societies when certain groups institutionalize the devaluation of others. I still remember my shock in 1963 in North Carolina for the summer when I saw three bathrooms at a gas station, labeled “Men,”

“Women,” and “Colored.” As if African-Americans were something other than “regular” men and women, and not just other, but less as well in not being worth separate bathrooms for their own men and women. Racism has certainly not disappeared in the past 45 years, and other forms of devaluation exist today; just think of the fear-driven labeling these days of Arabs and others from the Middle East.

Researchers such as John Gottman have found that disdain is typically the most corrosive element in a relationship. Be very very careful with it. It’s especially insidious when we feel it is justified, as with others in the political world that we disagree with. Or those in our everyday life who are Exhibit A for a roll of the eyes and the thought, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

In turn, those criticisms of the individual overall are very easy to internalize, and “You’re so stupid” becomes “I’m so stupid.” The contempt of others become hatred of the self. In terms of transactional analysis models of the personality – classically, child/nurturing parent/critical parent . . . or the modern formulation of victim/persecutor/protector – the internalized critic or persecutor has way too much power, and the internalized nurturing parent or protector is too weak.

Third, we are intensely social animals, with an evolutionary history that associates survival with belonging to a group, for its protections, nurturance, and opportunities for finding a mate and passing on one’s genes. To be outcast, exiled, banished, shunned, etc. is a terrible thing, exposed to the cold whistling winds of the elemental world, trudging alone and vulnerable through life. Traditionally, it was the most severe punishment short of death, which puts it in perspective.

Those associations are active somewhere deep in the brain when a preschooler trots over to a group of children to play and they ignore her, when a child gets picked last for a team, when you audition for the school play and don’t get a part, when you apply to a special college and don’t get in, when you aren’t hired for the job . . . whenever by action or word you’re told: “You are the weakest link!” “You’re fired!” “You’ve been voted off the island.”

It’s kind of sick that there is a weird vicarious gleeful *schadenfreude* – pleasure in another’s misery – in reality shows watched by millions in which one person after another gets publicly scorned and rejected until there is only one . . . “American idol!!!!!!” It’s somewhat the modern equivalent of the gladiator battles in the ancient Roman Coliseum.

These associations to lethal exile are triggered in one-to-one contexts as well, when someone doesn’t want to be your friend, or lover, or mate . . . especially if they have been that to you – and don’t want that any longer. When these events occur, haunted by

their ancient shadows, they typically trigger strong and painful feelings of being unwanted – because, in fact, that is indeed the case.

Fourth, to function in life, we need to learn from our experiences, and that requires feedback. We have to look in the mirror and see if there's some spinach stuck in our teeth. We need that internal evaluator continually registering: that worked and that didn't; that helped and that hurt.

As long as the evaluator is clear-eyed and friendly, it's a wonderful internal resource. But if it grows harsh – often through absorbing the emotional residues of the anger and contempt of others, or the meanings derived from social exclusions – it can become a terrible monkey on your back . . . actually, worse, a terrible growling spitting monkey in your mind. This negativistic evaluator blurs together with the internalized critic/persecutor, and then looks continually for the shortfall between “should” and “did.”

With each lash of the critical whip, the evaluator gets a little more powerful, and the inner self gets a little more cowed and resigned.

And so it goes, and here we are today.

These four sources of shame-spectrum feelings are exacerbated by a range of external factors, such as:

- Belonging to a group that has associations with low-status, e.g., ethnic and religious minorities, women, homosexual orientation, poor, overweight
- Disintegration of traditional community structures that gave people a sense of belonging and value
- Extending the period during which youth are in schooling and unable (usually) to make much of a contribution to society
- Events that challenge self-worth, e.g., company downsizing, (often) becoming a mother, divorce, teenage (or adult) children being cold or rejecting, illness or disability (or even aging) that compromises the capacity to do those things that gave one a sense of value
- The sheer complexity and ambiguity of modern opportunities and expectations, which is a double-edged sword. These days, there are so many more choices to be had that there are many more ways to go wrong or fall short in making any of them. And this is especially intense in the American culture that equates worth to success.

These external factors add to the lived history of inadequacy that is buried in emotional memory. They also intensify any here-and-now challenges to self-worth.

So – as a result of these four sources of shame-spectrum experiences, exacerbated by external factors, we have within us circuits of shame that are ready, willing, and able to be activated by any appropriate trigger. That’s why little things can have such a big impact: it’s just a tiny spark, yes, but there’s that pile of dynamite there . . .

And then we often add insult to injury by feeling ashamed of getting ashamed!

Exercise: “What’s A Good Quality You Have?”

You may need to be a little creative to do this exercise on your own, or even better, with a friend. And please recall the perspectives on doing exercises at the very beginning of this article.

Here are the instructions for the exercise, which you can adapt freely:

“A’s ask B’s these questions, or some variation on them: What is a good quality you have? What is a good thing you have done?”

In response to the question, B’s find a succinct answer. It’s OK if A’s need to ask something for clarification, but mainly A’s listen.

Then A looks inside and tells B genuinely: I see _____ in you. Or: I believe _____ about you. A’s, only say what you sincerely think.

When A speaks, B’s focus on taking in the ordinary but vital experience of having a good quality or accomplishment seen by another person. A quick reminder, from earlier classes about the three steps of taking in the good: Let a good event (A seeing that about you) become felt as a good experience. Have that good experience be big and strong in your mind and body, and savor it and make it last. Get the sense of the good experience soaking into you, sinking into your body and mind, becoming a part of you.

Then A ask the question again – What is a good quality you have? Or: What is a good thing you have done? – and repeat the process.

After 5 minutes, I’ll ring the chimes and ask you to switch roles

OK, let’s begin.”

Exercise: “Letting Go of Shame”

If you like, you could move directly from the previous exercise into this one. Here are the instructions for the exercise, which you can adapt freely:

“Imagine that you are sitting beside a powerful river on a beautiful sunny day. You feel safe and contented and strong.

Imagine that sitting with you is a wise and supportive being. Perhaps someone you know personally, perhaps a historical figure, perhaps a guardian angel, etc. Know in your heart that this is a very wise and honest and caring being.

Imagine a small boat tied to the bank of the river, there near you. Imagine an empty and open box in the boat that you can reach easily.

Alright.

Now, continuing to be centered in feelings of worth and well-being, bring to mind lightly something you are ashamed of. Represent it, whatever it is, as a small object on the ground in front of you.

Imagine that the being is telling you, or that you are telling the being, some of the many causes and conditions that led to that thing you are ashamed of. You don’t need the whole story; often a few seconds in your imagination can summarize the heart of the matter.

With that summary of the causes of the shame, see if you can feel a letting go inside.

If you like, in your imagination, bow to the object representing the shame: it exists, it is what it is.

Then put the object in the box, and let it go as much as you can.

Now bring to mind, lightly, something else you are ashamed of. Represent it, whatever it is, as a small object on the ground in front of you.

I’ll be repeating the instructions, and feel free to go at your own pace, slowing down to dwell on certain parts, or speeding up to get through them to additional things you’d like to put in the boat.

[Repeat as many times as you like.]

Exercise: “The Presence of _____ in Me . . . ”

If you like, you could move directly from the previous exercise into this one, though you definitely need a partner for it. Here are the original instructions for the exercise from our script, which you can adapt freely:

“Find a partner, pick an A and a B, and A’s go first – after which you will go back and forth.

A’s, find a positive quality within yourself that you can sense is also present in B. Then say to B: The presence of _____ in me recognizes the presence of _____ in you.

Both A and B take a moment (often just a few seconds) to register this, and then it’s B’s turn to say something in the form of: The presence of _____ in me recognizes the presence of _____ in you.

Examples include:

- The presence of caring in me recognizes the presence of caring in you.
- The presence of happiness in me recognizes the presence of happiness in you.
- The presence of loving being in wilderness in me recognizes the presence of loving being in wilderness in you.
- The presence of being silly in me recognizes the presence of being silly in you.
- The presence of strength in me recognizes the presence of strength in you.

It’s OK to name good qualities in yourself or the other person without false modesty or fears of flattery. These are facts, not compliments. And it’s OK if these qualities are not present all the time; perhaps they are deep down, even covered over, and would be served by calling them out.

This exercise can be very powerful, and enjoy and let sink in the beautiful feelings it brings up.”

Conclusion

In the days and weeks ahead, we encourage you to keep moving from shame to worth.

As one simple way to do this, keep recognizing the factual existence of your good qualities and accomplishments. “Just the facts, ma’am.”

In closing, to quote Meher Baba, six words to live by: “Don’t worry. Be happy. Make efforts.”