

Dissolving Shame - A Hopeful Perspective

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Working with shame is essential for therapists, especially body psychotherapists.

In psychotherapy, the relationship is more important than the modality. So something like shame, that interferes with the relationship, interferes with therapy. In addition, shame interferes with embodiment, so in body psychotherapy, it is especially important to address shame effectively.

Here is how I orient my clients and students to working directly with shame.

“Every thing is available in solitude except sanity.” Nietzsche

Shame is the blade that splits our wholeness. It divides us into a presented self and a hidden, held back, shadow self. It leaves us split, afraid we do not belong, afraid we do not matter, and unwilling or unable to risk new ideas or actions, closer relationships, or even getting out of bed. It is hard to heal or connect when we are hiding.

Relationships are important.

Neuroscience tells us that our nervous systems need other nervous systems to develop, to heal and to stay regulated. Yet, shame is so powerful it can make us isolate ourselves.

Dan Siegel’s definition of emotional health is integration, so let’s look at understanding and dissolving the shame that divides our wholeness and separates us from each other.

Understanding Shame:

Shame is a powerful emotion with evolutionary advantages and limitations.

1. Powerful Advantages: Every society uses shame to control behavior.

a) For the tribe: People with no shame are called psychopaths and considered dangerous, for good reason. Shame limits antisocial behavior so we can live together. The tribe relies on shame to manage people’s behavior.

b) For the individual: Shame is an emotion. Like all emotions, it has essential, healthy, evolutionary purpose. One essential purpose is protecting survival through belonging. Shame helps individuals limit their behavior so they do not get kicked out of the tribe. In prehistory, being kicked out was often a death sentence.

c) For Parents: Another important purpose for shame is to freeze us in our tracks, when needed. This is also healthy. When Dad says “stop that” in a commanding tone, little Jimmy will likely stop, before he pokes his baby brothers eye out, or pulls the dogs tail and gets bitten.

2. Powerful Limitations - Too much shame cripples us.

a) For the tribe: Shame limits a society when it empowers oppressive dominance. Fear of marginalization, scapegoating and oppression can enforce slavish accommodation and limit innovation, speaking truth to power and even doing basic reality checks.

b) For the individual: Getting stuck in shame is bad for our health, our relationships and our initiative to do anything. It can freeze us down into depression or make us hotly reactive.

c) For Parents: Shame becomes toxic when there is no repair. When Dad stops little Jimmy's behavior, Jimmy is likely to stay freezy, overly careful and held back, unless Dad pulls him close and explains: "Jimmy, you are good but that behavior was dangerous. That is why I had to stop you. You are good and I love you, but do not pull dogs tails, you could get bitten and that would hurt." Left unregulated, childhood shame can limit people for life.

3. Shame is a relational emotion. We can run shame on ourselves, all by ourselves, all day long. I know, I have done it. However, shame gets laid in in relational space, and it clears in relational space. I do not care if I have food in my teeth until I think about someone else noticing it. What reassures me after a big social goof is someone saying "Yes, you messed up but we love you anyway".

4. Shame is tenacious, an enduring shaper of behavior. Shame can be conscious but there is often a deep, unconscious, embodied layer of it that is a very compelling and long lasting shaper of behavior. Talk therapy does not seem to shift it. Embodied work in relational space can shift it fast. Shame keeps us stuck for at least three big reasons.

First it pushes us in the direction of **neurological freeze**, where we lose brain power and it is hard make decisions, reach out, or do anything, especially anything new.

Second, shame is an enduring shaper of behavior because it **cuts deep**. The first time an Eskimo toddler breaks through a skim of ice on a puddle, the whole village gathers around and points and laughs. That child will be highly wary of thin ice for a lifetime, and probably live longer because of it.

Third, shame is an incredibly durable shaper of behavior because we don't just avoid shame, we avoid the mere **expectation of shame**. That means we avoid doing the reality checks that prompt us to adjust our behavior. If I want to swim in April, I put my foot in and test the water. If it is too cold, I come back and try again in May or June. If I expect to get shamed, I never want to try that again.

Dissolving Shame with Body Up Practices

Belonging and Mattering are antidotes to shame.

Sharing weight and attuning to rhythm are efficient, embodied ways to communicate belonging and mattering.

Belonging to the tribe reads as safety from outside dangers. Giving and receiving weight wires in a sense of belonging at a primitive level. Most of us need this.

Mattering to others means we are more likely to get better food, a place by the fire, care when we are sick and protection from bullies. Attunement* reads as respect and therefore safety, from dangers within the tribe. Attunement to our rhythms - rhythms of breathing, speech and movement - wires in a sense that we matter. We soothe babies by bouncing their weight in the right rhythm, the one that works for them. (Benign attunement is an antidote to shame. Sadistic attunement warps our capacity to trust and adds a significant layer of complication.)

Body Up! Co-Regulation practices include a titrated set of embodied practices for sharing weight and attuning to rhythm.

We may start with gentle, no touch practices and move on to more connected, intense and revealing work.

Reaching for connection is essential to healing shame. Shame (especially old, familiar shame) pushes us towards a freeze response. We may feel constricted or collapsed. We hide. We turn away from connection. It can be very difficult to reach out, make decisions or motivate ourselves in any way, especially to try anything new. Initiating contact and sharing vulnerability can feel hopeless, dangerous, terrifying and impossible. None the less, reaching out is an essential step to take, in healing from shame.

It is also important to develop assessment skills so we reach for connection and help from people who are willing and able to give it. Otherwise, we end up more hopeless, which is dangerous when hope is already very low.

My perspective is that learning to co-regulate shame is a survival issue for us as individuals and as a culture. For us as individuals, shame is core to our epidemic of loneliness, poor decision-making, and the expensive health problems that manifest when we do not connect enough to keep our nervous systems well regulated. Shame also triggers primitive black and white thinking that limits our capacity to deal with complexity. And our world is nothing if not complex. In our culture, shame drives compulsive competition and greed, which warp our public institutions and leave us polarized and unable to collaborate on complex issues. So, skills to co-regulate shame are essential and hopeful, for our health and survival as a species.

