

# Unhealthy Shame



Shame is a normal healthy response that is developed through childhood via the setting of firm, but compassionate, boundaries around behaviour and expectations.

Healthy shame (or guilt) can be described as the uncomfortable feeling that occurs when you contravene your moral, belief and value systems. You can, however, deal with healthy shame.

In Biblical terms you can repent and change your behaviour. This is not possible with unhealthy shame, as it goes to the very core of your being; to the very core of your self identity. You must have a healthy sense of shame/guilt as this assists you to set limits around your behaviour and thoughts. These boundaries come from your moral beliefs; your understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

When parents let children test these boundaries without withdrawing love then an atmosphere is created that allows for the development of a healthy sense of shame/guilt.



Right from the beginning of life children need their parents to meet their basic needs. These basic needs go much further than simply providing food, clothing and shelter. A child also has as part of their basic need, the need for attention, touching and validation through verbal and non-verbal communication such as tone of voice, facial expression and affirmation.

Children learn to know their value, worth and selves through the mirroring eyes of their parents. As the relationship between parent and child grows so too does trust. According to developmental psychologist Eric Erikson [you learn to trust or mistrust your environment in the first year of life](#). It is through this trust that the emotional bond between parent and child is formed.

It is through this emotional bond that a child learns to feel comfortable within themselves and their environment. At this point of their development a child is in a position to learn shame; either unhealthy shame or healthy shame. A healthy sense of shame is necessary for children, as human beings, to set internal boundaries and controls over their behaviour.

## So, What Makes Shame Unhealthy?

When a child's feelings, wants, needs and desires are shamed or neglected, the emotional bond between parent and child is broken. The resultant feeling (or state of being) for the child is one in which they feel and think they do not matter and that their environment is hostile and hurtful. They can't, and indeed have no right to, depend on others.

Unhealthy shame comes from the child's internalisation of the belief that they are bad, wrong or flawed in some way.

Healthy shame comes from the child feeling bad because they have done something wrong. **It** also occurs as a result of the messages about themselves that a child internalises as a result of abuse. Abuse in this context can be assumed to be anything that is less than nurturing for the child. Abuse may be intentional or unintentional. The main types of abuse are physical, emotional, mental and sexual abuse.

Family systems fail, not just because of 'bad people', but also because of 'bad' information or 'bad' feedback in the form of unhealthy rules of behaviour. The rules and messages are bad. This makes the whole family system dysfunctional.

## Abuse Can Occur In A Variety Of Ways.

- Via a dysfunctional family system.
- Stroke and touch deprivation.
- The parents not being there for their child by not mirroring that child's acceptability to them through the provision of protection (and therefore not imparting to the child a feeling of being valuable and being worth caring for).
- Neglect of a child's basic needs, i.e. food, clothing and shelter.
- But above all; by children not feeling love, nurture, warmth and acceptance from parents.

Children are egocentric and therefore have a tendency to take things on and personalise them. This process results from them not have a clear definition between their internal and external worlds. Children internalise self love, or a sense of shame from the way they are parented. Once a feeling of shame is internalised it can become a part of the child's state of being, i.e. it becomes part of their self.

Unhealthy shame has no boundaries so all the child's natural wants and desires become shameful. What occurs for the child is that instead of feeling a feeling, desire or want, they feel shame. For example, if a child gets shamed for feeling angry, sad or sexual, they will shame themselves each time they feel angry, sad or sexual.

Unhealthy shame can therefore be described as a feeling of being flawed, diminished, not measuring up and of being unacceptable to the very people by whom they want to be accepted. This is the opposite of healthy shame or guilt.

**Guilt****Unhealthy Shame**

I made a mistake ..... I am a mistake

I have done something ..... There is something  
wrong wrong with me

Unhealthy shame can therefore best be defined as: An inescapable belief and feeling of being a defective and flawed human being. As a state of being, it is uncomfortable, frightening and horrible.

Unhealthy shame is often the origin of many distressing and complicated conditions, some of these are:

- Perfectionism
- Depression
- Addiction
- Extreme lack of self worth
- Self doubt
- Isolation

As a child, and later as adults, you may be constantly confronted by those who shame you because you display some of the above, this entrenches your unhealthy shame within you, some examples of how this can occur are:

- Name calling, such as “stupid”, “lazy” and “clumsy”.
- Criticism or being talked about as a child in a negative manner, “every time we go she forgets...”, “He’s afraid of his own shadow”.
- Crushing comments like: “Who asked you?”....“What makes you think you’re so smart?”....“How would you know anyway”?

A harsh tone of voice turns a simple statement or question into a shaming statement or question.

As a child we deal with these situations the best way we can, often by:

- Suffering passively
- Lashing out
- Acting in
- Acting out



As adults these types of coping mechanisms may not be as effective. You therefore look for other means by which you can gain some relief from your pain. To feel good (or at least okay) about yourself you look for something outside yourself that you can rely on to do this for you, such as, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, work, food etc, some of the characteristics of a shame-based person are:

- Low self esteem so that there is no ability to honour or respect self or others.
- A distorted view of others with a large amount of internalised anger. A shame-based person will project this on to others, making themselves the victims by characterising others as angry, blaming, unfair, aggressive, judgemental etc.
- A distorted view of themselves which comes from a lack of the ability to accept that they can and do make mistakes.
- Fear. The greater the fear, the greater the need for mental and emotional denial processes. Shame-based people tend to become hyper-vigilant towards that which they fear the most.
- Rigid thinking. Shame-based people tend to assign other people and their behaviours to rigid categories. In judging others and their actions there are no grey areas.
- Hyper self criticism. Shame-based people tend to feel intense guilt. They judge themselves more mercilessly, critically and unfairly than they do others.
- Fear of abandonment. This fear is a fate worse than death and must be avoided at all costs.
- Loneliness. Shame-based people detach themselves from others because of their shame by physically - emotionally withdrawing, or becoming the 'life of the party' as a mask.

To cover up the above characteristics a shame-based person will usually develop masks or create a particular identity. The intent of this is to keep their contact with others within their control. This allows them to:

- Control the topic of conversation
- Control the tone of the conversation and the emotional distance
- Avoid being involved with others at a deeper than superficial level
- Avoid unexpected emotional intrusions
- Put their environment firmly in their own control
- Gain friendly, positive contact with others, without having to become intimate
- Feel good about themselves.

It is reasonable to say that shame-based people are externally driven and motivated by approval or disapproval. They are unable to recognise that the world is not black or white and that nothing in the world is totally failsafe and that success and failure both occur.

They also don't understand that in the real 'grey' world people can, and indeed do, make mistakes and that mistakes are rarely, if ever, final.

We all make mistakes and at times fail at things. We are, after all, human and making mistakes is part of the human condition. The important point to remember here is that you are not your mistakes. Your mistakes are your mistakes, you are not your mistakes. To put this another way: if you make a mistake it is the mistake that is stupid and not you. If your mistakes are internalised and become part of you they may very well become a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e. if you hear the message long enough and hard enough about yourself, you may become that message, particularly if you are giving yourself that message.

People who see themselves as a failure, a mistake, stupid, not wanted and unloved may well take the 'field' of life with their focus being trying not to lose in life, instead of trying to be a winner in life. The problem is that focusing on defeat usually guarantees it.

All of the previously mentioned behaviours, characteristics and traits are used to create a 'false self'. This disguises the inability to form open, mature and trusting relationships, and hides the anger of the unhealthy, shame-based person.



## Some Points for Discussion

1. What messages about yourself do you still carry?
2. How do you live these messages out today?
3. Where did you get these messages from?
4. What practical, spiritual steps can you take to let go of your unhealthy shame?