Some Thoughts Regarding Shame

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**Why experience the feeling of shame?**

Shame rests on the idea of conformity. An unwillingness or inability to conform to internal or external values is perceived as dangerous because I become unpredictable to myself and/or others about fundamental relational agreements. Without these I become unable to connect to myself and/or others.

When the unconscious detects a situation that appears to meet the above criteria, the feeling of shame is sent to the conscious mind (with considerable energy) so that this urgent issue is quickly assessed and acted upon if valid.

Like the other emotions, shame is helpful. It can act to keep us in conformity within ourselves and within our relationships with the realities outside of ourselves. It can cause us to replace or modify values we have which have unanticipated flaws or which have become unresponsive to our current reality. The fact that shame is often intensely painful is largely due to the importance of the issues it deals with – the pain is high because the stakes are high, and the need to assess and act is urgent.

We want touching a hot stove element to send a strong pain message so that we react immediately to prevent further serious damage – so also do we want pain to send us a sharp pain, for the same reasons.

**What is shame?**

Shame is an active emotion that asks you to do something about the situation now. It provides you with both motivation and the physical/psychological energy to act. It also tells you where to direct this action. In the case of shame, the direction is that of recognizing in yourself a character trait that is not in accord with the self-concept you want for yourself, and doing something about that.

Unlike guilt, shame is mostly about internal changes, not external actions. Although shame is influenced strongly by outside reality, it is truly about how my internal reality works. It is only to the extent that I accept external beliefs about what is proper and improper that I feel shame about these things. On the opposite end of that, I can feel shame about choices and actions that no one else would label as shameful.

Shame requires at least these 4 elements:

1. I have made a choice or became involved in an action, intentionally or not, over which I had the ability to have at least some control;
2. The choice, action, outcome of the choice, or nature of the action goes against the method that I want to use/believe is correct to use to make choices (my values), leading to self-shame, or against the accepted method of making choices of my relationship with outer reality (social values), leading to relationship shame;
3. I do not see this variation in choice or action as desired, regardless of its benefits or rational justifications; and
4. I believe this unwanted choice originated or was made possible due to an attribute of my character; it involves a larger structure of thinking than just that pertaining to this specific example.

**Resolving Shame**

The first task when feeling an emotion is to consciously decide if the feeling is real and accurate. We feel real feelings about imaginary characters and fictional stories.

If I rationally determine that one or more of the necessary elements for shame are not real or not valid, the feeling of shame will go away. It may be replaced by another feeling like disappointment, regret, or a belief statement such as “life is strange” or “things sometimes look different than they really are.” It may go away without any following feeling or belief thought.

If, however, I consciously determine that all four criteria are valid, then I need to take the following steps to resolve the shame:

1. Admit that according to my current values I have made a shameful choice and/or been involved in a shameful action.
2. Determine if what happened meets the criteria for guilt, and if so, deal with the guilt.
3. Determine if the values involved that I adhere to, whether personal and/or social, are somehow unrealistic or require modification. Was my inability to conform to the values actually due in part or in whole to the values themselves having heretofore unrecognized defects? Is the trait I am labeling defective actually wrong to have influenced me the way it did, or did it do the right thing and my values are simply not recognizing or accepting that?
4. Once the questions regarding the values are resolved, make any changes (to the extent possible) to the character trait or traits that caused the deviance from my values such that there is not a repeat of what happened. In doing this I need to take care to recognize the difference between a bad tool and a bad use of a tool: for example, cowardice is sometimes a best choice – standing up to oppression at the wrong time can make things worse, not better. Don’t get rid of a tool just because it’s been wrongly used.
5. Validate the changes in some way in outer reality.

As with other active emotions, resolving the shame steps causes the shame to stop. It may be replaced by a different, less action-oriented feeling such as remorse, or by a host of other feelings dependent on the context in which you think about the previously shameful experience. It may remain but now be in your conscious control – if you want to remember the feeling of shame you can do so, but you can keep the feeling tied to the past, not the present.

**Shame versus Guilt**

Regret and guilt primarily have to do with specific individual actions or choices. Shame has to do with attributes of ourselves, of who we are. Guilt says I should have done something differently; shame says I should have been the kind of person who did something differently.

It is easy to mislabel these two emotions – to feel shame when the more helpful or accurate response would be to feel guilt, or to feel guilt when shame is really what is called for.

Mislabeling sometimes is something we do alone, but often it is something that comes from outside: we are told we should feel shame or guilt, and we accept the outside label because we know we are feeling something, but may not be clear exactly what yet. Or we may assume we were wrong to think we knew what we were feeling, and the outside source must for some reason be right.

Other times we are not explicitly told what we are feeling, but the actions of others define it instead. If bad things happen as a result of what I did, I can easily conclude I am guilty of causing this. If the people around me react to me as if something I’ve participated in is shameful, I may conclude that I am - or should be – feeling shame. If the circumstances do not allow for normal questioning – there is too much emotion or the subject is one “we don’t talk about” then there may be little chance to correct the mislabeling that has been made.

A major reason why correct labeling is important is that each of these emotions requires a different set of responses to deal with it. Trying to resolve guilt by doing the things that resolve shame won’t work the way we expect it to, and vice versa for resolving shame using the ways for resolving guilt. (We’ll look at that later in this paper.)

**Shame over past events**

Shame about the past is either about he things we didn’t do or the things we did. Before we take a closer look at each, let’s look at some problems we run into when we apply shame to our past choices and actions.

Shame about the past is different than shame about current experiences, because we rather easily and often inadvertently misinterpret the past. Our memory tends to alter certain details, to emphasize some and submerge others, based on our current situation and our current meaning for what happened. All this is normal, but we want to avoid the trap of interpreting what we did back then – and why – based on who we are and what we know now.

So the first crucial question is: is this true? Is this actually about a characteristic of who I am or was, or am I reading more into it than is accurate?

Let’s start out with this being an attribute of myself, past or current. One instance of something, however dramatic, doesn’t make a pattern. Contrary to the belief most of us have about how much we are in control – and are therefore responsible for – in our lives, chance plays a much higher role in outcomes than we give it credit. This applies to both good and bad outcomes – we take credit for good outcomes that more accurately were due to favorable outcomes of chance (“good luck”) and blame ourselves for outcomes that in actuality were more about bad luck. When looked at closely most successes and failures were much less in our control than we or others portrayed them to be.

So, can the attribute you apply to yourself be equally as well (or better) explained as something else, including simple chance? This is particularly important to check out if you had no conscious awareness of making a choice for that attribute at the time the choice was being made. Did you think “I’m going to be selfish here,” or did you decide after the fact that that’s what you must have been thinking? Were you aware at the time that you were making your choice because you were being excessively fearful, or did you decide later on that you acted based on that reason?

Why is this important? The past almost always could have been improved if we knew what the outcomes of our decisions would turn out to be. Even good decisions almost always could have been done better. We must be careful not to unconsciously switch the context of the decision from that in which it was made to that in which we are now.

Here’s an example: Researchers have found that older people generally identify their careers as having had less value in their lives than their relationships, and they wish they had been more daring about making choices to follow their dreams. The researchers then draw the conclusion that work should not be valued above relationships and that people at younger ages would be better off taking greater risks. These are erroneous conclusions, because the context of the choices is not the same, The older people are almost all post-career. At this stage in their lives previous career choices aren’t anywhere near as important as current relationship ones. Likewise, having already survived to old age, and also not being faced by their earlier choices in the context of the uncertain outcomes in which they were made, it is easy to say that more risk should have been taken. Could they have dealt with the greater failures if the risks had not turned out? There is no need to consider that now – and every need to have considered that back then. In spite of what they say about then, are they following their own advice and taking greater risks to follow their dreams now?

It may be that, indeed, in the long run, relationships trump careers and most people might benefit from being a little less cautious about pursuing their dreams -- but the short run also trumps the long run: to get to the long run I have to survive and get through that short run I’m faced with right now. And when I’m in it I don’t know how that will turn out.

Therefore, I urge you to be careful looking at the past to avoid seeing it too much from the basis of knowing how the choices turned out. Remember that at the time you very likely didn’t know what really would happen, at least with any certainty. Be careful to see patterns now, based on how things turned out, that really weren’t there then. If you had known that the next 25 rolls of the dice would come up heads you can regret that you didn’t bet heavily on them doing so – but that doesn’t mean you were overly cautious then or too afraid to take good chances. Don’t assign such attributes based on 20-20 hindsight.

When assessing shame based on what happened in the past it is very important to closely look to see if the feeling is based on what happened in the context of the time it happened, that we are not distorting that reality to fit our current one.

**Four types of past shame**

That said, four things might occur: 1) we might decide that we indeed did not need to feel shame then, and don’t need to feel shame now (the feeling is not validated by the facts or circumstances); 2) we might decide that we did not need to feel shame then, and but that it is accurate to feel shame now; 3) we might decide that it was accurate to feel shame then but it’s not ac curate to feel shame about it now; or 4) we may decide that it was accurate to feel shame then and it is still accurate to feel shame now.

In the first case we don’t need to do anything. Let’s look at the last three options individually.

**No shame then, shame now**

How does this develop? Here’s an example: You grow up in affluence and all aspects of the pain and suffering of others are hidden from you. Now, as a man, you suddenly discover that most people live in a far different reality. You feel shame that you lived a life of indulgence without realizing or understanding the costs that others were paying for you to do so. (Welcome to the life of the Buddha.)

In looking at this you can see that the child you were had no reason to feel shame – the child was simply accepting the only reality he/she knew. What about the adult/current you – should you feel shame? Only if you accept this as unfairly selfish and haven’t yet stopped doing it, which, in this case, let’s say is so. Now the emotion of shame motivates you to consciously change your choices and actions: shame is a good thing.

**Shame then, no shame now**

Here’s an example of how this might occur: In your youth you became a drug dealer. You knew the drugs were harming the people you sold to, and that was something you knew wasn’t morally right, but all you cared about was the money so you did it anyway. Ten years ago you had an epiphany and totally changed your life. You got a degree in architecture and became a pillar of the community. You support charities and volunteer some time to helping others.

What you did before clearly fit the criteria for shame: an attribute you had, selfishness, led to you making a repeating pattern of choices which went against the moral code you believed in at the time. Who you were deserved to feel shame.

However, although you may regret or feel disappointed or sad at having been like that then, you currently have no need to be ashamed about it. You corrected the shameful behaviors. The past shame is in the past – you might decide to do something about it “in the name of who I was”, but there is no current urgency, so this is less about shame than about justice – about balance and fairness.

**Shame then and shame now**

For the final example, let’s do a riff an the last one. You were a drug dealer, choosing to do so despite it going against what you knew to be right – and you still are a drug dealer. The past meets the criteria for shame, and so does the present.

**Shame over things not done**

Research on happiness shows that it is harder for us to deal with the things we didn’t do than the things we did. Typically this situation involves regret, but not uncommonly it can also show up as shame.

Regarding things in our past that we didn’t do, what might result in our feeling shame? We might feel shame for not stepping in to resist a wrong, or not helping someone when we could. We might feel shame for being selfish – for not putting the needs of others above our own. We might feel shame for having been clueless or oblivious to something we now feel we should have been aware of, or for letting a situation go on too long because we were afraid, uncertain, or unwilling to resolve it. These are just some examples – the list could go on and on.

In all these cases it is less the choice itself that is the focus than “what is says about who we are or were.” And that comes out as an attribute of ourselves that we don’t like. “I was selfish.” “I was indecisive.” “I was … “ The actual situation we bring up is seen as an example of this larger failing rather than an isolated instance.

**Shame over things done**

These differ mostly in that they are typically more overt. That means that you and others can more easily assert them to be true. That means they are also more likely to have had labels attached to them by others – “I can’t believe you could be so heartless!” “You never really are honest.” “I guess I’m just a coward.” etc. And that means that they are more likely to have been mislabeled or falsely seen as the reason for what happened. Be careful to not take the old labels at face value, but instead to assess things from a more neutral position.

Frequently the old labels are just plain wrong. The most common way these get distorted that I have seen in 25 years of providing psychotherapy is that of confusing a skill deficit with a character trait – instead of accurately seeing that I lack sufficient practice at interacting with others, I label myself as shy, or instead of being aware that I learned skills of attracting attention but not those of being part of a team, I accept the label of being “a show off” and “self-centered.”

Take the time to re-assess, especially from the standpoint of “What if this was in fact the best choice available to me at the time, in the context of that reality?” You may be surprised.

**What’s to be done?**

Assuming this has been consciously assessed as all true, what is to be done? There are two answers.

The first answer is to take the steps previously identified as those needed to resolve shame. Admit it, deal with any guilt issues, check to see if your values need any changing, change what you can regarding the personal attributes involved, and externally validate the changes.

The second answer is to let past shame go. Shame has its basis in a need to act now to resolve a current need. Think of it as having a shelf life that expires. It should only be coming up for past events if there is actually something you need to do now. There may not be. You may already have made the changes needed to resolve the shame. You may still be calling shame what has now actually changed to guilt, or to self-blaming or self-punishing.

We can’t change the form of what happened in the past. However, we do get to change the meaning of it. We don’t have to stick with the meaning it had when it happened, or the meaning we had this morning. In fact, I believe that we need to constantly be making big or small changes to the meaning of the past. Why? Because time changes our reality. What happened in the past can’t change –it’s fixed. So the only thing that can change to adapt to our new reality is the meaning of what happened.

Not letting the meaning change is. I believe, the basis for a host of psychological problems and unhelpful behaviors.

So if you should have felt ashamed and done something about it in the past, accept that and find a new meaning for it that fits the current reality. That old reality is gone. I have a quote made into a sign I give to my clients – “Sooner or later you have to give up the hope of a better yesterday.” You don’t have to ignore what happened, but you also don’t need to keep defining the meaning of it as a debt that can never be paid, choices that cannot be undone. ALL choices in the past cannot be undone. ALL choices in the past can be given new meanings.

If you feel shame about your choices or actions taken recently, try using the above suggestions on how to deal with it. As for the past – re-think it.

Shame is there to help you. Learn how to let it.

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