

5 Ways to Silence Shame

Try these 5 tips the next time shame comes your way.

David Sack M.D./ www.psychologytoday.com

Shame is among the most corrosive of human emotions, with the power to convince us that that little voice in our head is right after all—you know, the one that says “I knew you’d fail,” “You’ll never really belong,” and “Who would love you?”

It’s an excruciating feeling and a universal one. Rich or poor, overweight or thin, successful or struggling, we all experience shame from time to time, whether we admit it or not (and we usually don’t). Shame can shut us down or emerge in ways destructive to ourselves and others. It has been linked to addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders and bullying, so it’s crucial that we learn ways to deal with it and to build healthy barriers against it.

The next time shame comes your way, consider these steps:

1. Bring Shame into the Light

Shame and vulnerability researcher and author Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW, describes shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” No wonder then that the last thing we want to do when gripped by shame is talk about it. If we do, others may discover just how horrible we are.

But that’s not the best approach. “The less we talk about shame, the more power it has over our lives,” Dr. Brown explains in her book *Daring Greatly*. “If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we’ve basically cut it off at the knees.”

Thomas Scheff, professor emeritus of sociology at UC Santa Barbara, agrees, writing in the journal *Cultural Sociology* that shame is “the most obstructed and hidden emotion, and therefore the most destructive. Emotions are like breathing – they cause trouble only when obstructed.”

Getting beyond shame means acknowledging it and sharing our experiences with the trusted people in our lives, the ones who know we aren’t perfect and love us anyway. Their empathy will allow us to keep our sense of shame in perspective, as well as help us come up with strategies for dealing with it. That philosophy is also being used successfully in addiction and mental health treatment, where shame-based education can help clients identify, understand and move past the shame that often underlies their issues.

By acknowledging shame, we refuse to let it fester or define us. “When we bury the story, we forever stay the subject of the story,” Dr. Brown writes. “If we own the story we get to narrate the ending.”

2. Untangle What You Are Feeling

“You should be ashamed,” someone (or that voice in your head) says. But should you? Perhaps what you really should be experiencing is guilt. It’s an important distinction. Researchers define it this way: Shame means “I am bad.” Guilt means “I did something bad.”

Being “bad” means you see yourself as incapable of changing or doing better. The remorse and regret that can come with guilt, on the other hand, can motivate us to make reparations or follow a new path.

It’s also possible that “humiliation” or “embarrassment” is a more accurate label. Neither of those feelings is comfortable, but they don’t take aim at our self-worth in the way shame does. Humiliation can seem like shame, but it comes with the feeling that it was not deserved. If you are thinking, “I can’t believe my boss dressed me down in front of the entire staff for missing that deadline,” that’s humiliation. If you are thinking, “I can’t believe I missed that deadline. I’m such a loser,” that’s shame.

Our old friend embarrassment can pass in a blink, simply because we realize it happens to everyone. Your cheeks may go crimson when you miss the chair and end up on the floor, but you know you aren't the first person it has happened to and won't be the last.

So, take the time to analyze what you are feeling and compare it to what you really should be feeling. It can help you take the first step out of the shame hole and onto a more constructive path.

3. Unhitch What You Do from Who You Are

We all want others to admire what we bring to the table, whether on the job, at home, in our communities, or in the world. But what happens if they don't like our contribution? If our self-worth is attached to what we create or offer, the answer is that we may very well be devastated by a sense of shame that can cause us to retreat or lash out: "I'm an idiot. That's the last time I suggest an idea in a meeting" or "My idea may not be great, but yours is a lot worse!" Even if they love our offering, we then become slaves to the desire to keep pleasing. Either way, if we define ourselves by what we do, we have put the power of our happiness in the hands of others.

Separating what we do from our sense of self-worth comes with an important benefit. When your whole identity isn't on the line, you'll find yourself freer to create, take risks and be innovative. Yes, you may be disappointed if the world doesn't meet your efforts with applause, but it won't be soul-crushing in the way that shame can be. Instead, you can look at both praise and condemnation with the perspective they deserve, absorb any helpful critiques, and move on.

4. Recognize Your Triggers

One of shame's sneakiest tricks is its ability to hit us where we are most vulnerable. A new mom who secretly feels out of her depth is more likely to feel shame when her parenting style is questioned. A husband who worries that he doesn't measure up as a provider may see his spouse's comment about the neighbor's new car as an attempt to shame him rather than an innocent observation.

In short, our insecurities prime us to default to shame. By being aware of what our shame triggers are, we can help nip this process in the bud. Feel shame settling over you? Try to identify the feeling behind it before it can amplify.

Dr. Brown's research unearthed a variety of "shame categories," but the primary shame trigger for women still remains physical appearance. For men, it's the fear of being perceived as weak.

Rather than give in to these triggers, seek to ban them from your life. Embrace who you are rather than struggling to fulfill an outside notion of who you should be. Your vulnerabilities will recede and, with it, shame's power over you.

5. Make Connections

Shame is, at its essence, a fear of disconnection. By reaching out to family and friends, to our communities, to society, to our idea of a higher power, we can make connections that allow us to learn to accept ourselves and other people as well.

Researcher Jessica Van Vliet found this to be a key step in overcoming shame. In a paper published in the British Psychological Society journal *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, she wrote: "People start to realize that it's not just them. Other people do things that are as bad or even worse sometimes so they're not the worst person on the planet. They start to say to themselves, 'This is human; I am human; others are human.'"

That sense of connection also boosts our compassion for ourselves, meaning we are more likely to handle our shame without resorting to measures such as masking the pain with drugs or alcohol, or lashing out at those around us, or giving in to shame's message that we are indeed bad.

Being connected also means we can be there for others when the need arises. Simply expressing "I know how you feel" can work miracles for those in shame's painful hold.