



Dealing with Shame

Family Guides

The Macquarie Dictionary defines shame as “The painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonourable, improper, ridiculous, etc. done by oneself or another.”

On a mild mid-January day in Los Angeles, over 50 years ago, ten-year-old Joseph Burgo was drawing in his bedroom when he heard his father’s car pull up in the driveway, an hour earlier than usual. Excited, he put his pencil down and went out to greet him.

“Get your shorts on,” his father said as he came through the front door. “I’m taking you to the Little League tryouts.”

Joseph blinked in surprise. His father, who worked long hours as a builder, had never bought him a bat or ball, or tossed a ball back and forth in the backyard with his son like many of his classmate’s dads did. Nor was Joseph particularly interested in playing ball, let alone skilled in it.

Nevertheless Joseph, who was thrilled to be receiving some rare attention from his father, rushed and put on his shorts and went along to the tryouts. Not surprisingly, he failed miserably.

“I felt utterly humiliated by my clumsiness,” said Burgo, who is now 63. “I was in tears as we drove home. I felt my dad was ashamed of me.”

“I’ve struggled with core shame my entire life,” Burgo said. “The residue of growing up with a toxic mother and an absent father.”

This sense of shame, in addition to struggling with his sexuality as a teenager, meant that by the time Burgo entered university at the age of 18, he was deeply depressed and feeling suicidal. Thankfully, he recognised he needed help. “I went in search of therapy,” Burgo said.

The benefits therapy provided left a lasting impression on Burgo, who went on to obtain a doctorate and become a psychotherapist himself.

“I am passionate about this topic,” Burgo said. “Understanding shame and the defences against it has been the focus of my professional work and a central theme of my own life. I feel that coming to

terms with my own shame, then building pride and authentic self-esteem to offset it, has been deeply meaningful to me; I wanted to help readers do the same.”

It may seem superfluous to talk about shame in an era marked by what some social commentators say is “a narcissistic epidemic” of selfies and Instagram posts. Yet it seems that we’ve never hated ourselves more.

Globally over the last decade, while people are projecting their smiling emojis over social media, the rate of depression and other serious mental health issues has continued to rise, according to the World Health Organisation.

Along with anger, joy, fear and anxiety, shame is an emotion which all humans experience. Citing research that suggests shame evolved when we were living in small social tribes, Burgo writes, “People who can’t feel physical pain often die young because they don’t have a mechanism to tell them when their tissue is being damaged. Shame is the same as physical pain – it protects us from social devaluation, which might ultimately lead to isolation and death.”

In his book, through deidentified case studies from his own practice, Burgo explores the four categories of what he calls “the shame family of emotions” – unrequited love, exclusion, unwanted exposure and disappointed expectation.

The shame of unrequited love is exemplified by the humiliation experienced when we develop a crush on someone, only to find that they don’t reciprocate. However, it can also develop from platonic love, or the lack thereof, such as the love a child should have with their parents.

“We’re born into this world with an innate expectation for parents who will love and shower attention upon us,” Burgo said. “When they don’t, the legacy is profound shame.”

Shame as exclusion is that awful realisation you have when people you thought of as friends have organised a social outing and you haven’t been invited. The shame as unwanted exposure is when

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something about our body or bodily functions, such as being obese or accidentally passing wind in public, is exposed to others. And the shame as disappointed expectation comes when we've failed to achieve a goal or we haven't met our own or others' standards.

Shame and embarrassment about the fact that they need help is certainly one of the barriers people with mental health issues need to overcome.

The first thing is to have a look at why the person has developed this construct. And then to slowly re-model it. Life is hard and accepting that it's hard for each of us means that we can work at a solution for the individual.

Establishing a sense of self-esteem and pride in one's own achievements is no easy task, let alone a quick one. Instead of being reliant on how other people view you as a source of self-worth, Burgo advocates setting your own achievable goals and allowing yourself justifiable pride when they are reached.

Burgo promotes pride as a slow and constant part of life's journey. "Self-respect ... must be earned," he said. "It is an achievement rather than an entitlement."

When you work long and hard for something that matters to you, when you finally achieve your goal, perhaps after enduring frustration and repeated setbacks, the experience of pride and pleasure will lay down memories that last a lifetime.

Clinical psychologist and director of the Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Institute in Hobart, Dr Bruno Cayoun, says that shame can be a great teacher if we look at it objectively.

"It is important to differentiate healthy shame, unhealthy shame and guilt," says Dr Cayoun, "Healthy shame is an evolutionary feature embedded within the human psychological make-up that assists in the survival of the species by providing an inbuilt ethical system."

We need to be aware of the physical sensations associated with shame because it is these feelings which emerge that give us the motivation to change.

Our reactivity to shame may take the form of catastrophic and ruminative thinking, social withdrawal, or using alcohol and other drugs to prevent discomfort associated with the experience

Once we are more objective and less emotionally reactive, we need to acknowledge our responsibility for what we did. Taking responsibility is an empowering process.

Maintaining self-esteem is a lifelong process

How to deal with personal shame

Self-awareness: the first step towards personal growth is to become aware of our present experience, especially how what we feel is only created by our thoughts.

Acceptance: once we are aware of what causes us to feel shame, we need to prevent reacting and over-focussing on our self-image.

Acknowledging fault: when we are more objective and less emotionally reactive, we need to acknowledge our responsibility and understand the consequence of our action.

Being kind to yourself: we are usually more likely to be harsher on ourselves than towards someone else in a similar situation and need to be kinder to ourselves.

Clinical psychologist Dr Bruno Cayoun

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