

## Addressing Shame Overload

Much has been written about the effect of built-up shame in a person's response to life, self, and others. Much of the behavior of our clients that seems so hard to understand, may well be the result of stored shame. Shame is passed down from generation to generation.

### **What Is This Thing Called Binding Shame?**

Shame means I wear masks. I have the feeling of needing to always be on guard lest the real truth be exposed. Shame is about fear of exposure. Shame shows up in hiding, withdrawing, feelings of depression, and low worth. Typically, the person is always looking down, and talking without making eye contact. You often observe blame-shifting and excuse-making. Sometimes stored shame translates into anger and rage, expressed without provocation.

Shame is not guilt. Guilt is a God-given thermometer that tells us we have done something wrong that needs to be corrected. Guilt is about our need to seek and receive forgiveness. Shame is about guilt that got misplaced or stored.

Shame is an uncomfortable word. Shame is seldom talked about – we avoid thinking about it and certainly avoid acknowledging it. We are usually ashamed of having shame issues and so the very nature of shame perpetuates itself.

When you have a shame-based identity, you see yourself negatively. You may try to perform your way to acceptance. You are unaware of personal boundaries, and as a people-pleaser, you cannot say no to others. Often this leads to further addictions. You tend to stuff your feelings to avoid pain at all costs. Even though you are wounded, you must conceal these wounds and you often have feelings of abandonment. You are tired because survival is a lot of work. There are huge trust issues and much sense of abandonment. If you were raised in an atmosphere void of love, you continue to look for it in all the wrong places, developing possessive relationships because you cannot afford to fail. In all of this, you develop a high need for control so when you come to live in a shelter where someone else is in charge, you do your best to resist. You work very hard to be who you are not, so others will not discover who you really are.

### **The Difference between Healthy Shame and Toxic Shame**

Not all shame is bad or to be avoided. Without shame we would not understand our need for a Savior. We would not change our ways when we have gotten on a wrong path. But healthy shame is quite different from toxic shame.

Think about what you know about toxic materials. Vitamin A is very healthy in the amounts we need, but if we overdose, we can develop a disease called Hypervitaminosis A. Too much of a good thing is

not good. Nuclear power is a great benefit to our lives unless it is put to toxic levels. Sunrays are healthy when absorbed in moderation.

Healthy shame is exhibited in embarrassment, humility, and sometimes in a very positive appreciation for correction. It lets me know I have limits, that I am not God. Healthy shame says I make mistakes and gives me permission to be human.

Toxic shame, on the other hand, is exhibited in feelings of being flawed, “no good,” and “worthless.” I cannot admit mistakes, but I know that I am a mistake.

### **Strategies Used to Avoid Dealing with Shame**

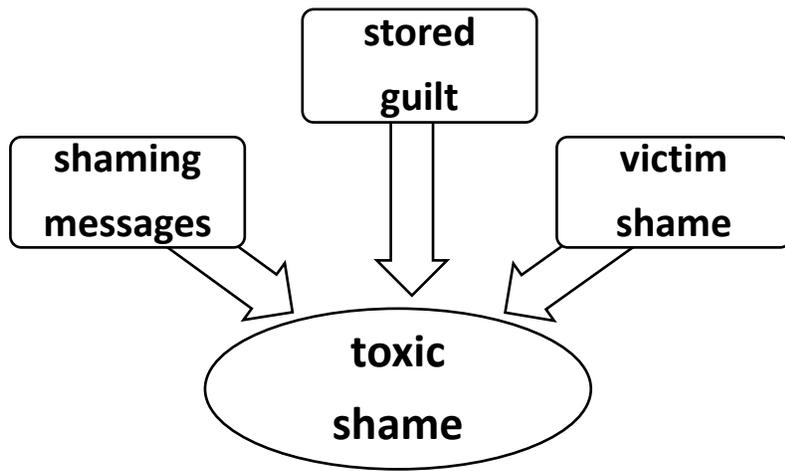
Any method that we would use to numb-out allows us to not think and not feel. This might be abuse of mood-altering substances. It includes any of the myriads of addictions. Some of the less-suspected strategies would include the following:

1. Withdrawal – the wearing of masks
2. Escapism – e.g. Workaholism
3. Paralysis – e.g. “stuck”
4. Flattering energy
5. Perfectionism – (can’t make any mistakes)
6. Criticism
7. Rage
8. Exhibitionism – e.g. “the clown”
9. Arrogance

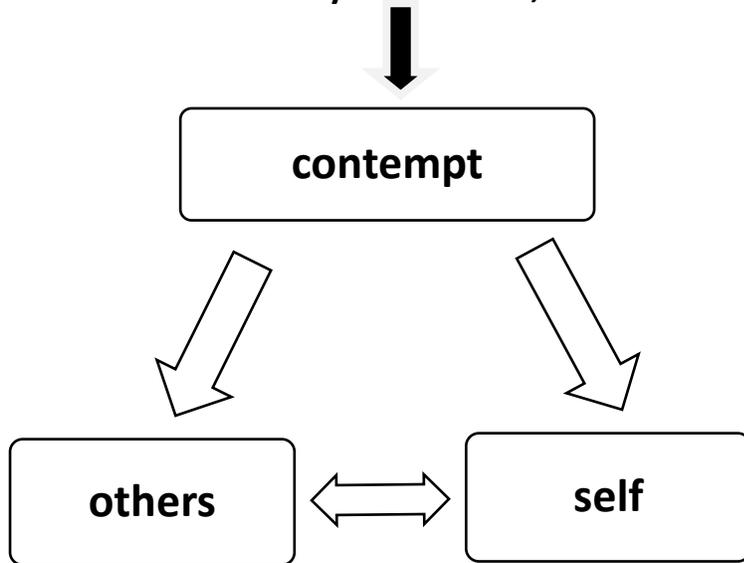
### **Why Should I Bother with the Process of Releasing Shame?**

- Until I deal with toxic shame, I can’t/don’t experience healthy shame
- Until I deal with toxic shame, my relationship with others is affected.
- Carrying toxic shame causes wrong motivation in my life...Do-gooders, over-committed, trying to make self okay, try- harder life style
- Until I deal with toxic shame, I will be paralyzed with a fear of failure.

The diagram on the next page shows the origins of toxic shame. Each of these is handled differently. Shaming messages coming from inherited shame should be handed back; they do not belong to you. Shaming messages from self-talk should be stopped. Stored guilt is confessed and forgiven. Victim shame usually has to be worked out with a caring counselor willing to speak truth. But all need to be disposed of to avoid wrong responses.



If not correctly disposed of, results in



## Stored Shame Prevents Relationships

Shame changes how I see myself and how I think others see me. If I am holding onto a garbage bag full of shame, I end up having to do something with it. I might choose to pass it on to someone else with shaming messages.

In my own experience in counseling in the Rescue Mission, many women would give the identical confession that their mother called them a slut when they were four years old. (Always the same word and always the same age). The women came to realize that such an accusation was an impossibility and the shaming message was someone passing on their own unresolved shame.

If I do not correctly dispose of the toxic shame in my life, it will grow into contempt, either for myself or for others. Whichever way it grows, it will move to the other side. If I have contempt for myself, I will pass it on to others, and if I have contempt for others, I will end up feeling self-contempt...A vicious cycle that can be cured.

## Receiving and Giving Shame Messages

A “shaming message” is a comment, a look, or an action that communicates to someone a negative statement about his or her identity. It is a negative statement about who they are, and their worth as a person. Examples would be a disdainful look, a slap on the face, or statements like “You’re an idiot,” or “You don’t belong here.”

Shaming messages include a need to increase one’s control over the one receiving the message. When I shame myself, I am usually feeling out of control (not experiencing the “fruit of the Spirit,” the God-given self-control). When I shame another, I am sometimes feeling too controlled by this person or the situation. In an effort to readjust that out-of-control feeling, I put them down in an effort to boost myself up.

Part of the healing process, then, is going to include both a proper understanding of control and a healthier self-concept.

The opposite of a “shaming message” is not just a compliment. A compliment can be a statement about what a person does rather than about who the person is. The opposite of a shaming message is a message of honor or respect. It may include a compliment about the person’s character or personality. Examples of weak compliments would include: “You do nice things,” “You are pretty,” “You sing great.” Compare those with these examples of honoring statements: “I like you for who you are,” “You’re a beautiful person,” “The message of your music blesses me.”

How does one stop internalizing shaming messages and move toward the freedom of respect for self and others?

- Acknowledge shame whenever it happens. Shame from my own sin must be exposed to the Lord (Psalm 32:3-7).
- Identify, label, and address all shaming messages. E.g., “When I heard you say...,I felt shame, like you were making a statement about my worth as a human being.”

- Learn to distinguish between healthy shame and attacks on identity and worth. E.g., (Self-talk) “I made a mistake, but I am not a mistake.”
- We need to identify the strategies we use to deal with shame on the surface, and confront those strategies when we catch ourselves engaging in them.
- Rekindle your wonder about yourself. Ask questions: What influenced me to think this way? What trained me to respond to others this way? What positive quality do I have and like about myself that causes these problems when done to an extreme?
- Get back in touch with WHO you are from God’s perspective (1 Timothy 4:4; Colossians 2:10; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 1:4, 2:5,10; Isaiah 43:4).