

# Shame

Humans are born brimming over with primitive, uncivilized, animalistic instincts. They expect to be the center of attention, win all the prizes, and be rewarded no matter what they do. They want to fly like a superhero, win every game they play, and never have to share with others. What awaits them are parents who want a respectful, hardworking, and well-behaved child. If all goes well in the ensuing 2-decade battle, a child's primitive narcissistic instincts will gradually be shaped into healthy self-esteem. If things don't go well, a child can enter adolescence with a profound sense of core shame.

Socialization involves lots of "nos," power struggles, and time-outs. And although most children aren't harmed in the process, we all have to learn to absorb plenty of negative feedback before we become independent adults. Problems in psychological and intellectual development do occur, however, when the normal egocentrism of

childhood is met with prolonged and overwhelming experiences of criticism and rejection. This can occur due to harsh parenting, oversensitive temperament, or a variety of other factors that can overwhelm the child's ability to maintain a core sense of self-esteem. Understanding the power and impact of criticism, ostracism, and other kinds of negative evaluative experiences is vital for psychotherapists, teachers, and parents.

To begin with, we need to distinguish core shame from appropriate kinds of shame and guilt that children need to experience. Appropriate shame and guilt emerge slowly during childhood along with an understanding of others' expectations, an ability to judge one's behaviors, and the cortical control required to inhibit impulses. Appropriate shame and guilt support the development of conscience, deepen our empathetic abilities, and enhance our self-esteem as caring people (Greenwald & Harder, 1998; de Hooze et al., 2008). In contrast, core shame develops earlier in childhood as a function of overwhelmingly negative attachment experiences. The emotions of core shame are distinguishable from healthy shame in that they are not related to behavior but to the experience of the self. Children and adults with core shame come to experience themselves as fundamentally defective, worthless, and unlovable: the polar opposite of self-esteem.

While most of us aren't physically or sexually abused during childhood, all of us experience shame. During the first year of life, parent-child interactions are mainly positive, affectionate, and playful. The infant's limited mobility and skills keep them close to caretakers, who provide for their physical and emotional needs. As infants grow into toddlers, their increasing motor abilities, impulsivity, and exploratory urges lead them to plunge into danger. The unconditional affection of the first year gives way to loud shouts to stop a child in his or her tracks. The same face-to-face interactions that stimulated excitement, exhilaration, and brain growth during the first year now include information on the recognition of disapproval and disappointment. Smiles and soft tones are replaced by a chorus of "Nos," "Don'ts," and "Stops," and a child's name shifts from a term of affection to a warning designed to freeze a child in his or her tracks (Rothbart et al., 1989).

This parent-to-child warning mechanism, seen in many animals, is designed to make children stop moving instantly. It plays an important role in protecting the young from predators and other environmental dangers. This freeze response is reflected within the autonomic nervous system by a rapid transition from sympathetic arousal to parasympathetic

inhibition. Experientially, children are snapped from a mode of curiosity, exploration, and excitement to one of shutdown and withdrawal. As a result, the child stops, looks downward, hangs her head, and rounds her shoulders. Physiologically, these experiences are similar to what could be called “mini-traumas.”

This state of submissive inhibition is essentially the same as when a dog hunches over, pulls its tail between its legs, and slinks away after being scolded for some canine faux pas. Similar postures occur in reaction to social exclusion, helplessness, and submission in virtually all social animals. It is nature’s way of expressing what an adult might articulate as “You are the alpha and I am the beta,” “Please don’t hurt me,” and “Okay, you’re the boss.” But for a child, it also can be experienced as “I’m not important, valuable, or loveable enough to be secure in my membership in the family.” The experience of exclusion during the first years of life is surely traumatic, given that survival is based entirely on inclusion and the protection it provides. At its heart, core shame is the visceral experience of being disconnected, shunned, and expelled from social connectedness, stimulating the same brain regions activated during pain.

While it may be difficult for adults to remember, toddlers expect their parents to be just as excited as they are about their adventures. Young children are surprised when their parents are not as fascinated as they are to watch the contents of a quart of milk find its way toward the living room. These exciting experiences establish the expectation of deepening connection with their parents. But when these situations stimulate indifference, disapproval, or anger in a parent, the child is at risk of feeling alone, rejected, and shamed. These experiences of misattunement may trigger the same rapid shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic dominance and negative emotions as the primitive stop mechanisms we share with other animals (Schoore, 1998).

Negative parental reactions to children’s joy and enthusiasm can be experienced as painful rejection experiences that are translated to the developing psyche as threats of abandonment and death. And to whatever degree early relationships are characterized by these interactions, infants can develop into more hypervigilant, fearful, and avoidant toddlers. These experiences are stored as visceral, sensory, motor, and emotional memories, creating an overall expectation of negative feelings and outcomes during future social interactions. In this way, the experience of core shame becomes interwoven with our attachment schema.

The return from a state of shame to attunement with parents creates a return to a balance of autonomic functioning, supports affect regulation, and contributes to the gradual development of self-regulation. Repeated and rapid returns from shame to attuned states consolidate into an expectation of positive outcomes during difficult social interactions. These repeated repairs are stored as visceral, sensory, motor, and emotional memories at all levels of the central nervous system, making the internalization of positive parenting a full-body experience.

Because core shame is formed during a developmental period characterized by egocentric information processing, the loss of a parent through imprisonment, divorce, or even death is taken personally. During the first years of life, our parents don't leave a marriage or die from an illness; they abandon us because we weren't lovable enough for them to stay. Unable to distinguish between their reaction to us and our behaviors when we are scolded or rejected, our brains experience them as life-threatening rejections even though our parents may only be trying to protect us.

These ruptures of attunement and emotional connection happen between the best of parents and the healthiest of children. However, a child with a sensitive or anxious temperament may suffer greatly in the face of what appear to be normal, everyday parenting interactions. Differences in temperament and personality between parent and child can also contribute to the development of core shame because they can result in a great deal of misattunement. In other families, parents who were abandoned, neglected, or abused as children may use shaming and criticism as a predominant parenting style with their own children. This is quite common in rigid and authoritarian parents, religious cults, military families, and when there is mental illness in one or both parents.

Because shame is a powerful, preverbal, and physiologically based organizing principle, the overuse of shame as a disciplinary tool predisposes children to long-standing difficulties with emotional regulation and self-esteem (Schoore & Schoore, 2008). Chronically shaming parents have children who spend much of their time anxious, afraid, and at risk for depression and anxiety. On the other hand, attentive parents rescue children from shame states by reattuning with them as soon as possible after a rupture of connection. It is thought that repeated and rapid returns from shame states to reconnection and attunement result in rebalancing of autonomic functioning while contributing to the gradual development of self-regulation.

So the primitive parasympathetic reflex to freeze in the face of negative parental reactions has unfortunately become part of the infrastructure of later-evolving psychological processes related to attachment, safety, and self-worth. For social animals like ourselves, the fundamental question of “Am I safe?” has become woven together with the answer to the question “Am I loveable?” The shutdown designed to protect us from danger will subsequently interfere with our ability to connect with others. See Table 17.2 for some of the causes and consequences of shame.

By the time we achieve self-awareness between 5 and 10 years of age, positive self-esteem and core shame have already been programmed as social and emotional givens. It is similar in many ways to booting up your computer and being presented with a desktop that has been organized by a Microsoft or Apple operating system. You accept it as the parameters of your computing universe—unaware of the thousands of lines of programming language required to generate the reality that has been created for you. In other words, basic self-esteem and core shame are programmed so early that although they are deeply known, they are seldom thought about or directly articulated.

**Table 17.2. Causes and Consequences of Shame**

**Psychological Effects**

- Depression<sup>1</sup>
- Inferiority, low self-esteem, and self-efficacy<sup>2</sup>
- Inappropriate self-blame<sup>3</sup>
- Anger, hostility, and externalizing problems<sup>4</sup>
- Envy and blame of others<sup>5</sup>

**Effects on School and Work Performance**

- Reduced pride in response to success (girls)<sup>16</sup>

**Interpersonal Effects**

- Conflict avoidance<sup>13</sup>
- Reduced interpersonal problem solving<sup>14</sup>
- Reflective apologizing<sup>15</sup>

**Family-of-Origin Correlates**

- Authoritarian and critical parents<sup>8</sup>
- Childhood abuse and abandonment<sup>10</sup>

**Biological Effects**

- Decreased immunological functioning<sup>6</sup>
- Increased levels of cortisol<sup>7</sup>
- Decreased neuroplasticity<sup>7</sup>
- Increased shame in the face of failure<sup>17</sup>
- Maladaptive perfectionism<sup>18</sup>
- Fear of negative evaluation<sup>19</sup>
- Memories of absent mothers<sup>9</sup>
- Feeling less favored than siblings<sup>12</sup>

As children graduate into increasingly complex peer group relations, core shame can come to shape their social life. Core shame distorts social cognition and creates the experience of rejection in neutral and even positive situations. Consistent misperception of rejection and negative distortion of social interactions create a vicious cycle that aversively impacts their popularity, social status, and ability to form relationships. Lives guided by core shame are marked by anxiety, depression, and exhaustion. There is a constant losing battle to achieve perfection and gain acceptance by accommodating to the needs of others, and fear of being found to be the fraud you surely are.

At its heart is a sense of being a defective person and a fear of exposure. Even though they have done nothing wrong, there is nothing they can do to make up for it (Kaufman, 1974). One of my students described it this way: “My shame makes it impossible for me to be loved because I can never believe someone could love me. And if I believe they do, I can’t possibly respect them because if they love me, their judgment must be seriously flawed.” Because shame leads to anger and resentment, there is also considerable blame and hostility directed at others.

For those who suffer from core shame, early parental relationships are often described as having included abuse, abandonment, and constant criticism. Others describe dependent parents who, instead of helping them develop, looked to their children for emotional regulation. In both cases, the absence of caring and competent parenting makes children extremely vulnerable to core shame. In their behavior with others, they are characterized as compulsive apologizers, desperately trying to avoid conflict and the anger of others, which always feels deserved. Praise bounces off them but anything interpretable as criticism will be taken hard, triggering a fight-or-flight reaction.

In adults, core shame can be acted out in the form of choosing abusive or nonsupportive partners, an absence of self-care, and unyielding perfectionism. You see expressions of shame in an inability to tolerate being alone or in adolescents and adults who attempt suicide after a breakup. For people with core shame, even a relatively minor abandonment can be experienced as life threatening because it has the power to trigger implicit memories of early shame and danger. For some, any feedback suggesting that they are less than perfect triggers panic, making them unable to take risks, explore new ideas, or receive instruction from teachers. Because not knowing something is intolerable,

students with core shame have great difficulty dealing with the anxiety involved in uncertainty while working toward a solution.