

## How shame can hurt your relationship

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Shame is a human emotion that we all experience and it plays a central role in our relationships. You may know the feeling by other names, such as humiliation, embarrassment, guilt, shyness, nervousness, or depression. Or your shame may show up as thoughts like, “I feel bad about myself” or “I feel like I don’t matter”.

The emotion of shame has a unique role in the human mind as a mechanism for “turning off” positive emotion. Positive emotion is inherently rewarding--it feels good and we want to continue feeling this way. However, realistically there are constant obstacles or impediments to feeling good. It wouldn’t be very adaptive to continue to pursue things that aren’t working out. Shame evolved in order to get us to pay attention when there is something getting in the way of feeling good.

One aspect of development which is central to the experience of shame is interpersonal relationships. You were born wanting to connect with others. Initially, it was with your mother and other caregivers. Soon that got extended to peer groups and other relationships as well. Since we all have this need to belong, when we experience some obstacle to connecting then we feel the pain of shame. For example, as a child, if you were really hoping to have your parent recognize how excited you were about something that happened at school but they were preoccupied and couldn’t respond in the way you needed, then you might feel shame arise.

When we are children and try to make sense of why things aren’t working out interpersonally, we tend to blame ourselves. Children are predominately self-centered because they haven’t fully developed the capacity for abstract thinking. If your father got angry with you, you were more likely to think “I am bad” rather than “he is having a bad day”. Our

shame experiences create an image in our minds of ourselves as inadequate or flawed and we develop negative beliefs about the self, such as, “I am unlovable” or “I am uninteresting”.

None of us can avoid the experience of shame growing up. We all carry around some sense of self as inadequate. And since shame is so painful, the mind searches for a solution to this sense of self as inadequate.

In order to defend and protect yourself from shame, there are four basic strategies that you learn to use. You can use the **Avoid Others** strategy, where you avoid the situation that is triggering, or threatens to trigger, shame. You may also attempt to gain control over the anticipation of humiliation by **Attacking the Self**--rather than have your flaws pointed out by another you point them out to yourself. This strategy can create some sense of control over the anticipation of being shamed.

The two other strategies are the **Attack Other** and **Avoid Self** strategies. The Attack Other strategy involves becoming attuned to, and pointing out, the flaws of others in an effort to distance yourself from the experience of being flawed. When you engage in blaming, the Attack Other strategy is being used. Feelings of contempt or superiority are also indicators of this strategy in operation.

The Avoid Self strategy solves the problem of shame by allowing you to disconnect and avoid feeling altogether. Examples of this strategy in operation are perfectionism, counter-dependent behaviors, excessive focus on work, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, sexually compulsive behaviors, gambling, excessive shopping, exercise addictions, among others.

All the defenses against shame are temporarily successful in making us feel better. However, they ultimately make matters worse by getting in the way of getting close to other people. They all have the effect of putting up a wall between you and other people.

Do you use any of these shame defenses in your relationship? For example, how do you react if your spouse responds to you in a way that indicates that he or she is annoyed when what you are hoping for is some

closeness? Do you end up feeling bad about yourself? Do you respond by getting critical, withdrawing or zoning out in front of the TV?

Since the experience of shame is inevitable, the only thing you have any control over is how you will respond when it shows up. You can respond in a defensive way and put up a wall to try to protect yourself from the feeling, or you can do the harder thing—which is to allow yourself to be vulnerable and talk about your experience with your partner. This takes a bit of courage since the reason you are protecting yourself with your wall is to avoid getting hurt. Taking down the wall and putting in a door requires you to trust yourself and your partner to be able to talk this out.

Regardless of what defensive strategy you use, the experience of shame is often one of feeling hurt. So a starting point is to find a way to talk to your partner about feeling hurt **without** being blaming. Try to stick to “I” statements rather than “you did this” and avoid generalizations, like “you always” and “you never”. For example, instead of saying “You have such a bad attitude”, try saying “I was really hoping to spend some time with you today and I’m feeling hurt because it feels like that isn’t important to you”.

When you take the risk to open up to your partner without your walls of protection you have a chance for a new way of engaging. It will feel unfamiliar and there are likely to be bumps along the way. However, couples therapy can make this easier and safer. My job is to help both of you talk about old and new hurts in a way that allows you to not only accept what has happened but to open the door for your partner to give you the love you are looking for.

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