

CHAPTER 2

What's Shame?

Shame is a soul-eating emotion.

Carl Jung –

It helps to learn as much as we can about shame before engaging with it. We need move in slowly. This chapter begins by exploring the many faces of shame, especially how shame appears in your own life. Then we define what we mean by shame, contrasting it with similar emotions like guilt and embarrassment. Finally, we consider various dimensions of shame—mild or intense, a state or a trait, internal or external, and adaptive or maladaptive shame. After reading this chapter, you'll be able to recognize shame when it appears and determine how much shame impacts your life.

What Does Shame Look Like?

Let's do a little shame-busting. Please reflect for a moment a past event that made you feel ashamed—not the worst experience of your life, but one that still makes you cringe when you think about it. It could have been something you did, such as getting caught in a lie or saying something foolish at business meeting. It might be something that happened *to* you, such as overhearing hurtful gossip or being teased in school. Maybe it was just an unfortunate life situation which you nonetheless feel ashamed about, such as getting a divorce, being unable to

find a job, or failing an exam. What makes you identify what you were feeling at the time as “shame”? How did you feel in your body? What were you thinking? How did you react?

Shame is a complex emotion. Below are some ways that shame may appear in your life. There are inner body sensations, outer body expressions, mental and emotional signs, and behavioral consequences.

Inner Body Sensations

The body is the first to react when we feel shame. You might experience:

- a sinking feeling
- a bump in the chest or gut
- tightness in throat or chest
- hollowness in the head region
- facial tension
- tingling or crawling skin
- nausea

Outer Body Expressions

The body also communicates how we feel to others. Physical signs of shame include:

- averted gaze or eyes closed
- slumped shoulders
- hiding face
- muscle tension
- fidgeting
- nervous smile or laughter
- sweating

- inaudible speech
- no movement

Mental Signs

A lot can happen when the mind is engulfed in shame. Some mental signs of shame are:

- confusion—“What!!”
- feeling observed—“The whole world is looking at me.”
- sense of inadequacy—“I’m not good enough.”
- self-criticism—“I’m an idiot.”
- blaming others—“You’re are a bad person.”
- worry—“Oh, no!”
- powerlessness—“There’s nothing I can do.”
- feeling like an outsider—“I just don’t fit in.”
- vulnerable—“I will be hurt.”
- mistrust—“No one is here for me”
- worthlessness—“I’m nothing”
- unworthiness—“People won’t like me?”
- emptiness—“Aaargh!”
- rumination—“Why me? What’s wrong with me?”

Emotional Signs

Shame easily mixes with other challenging emotions. For example, shame can hide behind anger, or anger can be a cause for shame. Some emotions that accompany shame are:

- sadness, despair
- anxiety, fear

- disgust, distain
- irritation, anger, rage

Behavioral Consequences

A variety of actions can be set in motion by shame. Most of these behaviors are an attempt to reduce the intensity of shame. We might:

- Move away – go small, go silent, and go away, numb or distract ourselves
- Move toward – people-please, or respond with submissiveness to regain favor
- Move against – respond with aggression, such as becoming aggressive or shaming others when we feel ashamed.

[Start Text Box Here]

Try This: How Do I Know I'm Feeling Shame?

Each of us has our own repertoire of reactions to shame. It's helpful to identify shame while it's happening so that we can deal with it directly, before it causes any problems. Please note down for yourself how shame manifests for you:

- How does shame feel inside my body (e.g., sinking feeling, blushing, muscle tension)?

- How does my body react? (e.g., slumped shoulders, fidgeting, hiding eyes)?

- What happens in my mind while I felt shame (e.g., confused, self-critical, unworthy)?

- What other emotions might accompany shame? (e.g., sadness, fear, anger)?

- What actions follow when I feel shame (e.g., withdraw, fight, people-please)?

Identifying a few reliable manifestations of shame is sufficient. The next step is to be alert to those signs when you're going about your daily life. Change happens when we are able to recognize shame in the present moment—when we are able to say, “Ah, this is shame!”

The Meaning of Shame

How do social scientists understand shame? As given in the introduction, shame is a (1) a self-conscious emotion with (2) negative self-evaluation. When an emotion is self-conscious, we are aware of ourselves in a social setting and also evaluate ourselves according to social standards and values. A self-conscious emotion refers to seeing “the self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other.” Shame also includes negative self-evaluation. We tend to evaluate ourselves much of the time, but when we *negatively* evaluate ourselves, shame is usually present. Shame is also a global self-evaluation—our *whole* self is defective, unworthy, incompetent or inadequate.

We can understand shame better by comparing shame to other self-conscious emotions, especially guilt, embarrassment, humiliation and shyness. There is a lot of overlap between these emotions, but the differences illuminate the unique nature of shame.

Guilt versus Shame

In everyday life, guilt and shame seem almost identical. The same event can trigger either shame or guilt depending on how we interpret it. For example, if you lose your temper at a family gathering over the holidays, you could feel bad about yourself or you could consider it an unfortunate mistake. Guilt means “I *did* something wrong” and shame means “I *am* wrong.”

Helen Block Lewis, who launched the scientific study of shame, wrote that shame means “I did a horrible thing” whereas guilt means “I *did* a horrible thing.” Both guilt and shame have a critical attitude, but guilt is more focused on behavior and shame focuses on the “self.”

When Kayla flubbed her lines on the opening night of a school play, she described the experience like this:

“I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die. The auditorium was packed with everyone I knew—my friends, my parents, my teachers—everyone! I couldn’t even say three lines in that stupid play without my mind going blank. I’m such a loser.”

Kayla’s description contains many elements associated with shame. She felt distressed, she focused on herself, was concerned about the judgment of others, she devalued herself in a global manner (“I’m such a loser”), externalized blame (“that stupid play”), and wanted to disappear (“crawl into a hole and die”). In contrast, if Kayla had reacted with guilt rather than shame, she might have said:

“I feel really bad about what happened out there. My teachers and friends were relying on me, but I let them down. I should have learned my lines better so that they came out of my mouth even when I was so nervous. I need to apologize to all my friends for what happened.”

In this scenario, Kayla focused on her mistake rather than her value as a person. She wasn’t in as much pain as the shame-based Kayla, she didn’t attack herself or anyone else, she felt remorse for how her behavior affected others and wanted to make amends, and she had a plan for improvement.

Both shame and guilt are considered “moral emotions” insofar as they can improve how we behave. They make us pause when we perceive a gap between our standards and our behavior, which is a chance to chart a new course of action. However, shame tends to make us freeze and become self-focused, unable to see beyond ourselves and how our actions may have

impacted others. A person experiencing shame is primarily concerned with their own flaws, feels helpless, and sees little hope for doing better or being better. In contrast, a person who experiences guilt feels responsible for what happened and is empowered and motivated to make amends. (Miceli) Therefore, guilt is more “moral” than shame. When we have a bad conscience, we are probably feeling guilt. When we are worried about our reputation or social status, that’s probably shame.

If you find yourself being self-critical and wonder whether you are feeling guilt or shame, consider the following:

Guilt	Shame
I behaved badly	I am bad
I’m responsible	I’m inadequate
I broke a rule	I’m unworthy
Thinking of others	Self-focused
Distressing	More distressing
Can problem-solve	Disrupted thinking
Try to make amends	Try to avoid the problem
Feeling capable	Feeling helpless

We can slip back and forth between shame and guilt when things go wrong in our lives. For example, if I cause a car accident and my passenger is injured, I might start out feeling ashamed and, upon further reflection, decide it was an unavoidable driving error and feel guilt. The reverse is also possible: If my passenger refused to speak to me again, guilt might switch to shame because I can’t make amends and I feel isolated and rejected.

[Insert Text Box Here]

Try This: Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale

If you would like to measure whether you have a tendency toward guilt or shame, please go to www.emotivity.my and take the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP). The scale has 16 items that you rank 1-7 from “very unlikely” to “very likely.” Examples are:

- You reveal a friend’s secret, though your friend never finds out. What is the likelihood that your failure to keep the secret would lead you to exert extra effort to keep secrets in the future?
- You give a bad presentation at work. Afterwards your boss tells your coworkers it was your fault that your company lost the contract. What is the likelihood that you would feel incompetent?

There are four subscales in the GASP scale. You can score the scale yourself and see whether you are likely to react with shame or guilt when things go wrong, and whether you are likely to try to withdraw when you feel ashamed or change your behavior when you feel guilty. The average subscale scores for men and women are included on the webpage and you can see how you compare to those averages. If you have a subscale score that is approximately one point higher (or lower) than the average, that means that you scored higher (or lower) than two-thirds of the population.

[End Text Box]

Embarrassment versus Shame

Embarrassment is another self-conscious emotion. When we feel embarrassed, there is usually another person watching us and we are the center of unwanted attention, but we are not necessarily self-critical. For example, when we receive a compliment in public or discover that

we are not appropriately dressed for an occasion, we might feel quite awkward but not necessarily condemn ourselves.

To an outside observer, embarrassment may look similar to shame, with fidgeting or blushing, but embarrassment doesn't shut us down. When we're embarrassed, we may also avert our eyes as we do with shame, but we do so in a shy way, perhaps with a tilted head, hoping to stay in connection rather than wanting to disappear. An embarrassed person is also more likely to smile, perhaps sheepishly, or even make a joke, whereas a person experiencing shame rarely smiles.

Humiliation versus Shame

Humiliation is more severe than either embarrassment or guilt. We feel humiliated when someone injures our dignity or self-respect in a way that we do not feel we deserve. The focus of attention is on another person or persons, and it's more likely that we become angry and seek revenge when we are humiliated compared to when we are shamed. An example might be when an adult is humiliated online for stuttering. The person being humiliated may feel quite alone, like embarrassment, and there is negative evaluation, like shame. However, when we're being humiliated, we're also keenly aware of the harmful intentions of the perpetrators and the injustice. Humiliation is likely to lead to action, especially retribution, whereas shame confirms our darkest fears and immobilizes us.

Shyness versus Shame

Shyness refers to feeling apprehensive in social situations, particularly when meeting unfamiliar people. Shyness is generally less intense than shame. It's possible to feel shy without any shame when a person feels fearful around other people without self-criticism. Shyness is partly inherited, and when a person is raised in an environment that is accepting of shyness and

encouraging of social engagement, then the person is generally less shy. However, when a shy person is raised in a critical environment, then the person is more likely to feel shame about being shy and also suffer more from shyness. (Neda)

In everyday life, the emotions of shame, guilt, embarrassment, humiliation and shyness are probably less distinct than our definitions of them. For example, when something goes wrong in our lives, we may criticize our behavior *and* ourselves, which means we're probably feeling both guilt and shame. Embarrassment and shame can also blend, for example, during a daylong job interview with multiple interviewers. At first, we might feel embarrassed by all the attention and later slip into shame when we think of the personal flaws that could be revealed. Unfortunately, humiliation can get mixed up with shame, such as when a person suffers repeated humiliations internalizes the abuse as just punishment of their essential "badness." As a general rule, when guilt, embarrassment, humiliation or shyness are intense or persistent, shame is probably involved. This is because our personhood has come under attack. Recognizing shame gives us an opening to alleviate these other emotions by directly addressing the shame component, ideally with self-compassion.

The Spectrum of Shame

Shame plays host to a wide range of experiences. It can be mild or intense, a state or a trait, external or internal, and adaptive or maladaptive. These dimensions also overlap with one another, but by discovering the distinctive features of each, you will be able to assess the impact of shame in your life.

Mild or Intense?

Everyone experiences shame from time to time and it's usually mild. Mild shame may look a lot like embarrassment, shyness, or guilt. There is self-consciousness with a touch of self-criticism, but not a full assault on the self. Mild shame makes us stop what we're thinking or doing, but it doesn't overwhelm us or take us hostage for very long. Mild shame may be caused by something we did or by something that was done to us. It occurs when, for any reason, there is a gap between our standards and values and how we are perceiving ourselves. When the gap is narrow, shame is mild.

An example of mild shame might be forgetting the name of a neighbor whom you meet on the street. You might feel anxiety because you can't remember the person's name, but then the smiles and friendly chit-chat reassure you that the warmth between you is more important than remembering the person's name. Afterwards, you might search through old emails to find the person's name to avoid making the same mistake again. Forgetting your neighbor's name might have a touch of shame in it ("I'm losing my memory" or "I'm a lousy neighbor") but you recover quickly and take corrective action.

At the other end of the spectrum, imagine that your memory is slipping due to early onset dementia. Throughout your life, you may have taken pride in your intellect and now it's hard to even remember the names of your children. Losing your memory strikes at the heart of your identity and a critical voice rattles through your mind, "I'm stupid. I'm an idiot." It intensifies when you meet other people so mostly you prefer to stay home. Being home doesn't stop you from feeling shame, which devolves into self-loathing and you just want to die. That's intense shame.

When intense shame comes from childhood maltreatment, it is known as *toxic shame*. (Tomkins) When a child is repeatedly harmed by someone who is supposed to be taking care of

them, the child inevitably concludes that they deserve how they are treated. The abused child develops negative core beliefs like, “I’m unlovable,” “I’m bad,” “I’m unworthy,” and “I should never have been born.” This can happen when a child *feels* bad a lot, is *told* they are bad, or is *physically* harmed. Children lack the perspective to see that the problem lies with their supposed caregivers, not with themselves. Everyone harbors negative core beliefs, but people suffering from toxic shame carry that burden all day long. Toxic shame can also be accompanied by hearing voices or seeing images associated with past trauma.

Toxic shame is so painful that people try to avoid it at all costs. Some unhealthy ways of avoiding toxic shame are substance abuse, eating disorders, and self-harm. The pain of cutting one’s own skin, for example, can bring temporary relief from the greater agony of self-hatred. So can numbing oneself with alcohol or food. Another way of avoiding toxic shame is by shifting our attention to the faults of others rather than ourselves, which is a relief, and then engaging in useless arguments. The more drama we can bring into our lives, the less we have to deal with ourselves.

People with toxic shame often have shame anxiety—fear of shame. It makes sense to be wary about anything that could cause shame, and to avoid it, since shame is so painful. Perfectionism is often driven by shame anxiety—the attempt to be perfect, or to look perfect, to avoid feeling shame. People with toxic shame may also avoid intimacy, fearing that their flaws will be revealed when someone knows them well, and then they will be rejected. It can also be hard to ask for help because, in childhood, reaching out to others was a punishable offense. Sometimes even positive emotions like joy or gratitude are suppressed in adulthood when emotional expressions of any kind, even positive ones, brought unwanted attention from ill-intentioned caregivers.

State or Trait?

Emotions can be states or traits. A state emotion is temporary whereas a trait emotion is woven into a person's personality. Both state and trait shame can be mild or intense, and they can include the full gamut of shame reactions such as uncomfortable body sensations, negative core beliefs, and actions to escape shame. The difference between state and trait shame is how long shame lasts. Traits may be considered a person's tendency to be in a particular state. Human beings are hardwired to feel shame as a temporary state whereas trait shame is mostly learned after we are born.

State shame is usually harmless and sometimes even helpful. For example, Cynthia felt disrespected at work and called her colleague out on it. Cynthia surprised even herself with her reaction and felt shame about it afterwards. However, upon reflection, she realized she felt shame not because she did anything wrong but because she broke the gender norms she had been raised into. With this insight, Cynthia became even more determined to speak up the next time she felt disrespected. Shame was a helpful state for Cynthia because she learned something from it. However, if Cynthia had trait shame, she is likely to have been engulfed by shame after calling out her colleague, she might have spiraled into hours of rumination, and the experience would only have confirmed to Cynthia that she should never speak up like that again.

Another term for trait shame is *shame-proneness*. (Shame-proneness can be measured using the GASP scale given above and by over a dozen other scales (Robins et al 2007).) Shame moves from a natural state to an enduring personality trait when we are repeatedly shamed. When shame arises, we naturally try to change our behavior to avoid feeling shame again in the future. However, when nothing we do enables us to escape shame, shame becomes embedded in our lives. For example, when a child is raised in a critical household by parents who use shame

to control their children—when it’s part of the air a child breathes—then the child’s memories, current perceptions, and future expectations are all tainted by shame. Shame becomes an emotional habit. Another inescapable environment is culture, and when any of our identities are devalued by mainstream culture, perhaps due to body type, skin color, or sexual orientation, then, through no fault of our own, we may become shame-prone.

External or Internal?

You may have noticed that, in a moment of shame, your attention is directed outward or inward. External shame is the experience of “being shamed.” It can occur when someone holds us in contempt, when we are overtly criticized, or when we simply imagine that others have a negative judgement about us. Even when criticism is only in our imagination, it’s real shame and we come by it honestly. Our “self” is created by how we see ourselves mirrored in the eyes of others—we have a “looking glass self.” When we see ourselves negatively reflected in the attitudes of others, for whatever reason, it’s inevitable that we will feel bad about ourselves, i.e., shame.

There is another mirror, described by Paul Gilbert as “the dark mirror within.” This is internal shame, or when we are focused on ourselves with negative evaluations and feelings. (Ferreira 2020). Internal shame lives relatively autonomously within us. When internal shame is severe, it can live in circular time with repeated flashbacks of early childhood trauma and shame. Internal shame can also be mild, such as when we violate an internal standard (e.g., protecting the environment by recycling) and disappoint ourselves without any thought of being shamed by others.

People differ in how much internal or external shame they may experience. An example of mostly external shame might be a person confined to a wheelchair who doesn’t feel any shame

about her disability until she's treated in a condescending manner when she leaves the home. Conversely, another disabled person might see her disability as a personal failure, be preoccupied by self-loathing, and not spend much time at all thinking about other people.

Shame-proneness, or trait shame, tends to be associated with internal shame because we become shame-prone by internalizing shame. However, shame-prone people also experience external shame. I'm shame-prone, and in my own case, internal shame and external shame were related. During my struggle with public speaking anxiety, I imagined that other people were judging me harshly because I had underlying doubts about my intelligence and competence. I was afraid the audience would discover what I already knew about myself. However, since I mostly felt shame vis-a-vis other people when I was in performance situations, and not when I was alone, external shame was my predominant form of shame-proneness.

Adaptive or Maladaptive?

Shame itself is neither adaptive nor maladaptive—it's just an emotion. What makes shame adaptive or maladaptive is its impact on our lives. Adaptive shame helps us to function in life and maladaptive shame makes ordinary life activities more difficult, such as concentrating at work, meeting people, or maintaining a healthy diet.

When shame is adaptive, we learn from it. A moment of shame stops us in our tracks, gives us a chance to reflect, and maybe we learn something, like the example of Cynthia above. State shame is mostly adaptive shame. Shame also needs to be at a manageable level to learn from it. When it is intense, we are usually too self-focused to see the bigger picture and understand much about ourselves and our world. However, when we emerge from shame, and we emerge from shame more quickly when shame is a state rather than a trait, then we can see beyond ourselves and learn about the conditions that led to shame and respond in a healthy manner.

Shame is also adaptive when it helps us shape moral decisions and behaviors. That is what researchers mean when they call shame a “moral emotion.” It can help to narrow the gap between how we behave and how we want to behave. However, shame is often an obstacle to learning from our behavior and from being motivated to improve, especially when shame is intense and when it’s a personality trait.

[Insert Text Box About Here]

Try This: How Does Shame Affect My Life?

Would you like to understand the impact of shame in your life? If so, please ask yourself, “When have I felt ashamed in the past year?” Let three or four events that come to mind and write a short paragraph about each. Then go ahead and rate where you stand on the following scales:

- **Mild-Intense: How *severe* is shame for me?**

I criticize myself 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 I loathe myself

- **State-Trait: How *often* do I feel shame?**

I feel shame occasionally 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 I feel shame constantly

- **External-Internal: *When* do I feel shame?**

When others are judging me 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 I usually judge myself

- **Adaptive-Maladaptive: Is shame *helpful* or *harmful* to me?**

Shame helps me improve 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Shame disrupts my life

If you scored 1’s on the scales, shame plays a very minor role in your life. It just comes and goes like other emotions. If your scores were higher, then it makes sense to bring some attention to the experience of shame and learn to relate to shame in a new way—with self-compassion.

[End Text Box]

[Insert Text Box Here]

Points to Remember

- Shame has many faces. There are inner body sensations, outer body expressions, mental signs, emotional signs, and behavioral consequences. Knowing when we're feeling shame makes shame more manageable.
- Shame is a self-conscious emotion with negative self-evaluation. It is an attack on the self.
- Shame is similar to guilt, embarrassment, humiliation and shyness, but shame has its own unique characteristics. For example, guilt means, "I made a mistake." Shame means, "I *am* a mistake."
- Shame can be mild or intense, a state or a trait, external or internal, and adaptive or maladaptive. Every person is impacted differently by shame.

[End Box Here]