

Shame: Recognizing and Neutralizing the Toxicity

- I. Shame is the belief or fear that one is intrinsically flawed and therefore unworthy of healthy relationship connection. It can include an intensely painful feeling or experience, and has been discovered to stimulate some of the same reactions in the brain as physical pain. (p71)
- II. We often mistakenly use the terms **guilt** and **shame** interchangeably. They do not represent the same realities.
 - a. Guilt results from something **I did-** which was wrong;
When we feel guilty we apologize; make amends; change behaviors in a commitment to do better. **It's a helpful emotion, influence is positive.**
 - b. Shame results from what **I am-**flawed.
When we feel shame we seek to hide by disengaging from relationships, or protect ourselves by blaming and criticizing others. **It's a destructive emotion, corrodes the part of us that believes we can change and do better.** (Shame is highly correlated with addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders, and bullying. Researchers do not find any data correlated with positive outcomes.)
- II. There's a pervasive sense of scarcity in our culture, promoting shame among us.
 - a. The Never Enough Problem: "I'm never _____ enough"
 - b. The feeling of scarcity thrives in shame-prone cultures (significant numbers of people struggling with the issue of worthiness) that are deeply steeped in comparison and fractured by disengagement.
 - c. Scarcity dynamics play out in family, work, school, community, and church. They share similar patterns of shame, comparison, and disengagement.
- III. Some leading shame categories have emerged from the research:

i. Appearance and body image	v. Parenting
ii. Money and vocation	vi. Mental and physical health
iii. Motherhood/fatherhood	vii. Sexual appeal
iv. Family	viii. Aging

(p69)
- b. Two great casualties of a scarcity culture are our willingness to own our vulnerabilities and our ability to engage the world from a place of worthiness.
To be fully engaged – relationally connected - we have to be vulnerable.

- c. The opposite of scarcity is enough, or **wellbeing**. At the core of wellbeing is righteousness, by grace through faith in Jesus (worthiness). It's about connecting relationally with vulnerability and worthiness, facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough.
- IV. Men and women experience shame differently.
- a. Men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: "Do not be **perceived as weak**." Shame is failure. At work. On the football field. In your marriage. In bed. With money. With your children. It doesn't matter—shame is failure. Shame is being wrong. Not doing it wrong, but being wrong.
 - b. The primary **shame trigger for women** is how they look. In spite of all the consciousness-raising, and critical awareness, they still feel the most shame about not being thin, young, and beautiful enough. The close second for women is the ubiquitous "mother shame".
 - c. The first reaction to shame is often to lower one's vulnerability by blaming and criticizing others, hiding, or disengaging from relationship connections (compare Genesis 3: 7-12).
- V. Shame resilience is the answer.
- a. **Vulnerability** is a necessary element in the deep and meaningful relationship connections for which we were created. The solution for shame begins with righteousness (worthiness) by grace through faith in Jesus, and includes relationship connections with **mutual and intentional safety and trust**.
 - b. **Recognize and manage the emotional hi-jack**. Shame resilience requires cognition, or thinking, and that's where shame has a huge advantage. When shame descends, we almost always are hi-jacked by the limbic system. In other words, the prefrontal cortex, where we do all of our thinking and analyzing and strategizing, gives way to that primitive fight-or-flight part of our brain.
 - c. **Practicing Critical Awareness and Self-compassion**. Reality-check the messages and expectations that are driving your shame. Are they realistic? Attainable? Are they what you want to be?
 - d. **Reaching Out**. Are you owning and sharing your story? **Empathy is an antidote to the pain of shame**. We can't experience empathy if we're not connecting.
 - e. **Speaking Shame**. Shame thrives on secret-keeping. The less we talk about it, the more control it has over our lives. Talking about how you feel and ask for the support and empathy you need when you feel shame.

1. The Creator’s divine design included every created entity functioning optimally, in harmony with every other created entity functioning optimally, glorifying the Creator. Humanity was created for relational connections. Adam and Eve were naked, completely vulnerable; completely “knowable”. (Genesis 2:25)
2. The “groaning” of all creation (Romans 8:22) which results from the fall into sin includes the inability to live in, and fully enjoy the relational connections first lost in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:7).
3. God’s remedy for the fallen condition, including the toxicity of shame in relationships, is the restoration of the divine design by grace, through faith in Jesus, the Christ. (Romans 9:33) This restoration happens only partially on this side of eternity.

Wellbeing includes moving from “turning on each other” to “turning toward each other”. This will require “shame resilience”. Worthiness for connection has the power to set us free from the shame laden culture of scarcity.

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Much of the foregoing is drawn from the research of Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW as presented in:

Brown, Brené, (2012), *Daring Greatly-How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Gotham Books, New York.

Cutting and Other Forms of Self-Harm

Self-harm or cutting refers to hurting yourself on purpose. Cutting into the skin is the most widely known form of self-harm, but burning the skin, picking at wounds to prevent healing, picking at skin, biting or scratching at the skin, ingesting poison or pills without intent to die by suicide, and pulling out hair are all methods of self-harm.

These are all signs of emotional distress. Teens engage in self-harm to relieve feelings of stress, anxiety, or emotional pain. Self-harm can relieve tension momentarily, which gives teens the false belief that this inappropriate coping strategy actually works. The physical pain they inflict numbs the emotional pain they experience, and they feel like this potentially dangerous practice is helpful. In reality, it’s a temporary escape that can result in a lifetime of maladaptive coping if they don’t learn how to manage their emotional pain.

Self-harm might begin with feelings of anger, frustration, or emotional pain. In some cases, the self-injury stimulates the body’s pain-killing hormones and provides a

temporary feeling of uplifted mood. In other cases, teens might turn to cutting to feel pain in an effort to get away from a feeling of emotional numbness.

Following cutting, teens can experience feelings of shame and guilt. This perpetuates the cycle of overwhelming emotions followed by negative coping strategies. It can become a dangerous cycle that is difficult to break.

Self-harm is not the same as suicidal behavior, but there is an elevated risk of suicidal behavior for teens who self-harm.

Teens who self-harm need treatment. The first step is to seek a referral for a mental health professional who specializes in adolescents and self-harm. If you are concerned that your teen is engaging in self-harm it is important to remain calm and talk about the behavior with your teen without judgment. It's essential that you seek treatment right away.

More information on cutting and self-harm is available at www.mayoclinic.org and at www.psycom.net.

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