

Shame¹

Between the ages of 1 ½ and 2 children become aware of themselves. Around this same time, they develop emotions related to self-awareness like shame and hubris. These are called secondary emotions by psychologists, as opposed to primary emotions like sadness, happiness, fear, etc., which babies feel from birth. Some secondary emotions – those related to self awareness – include:²

Pride – positive self-affirmation because of some specific success.

Guilt – negative self-critique because of some specific failure (tends to focus on repairing the negative consequences of the action/inaction).

Hubris (arrogance) – global positive self-regard, not rooted in any particular accomplishment.³

Shame – global negative self-regard, often triggered by some failure or social stigma but often is rapidly used as a general negative self assessment;⁴ accompanied with a desire to hide, withdraw or escape.

See the, *Symptoms of Shame* handout.

Entitlement – a self-directed expectation for getting and keeping what is believed to be deserved. Often, there is an effort to recruit others to satisfy these demands. It is an active and demanding posture.

Self-pity – a self-directed compassion when feeling aggrieved (i.e. real or perceived). Often, there is an effort to recruit others to agree and show compassion for them. It is a passive and resentful posture.

You may notice that these terms are defined in such a way as to form opposite pairs. Pride and guilt are alike because they are specific self-perspectives. Shame and hubris are alike because they are generalized self-perspectives. Self-pity and entitlement are alike because they are focused on personal rights or perceived needs.

This workshop will focus mostly on shame.

Shame

1. Situational shame

- Shame connected with guilt

Shame may be felt when we fail to achieve a goal or keep some rule/standard. In this case we generalize from guilt (e.g. “I lied”) to shame (e.g. “I am such a liar”) and hold ourselves in contempt.

The Bible speaks of this kind of shame both in the context of redemption (e.g. Zephaniah 3:11) and by way of rebuke for sin (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:34; 2 Thess. 3:14; Phil.3:19).

This shame may or may not be felt when our guilt is not seen by others but is almost always felt when our guilt is seen by others.

- Shame connected with non-moral failure or social censure

Failing or believing that we have failed at some social ‘test’ can arouse feelings of shame in some, particularly if being observed by others.

Shame may be felt if we have put our confidence in someone or something that has failed us. This is often used in the Bible and the meaning of the promise, “Those who hope in the Lord will not be ashamed” (Ps.25:3; Isa.45:17, etc.).

Shame may be felt if we believe others have ‘judged’ or ‘put us down’. In this case, we may not have failed to keep our own goal, rule or standard but someone or some group lets us know that we have violated their goal, rule or standard. This kind of situational shame awards outsiders evaluative power.

¹ Much of this material is from, *Shame The Exposed Self*, Michael Lewis, Ph.D.

² There are other ways these terms are used. For example, in our culture and in the Bible, ‘pride’ is used to mean both the joy of accomplishment and the moral weakness of overvaluing self. Here we call the first use ‘pride’ and the second use ‘hubris’.

³ These definitions are about a person’s real internal state, not their public presentation. Some people who act arrogantly are really using a defensive strategy called ‘masking’ to hide their shame.

⁴ I fail a test, shortly afterward I think, “I’m such a loser.” I’ve had a specific failure but generalized it to my whole person.

- Shame connected with being observed.
People may feel shame simply when they realize that they are being observed, even if they have done nothing wrong morally or non-morally.
If we see someone or a group looking at us or if our name is publically mentioned, it invites others to look at us, which may trigger shame.⁵

2. Intrinsic shame

Intrinsic shame is a secondary emotion where someone feels they are defective, unacceptable, or fundamentally damaged. For some, by virtue of their social sensitivity, may be more inclined to feel shame – a shame prone person. If well, nurtured they may only suffer mild effects or tendencies that they are able to cope with but if poorly nurtured or abused, they may show significant intrinsic shame.

When people have a general sense or intuition that they are unacceptable owing to some loss,⁶ some unusual attribute,⁷ being associated with an ‘unacceptable’ activity, person or group or from abuse, whether sexual, physical or verbal, they may struggle with intrinsic shame.

- Shame connected with abnormality
physical, intellectual, emotional, social abnormality can evoke shame
aischuno (Gk.; pron. *ahēe·skhoo·no*] from *aischos* (disfigurement) - shamed
These abnormalities may be severe, mild or even imagined (e.g. body dysmorphia).
- Shame connected with associations
Being linked with a group that is or may be thought to be held in low regard may induce shame in some.
This kind of shame is undermined in a well functioning body of Christ where distinctions are not allowed (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22) and the weak/unseemly are honored (1 Cor. 12:22-25). I have seen many examples of this in Xenos.
- Shame connected with abuse
We can feel shame because we are sinned against
kalam (Heb.; pron. *kaw-lawm*) – blush, shame, ashamed, humiliated; the shame associated with public humiliation; this could be due to abuse or failure on the part of the one who is shamed. Jer.13:26 God will lift their skirts and expose their *kalone*.
atimatzo (Gk.; pron *at-im-ad-zo*) – dishonored
 - Verbal abuse
 - Physical abuse
 - Neglect
 - Sexual abuse
 - Trauma/Loss
 - Parentification of children

3. Unhelpful shame coping mechanisms

Refusing to attend to the shame

⁵ Saying, “Have you lost weight?” to someone in a group, invites everyone to evaluate their weight. Some might respond in shame, wishing to escape scrutiny and possible critique. Similarly, personal suffering can induce shame for a variety of reasons: fear of being scrutinized, blamed, labeled, etc..

⁶ Boys who lose their mother through death at around age 10 may struggle with the shame of being different than others; if they are not allowed to grieve they may feel ashamed of their legitimate grief; etc. There’s a strong correlation with rage behavior in adult men who lost their mothers around the age of 10.

⁷ The biographer of Truman Capote seems to connect his adult narcissism to the shame of his voice, stature, same sex attraction & absent parents. By the way, this abnormality doesn’t have to be objectively true or as severe as we imagine.

The feeling of shame may be temporarily avoided through various defenses like repression⁸, masking⁹ or other defensive strategies¹⁰ that shift attention or blame elsewhere.¹¹

These are unhelpful reactions and only result in shame being expressed in other ways later on (e.g. depression, rage, narcissism, suicide).

Wallowing in the shame

Often the feeling of shame is embraced, leading to horrible self denunciation. But of course, self-condemnation is as ugly as self-righteousness. In fact it's the reverse side of the same coin. "I'm right/innocent" & "I really suck" are both focused on self-abilities. The one is self-congratulatory, the other is self-condemning.

"Sin turns you in on yourself, blinding you to God... *Self-loathing* exalts your opinion of yourself as supremely important; shame exalts the opinion of other people. But...what God chooses to "remember" about you is decisive. Your conscience, if well-tuned, is...dependent on the stance He takes."
Powlison from, *Making All Things New*

One of the important insights into shame is how obsessively self-focused it tends to be. But spiritual health requires that we think less about ourselves and hope less in ourselves focusing/trusting more upon God.

The psychiatrist Ralph Ankenman argues that spiritual and emotional health requires that we develop a lifestyle of positive love output. There certainly are many things to consider & understand about shame but this is a realistic and biblical outcome of health.

4. Dealing with Situational Shame¹² (learning to turn away from inordinate self-attention)

The process of dealing effectively with situational shame includes:

a. Admit shame

Admitting shame involves personally acknowledging the feeling of shame, embarrassment or exposure.

It's important to not quickly withdraw and shift attention to other things because unexpressed shame manifests in unhelpful ways. For instance, efforts to escape shame can backfire and lead, over time to depression, rage, narcissism or suicide.

b. Specify shame

Instead of cringing, shrinking back and thinking/saying globally negative things about yourself, concentrate attention on the specific thing that happened leading to feeling so exposed. What led you to feel so exposed and ashamed? (i.e. something you did or failed to do OR something someone did to you or failed to do for you).

If the shame is rooted in guilt, deal with the guilt in the following manner.

- Bring it to the cross

Agree with God that you did something wrong.

Consider what this sin says about your view of God (Romans 1 suggests that all sin begins with a failure to acknowledge or thank God). David found out, through Nathan, that his central sin was despising God & his provisions.

Remember the work of Jesus to atone for this sin; that, in Christ, you are not condemned.

- Confess to a person

Find a mature friend and confess your fault to them.

Confess your sin to the one you sinned against. However, keep in mind that we may put the person we confess to in a position where they feel shame: 1. at what you did to them (e.g. gossip) and 2. at not

⁸ Repression involves keeping shameful feelings largely unconscious; this can happen automatically through dissociation; by shifting attention toward performance (i.e. a frenetic effort to outperform our shame.); 'numbing out' - through drugs/alcohol; eating; sleeping; entertaining (TV, video games, etc.); hobbies; sexual stimulation, etc.

⁹ Masking is pretending in order to manipulate the opinions of others: arrogance - pretended perfection; self-deprecation - pretended humility; flat affect - pretended disinterest in the opinions of others

¹⁰ There are many defensive strategies including flooding, punishing, recruiting, denying, etc.

¹¹ When we feel exposed we find a way to get the scrutiny off of ourselves and onto others. "Who broke my glasses?" "You shouldn't have left them so close to the edge of the table," the glasses breaker responds.

¹² I'm focused here on situational shame not on an identity that's shame based - intrinsic shame.

wanting to forgive immediately. Make it easy for them to tell you how your sin affects them. Don't try to escape shame by demanding/hoping that they immediately 'forgive' you. Offer to give them time to process things apart from you and re-approach them.

The more severe the violation (e.g. adultery), the longer this process may take.

- Do what you can to repair the damage.

If you've done something wrong, rather than fixate on your awfulness, you could move to resolve the specific wrong done. In this way, the unhelpful broad negative characterizations we make about ourselves (i.e. shame) are reinterpreted to the specific wrong thing that we've done (i.e. guilt) and about which we can do something.¹³

If the shame is rooted, not in guilt, but in a sense of public humiliation (e.g. perhaps you are experiencing some suffering), admitting it is helpful. Telling your friend, "I was walking around all day with my zipper down" can help defuse things, if you feel any embarrassment over it (i.e. some of you would think this was hilarious). Another, more serious example of this is when we have experienced a tragedy that others know about. There is a kind of 'fish bowl' effect of having something bad happen to us when we are in a community; a sense that everybody's watching us. We should pull aside our close friends and admit how awful we feel around others at times. If we find ourselves seething at the clumsy and self-centered things people say and do we can kick it around with our mature friends too.

c. Re-orienting when shamed

- Remember and reflect on the truth that God is not ashamed of us.¹⁴

Jesus died for our sins and for our shame. When we feel exposed before others we can choose to ponder the one who knows us completely and binds himself to us in love – forever and irrevocably.

But, we need to prefer this contra-conditional acceptance by God over the acceptance of others if we are to enjoy its benefits.

Despising shame - Guthrie: An attitude which does not ignore the shame, but hold it to be of no consequence in view of the joy.

- Choose to focus away from self onto something/someone else

Part of the trap of shame is its ability to lock our full attention on self but the longer and more carefully we attend to ourselves the more negative things we notice and the more we tend to evaluate the behavior of others as being somehow related to our flaws. It's a terrible trap. It's like grabbing onto an electrical wire, it seems impossible to stop attending to ourselves when we feel shame. The more intense the shame the harder it is to look away from ourselves.

So, if part of the problem of shame is inordinate self-focus, part of resolving shame involves choosing to re-direct attention elsewhere. Of course, without admitting & specifying the shame, the following suggestions can simply aid repression but having admitted and specified they can help overcome its debilitating effects.

- Direct attention toward God – praise & thanks are typical responses to shaming experiences in the Psalms.
- Direct attention toward others – this is where Ankenman's 'positive love output' applies.
- Direct attention toward a project

Turning from self-focus to an outward focus helps us regain a larger and more balanced view of things. We are, after all, a very small part of a very large universe and this incident is barely a blip when compared with eternity.

- Laugh about it

This is useful in some circumstances more than others and more useful for some people than for others but it is a way to emotionally join the observers rather than to stay in the spotlight.

¹³ I can apologize for being unkind in a conversation (guilt) but how do I fix, "I'm an complete idiot!" (shame)?

¹⁴ Rev.3:18 the gospel covers our 'nakedness'; Zeph.3:11a '...on that day you will feel no shame b/c of the wrong things you did against me'

It is a useful, for instance, when we've committed some social *faux pas*. The Latin singer Sade was once singing on Saturday Night Live with a huge smear of lipstick on her teeth during the first number – she smiles a lot when she sings. By the time she sang the second number her teeth were clean and she playfully smiled and licked her teeth while singing – she laughed at the social mistake and thus defused the embarrassment of it.

The formula for many comedians is Tragedy + Time = Comedy. Many of us howl with laughter when our friends tell their most embarrassing stories and so do they when we tell our own.

5. Dealing with Intrinsic Shame (learning to live from God's perspective)

Note: professionals may be needed if this kind of shame was produced by abuse or trauma. Shame produced through sexual abuse, especially, can persist for a long time without appropriate interventions from psychologists or licensed clinical therapists.¹⁵

One role we can play, is to be an excellent listener and avoid doing anything to exacerbate the shame (e.g. making fun of someone who is 'acting weird'; using sarcasm or mocking to 'help them snap out of it'; belling about their faults & weaknesses in front of others; pushing them to do things they seem extremely uncomfortable with; etc.).

Another role we can play is to avoid triggering dissociation,¹⁶ by learning enough about them to know what to not do. If my friend tells me they were cornered and raped several times as a kid, I might want to avoid positioning myself physically so they feel trapped.

Those whose identity is rooted in shame will benefit from the material related to situational shame but they have to also deal with the more difficult problem of shameful negative self-assessment.

Surprisingly, some with subclinical intrinsic shame often have an accompanying need/craving/demand for respect or, minimally, to not suffer critique. This belief – “I am worthless or shameful” – along with the demand – “I must be respected or not criticized” – drives much of their way of life. Their intense feelings, behaviors and thoughts are driven by these beliefs/demands. So, they may feel profound shame and say all manner of awful things about themselves to themselves but publically they may seem self-righteous, arrogant, aloof and so on. They have typically developed strategies to deal with their shame (e.g. avoiding people; becoming expert in some area while avoiding any areas they lack expertise; lying/concealing having large private lives that others are not allowed to access and so on.)

If the intrinsic shame is sub-clinical it can be helped by approaches described below. Even if they need professional help, these approaches can, if handled sensitively, serve as an adjunct to their therapy. Of course, it's always best to ask what the counselor is doing and find ways of helping them with that.

a. Journal in order to see the pattern

It is difficult to change if you cannot understand why you think, feel and act the way you do. More importantly, change is difficult if you cannot see the underlying beliefs/desires that drive how you feel, think and act the way you do.

I like to have people journal using a particular template (i.e. see the handout entitled *Journaling Guideline*). I ask them to notice when they have intense feelings, overwhelming thoughts or inappropriate behaviors and then ask themselves, “What happened¹⁷ that I felt/thought/acted this way?”

¹⁵ How do you know if it's time to suggest counseling or get it for yourself? Some things to keep an eye on might include: the intensity of reactions to shame triggers (e.g. do they have level 10 responses to level 3 triggers?); they can't stop obsessing over it; they appear to be self-medicating when triggered; they are regularly alienated from others after they are triggered; the presence of dissociation; is this problem making it difficult for them to function at work, school or in their relationships. Still not sure, try to work through the steps in this section with them. If they don't seem to be getting anywhere, it might be worth asking them to consider seeing a counselor.

¹⁶ Dissociation is an automatic defense against threats that is often learned early in life as a way to escape pain & suffering. The child didn't reason their way to this technique, it's a mechanism that gets automatically activated in some abuse victims. They may not even know it's happening at the time. They may appear to be 'checked out' or inordinately emotional. They themselves may feel like they have become a passenger in their own body that feels like it's being controlled by something else. They may be overwhelmed by some feeling of panic or intense sadness that seems to have come from 'outside' them. They may feel outside of themselves (depersonalization); that they've entered an unreal state (derealization); they may have little or no memory of events happening during this period (dissociative amnesia), they may seem like a different person (identity confusion)

Different people will tend to notice their feelings or their thoughts or their actions first. Wherever they begin, I ask them to move to the other areas: "What was I thinking when I felt/acted this way?"; "What was I feeling when I thought/acted that way?"; "What did I do when I felt/thought this way?" I ask them to 'work their way around the circle/triangle so that they can see their own patterns.

Eventually, on their own or in dialog, I want them to understand what they must believe and desire that they think and feel and act this way. This is important because many blame others or circumstances rather than seeing that their own beliefs and wants are the real driving force behind their feelings/thoughts/behaviors. I may feel that I don't confess my faults or take criticism because someone is harsh and judgmental but I'm mostly trying to avoid the awful feelings of shame I have within my own nature, whenever I fail or am seen by others as a failure.

I will also spend some time asking them what strategies they developed to avoid the negative core belief and what strategies they developed for getting their core desire. The behaviors they describe in their journaling will often reveal these 'core strategies.'

b. Replacing the core (see the handout *Replacing the Core*)

Shame filled people need to replace their core. On the one hand, it's fair to say that we never replace the old core; it is part of our flesh nature that will persist until we are glorified. But, we can develop another core that we learn to live from.

Think of the old core as the foundation for a ramshackle house. When we lay a new foundation we can build a new house on it. The old house is still around but sanctification means that we go there less frequently, don't stay there so long and don't find it so confusing to find our way back to our new home.

Some suggest replacing negative beliefs with positive affirmations. Others bring critical thinking skills to bear on their thoughts & beliefs in order to see themselves more realistically (i.e. cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT). There is much to commend this latter approach, not the least of which is its efficacy. No other therapeutic method of psychological change is shown to be as effective as this.

Biblically speaking, there is a great deal of material devoted to knowing and preferring the identity that God confers upon believers. There is also a strong biblical emphasis on desiring the glory and kingdom of God over our tendency to desire the glory and kingdom of ourselves. If, through meditation, memorization and various choices, we increasingly know and prefer what God says over what we or others say and crave God's glory over our own, then how we think, feel and act will also change because we are replacing the core that drives everything above the line.

- Learning & meditating on God's perspective

A person feeling that they are shameful, who intensely desires freedom from all critique and daydreams about being honored could begin to reflect on Zeph.3:11 that when they stand before God they will not be ashamed for the sins they have committed; on Romans 8:1 that they are beyond condemnation because of the work of Christ on the cross; Heb.2:11 that he is not ashamed to call us brethren; and etc..

They could also consider Christ's consistent orientation in the gospel of John to live for the glory of God rather than the self glory that comes from the opinions of others; Matt.11:29 that giving control of our strengths to God's glory (i.e. meekness) and occupying our thoughts with God & his purposes (i.e. humility; c.f. Lk.17:1-10) are an effective way to replace self-glory with a desire for God's glory. It will be very important to develop an appropriately elevated view of God.

I've personally found great relief from shame by memorizing and meditating on Psalm 23 (i.e. I do so most mornings before I even get out of bed). Why? Psalm 23 pertains to the reader but has absolutely nothing to do with the behavior of the reader. It is a replacing focus from self-performance to God's performance. It is a focus on his devotion to me rather than a critique of my devotion to him. That I am His is presumed - that he has committed himself to guide, provide, protect, honor, and attend to the reader happens apart from the behavior of the reader. What does this meditation look like? I recite it, then I fight it (i.e. I prayerfully admit to God that I'm not really believing some part of the psalm and why) and then I affirm it (i.e. I prayerfully say to God that I am choosing to believe those sticking points in spite of not seeing evidence).

1 Corinthians 4:1-13 is a useful study where we see Paul choosing to name the shame while refocusing on God and preferring His verdicts.

- Taking a Romans 7 perspective on our 'fleshly' perspectives
It's important that we not identify with the awful things our flesh tells us about ourselves, God or others. Paul chose to see these things as belonging to his flesh rather than that part of his nature which is spiritual. Partly, we take this perspective by saying things like, "My flesh is telling me to run away and hide" or "My flesh is saying that I am a loser" instead of running away and hiding or saying, "I am such a loser." If we defend or hide, we are following the advice of our flesh. If we self-condemn, we are taking the flesh's perspective.
- Welcoming threats to our 'fleshly' core and taking God-directed actions that risk shame & dishonor.
We could decide to believe that, when we are criticized or fail publically we might consider that God has allowed this in order to weaken our addiction to the opinions of others or even our own negative opinions of ourselves.
We could ask God to lead us into spiritual deeds that are a direct threat to our false beliefs so that we can practice living from/for what He says rather than what I or others say.
As noted earlier, the more a person finds ways to love others and glorify God the less they spend time thinking about themselves negatively or arrogantly.

A short list of resources

Released from Shame, Sandra D. Wilson

Shame Interrupted, Ed Welch

I find Welch a little tedious to read but there are some good nuggets. I particularly appreciate the efforts of the CCEF folks to offer solutions that are gospel centered.

Shame. The Exposed Self, Michael Lewis

A recent academic book on the topic.

Shame and Guilt (Emotions & Social Behavior) June Price Tangney PhD & Ronda L. Dearing PhD

An academic treatment of the topic particularly in how it relates to interpersonal relationships. Each chapter has a final summary that's helpful if you want to skim the book quickly.

Stuck in Toxic Shame and Guilt, Jim Fogarty, Ph.D.

This is a workshop. It is mainly focused on how to deal with shaming people in your life.

Bible studies

1 Corinthians 4:1-13 This passage provides helpful insight about how to name the shame but also to refocus on the praise from God instead of our self-evaluation or the evaluations of others. Keller's *Blessed Self-forgetfulness* is based in the first few verses of this passage and worth listening to or reading.

James 4:1-10 This passage is a powerful critique of trying to extract from others what we should be taking from God; this idea of taking from others what we should be getting from God (adultery) is captured also in Nathan's rebuke of David (2 Sam. 12 – notice that 3x God regards his sin as despising/scorning God) & admitted by David in his reflection on his sin (Ps.51).

Many Psalms of lament deal with rejection and shame. The psalms in the 30's to 40's are almost all laments. Look around, you'll find something that hits you. Write your own lament. Try to include both raw honesty and loyalty/trust.

Find passages that encourage you to focus on the greatness & love of God. If they're short enough, memorize them and meditate on them (e.g. Psalm 23; Hebrews 13:5b-6; Psalm 73:23-26)

Find passages that talk about God's view of us in Christ (e.g. the first few chapters of Ephesians & Colossians). Wrestle with God about not wanting to prefer his view over the view of others. Ask for help.