



Shame

What is shame, and how is it connected to trauma?

- Shame is an emotion that involves negative beliefs about yourself that can be pervasive and destructive to your sense of self. These feelings are strongly associated with experiences of childhood trauma.
- Shame is an emotion that can feel like it defines who you are as damaged, bad, helpless, and a failure. Shame is different from guilt. Guilt is a feeling of doing something bad. Shame is a feeling of being bad.
- Shame can be a response to secrecy, such as secrecy about sexual abuse or trauma and can lead to feelings of disconnection, detachment, and distress in relationships.
- Shame is a common response to trauma because it is sometimes easier to believe that there is something wrong with you than to believe that your abuser, often a parent or loved one, could hurt you for no reason.
- When childhood trauma includes sexual abuse, when abuse happens at earlier ages or when a survivor believes that they were at fault for the abuse or even enjoyed aspects of the abuse, shame can be far worse and very painful.
- When boys are sexually abused they can come to feel that they have failed as “men”, failed to protect themselves and be strong as men should. This can lead to high levels of shame as sexual abuse of boys is still something that people think does not happen or, even that a boy is “lucky” to be abused by an older person who “initiates” them.

How might shame impact you?

- Shame can cause you to believe that you do not deserve to be in a happy, healthy relationship or that you are at fault when things go wrong in your life.
- Shame can cause you to feel that you are unable to take action in your life and relationships to make them better.
- Shame can cause you to feel so terrible about yourself that you hurt yourself through eating, drinking, drugs, sexual behaviours that feel shameful, or self-injury in the hopes that these things will soothe you or help you feel better. It is more common for female trauma survivors to respond to feelings of shame by “internalizing” those feelings and turning their shame inwards through hurting themselves.
- For some people, when they feel ashamed, like they are bad and have done something that makes them feel even worse, they can react by becoming aggressive, angry, or even violent. It is more common for male trauma survivors to “externalize”, or react in these ways, and for them to find it unbearable to instead share how bad and vulnerable they feel, with their partners.



- Shame can cause you to feel the need to keep parts of yourself separate from other people, including important parts of your history of trauma and your intimate self that exists in your couple relationship.
- Shame keeps people from fully engaging in life and relationships.

How can shame impact relationships?

- Shame can make people feel that they are unlovable and damaged, and this can lead them to believe that they do not deserve to be in a healthy, loving relationship or that they do not have the right to stand up for themselves in their relationships.
- Shame may lead people to avoid disclosing their traumatic experiences, which can keep you feeling separate and alienated from your partner.
- Shame can lead to people keeping other kinds of secrets, secrets about their sexuality, their feelings of hurt and pain, or secrets about things that need to be discussed and resolved for the relationship to be healthy.
- Shame can cause you to believe that you deserve to be in relationships where you might be hurt or treated poorly, and so shame can lead people to stay in relationships where it might be safer or healthier to separate.
- When someone feels strong feelings of shame it can make it very difficult for them to empathize with their partner, especially if their partner is upset about something that they themselves have done. It can cause them to be unable to hear their partner's concerns and to responding without being overwhelmed.
- When someone feels strong feelings of shame, this can cause them to protect themselves from the pain and vulnerability of these feelings. How they protect themselves might not be something that is healthy for them or their relationship. This includes the issues discussed above, such as self-injury or addictions that the trauma survivor might hide from their partner, or becoming aggressive or violent towards their partner.

How has shame affected your life?

- How have you been aware of the impact of shame on how you feel about yourself?
- How does shame impact your life and relationships?
- How do you cope or respond to feelings of shame?
- How does shame affect your ability to be close and sharing in your relationship?