



Shame Has No Relationships

Some say the difference between guilt and shame is that guilty people fear punishment and shamed people fear abandonment. I like this. To the point, clear. But, it only sums it up, it doesn't explain the experiences and, more importantly, it doesn't help us understand such experiences within the context of a relationship (aka: attachment, of course!).

Guilt is a feeling. It is often so strong that it is like a driving force within the self to want to repair a wrong that was done. This force makes us want to amend, fix things, pay the price, so to speak, so that we can get this awful feeling "off our mind" and "out of our soul." We want relief! But why do we want these things... because it is about a relationship. We want to repair the hurt we caused. And, we need to obtain absolution from the hurt person. We want to "make it up" and we'll do that twice over to relieve ourselves of this awful feeling that is often equal to the pain we caused the hurt person. After all, it is only fair for the wrong doer to suffer in the same amount as the wronged, right? So, in essence, guilt is about a relationship. It can't exist without someone... some person... another... on the receiving end. So, my conclusion, the feeling of guilt can only be felt within the context of a relationship, otherwise it does not exist.

So, what of shame? Doesn't it go hand-in-hand with guilt? It is mentioned, in tandem with guilt, as one of the seven core issues of adoption. But, it seems to be ever so different, as though not even in the same realm as other feelings, especially guilt. Yes, it is a driving force, but it seems to be one that flagellates the mind... and the soul. It has a mantra; "you are bad; you are inadequate." It has tendrils that reach inward to grasp tiny doubts and fears, only to grow and inflict internal pain.

Shame begins as a kernel of doubt about "me." There is a developmental stage identified by E. Erickson (a long ago developmental psychologist) as "autonomy vs. shame." This stage of psycho-social development coexists with increased muscular coordination and mobility, and so a child becomes more capable of satisfying some of their own needs. If caregivers encourage self-sufficient behavior, a child develops a sense of being able to handle problems on their own (autonomy). Conversely, if caregivers are demanding, refuse to let children perform tasks of which they are capable, and in particular, they ridicule early attempts at self-sufficiency, children may instead develop shame. The shame can begin as "I can't do this, I am not capable." Shame grows if it continues to be fed and grasps onto beliefs that the parts that make one whole are defective.

The food of shame comes from others at an early age and grows through doubt. In the case of abuse, neglect; "Haven't I been told this by those that have hurt me, abandoned me?" "I am not only unwanted but I am unworthy of being wanted." This face of shame becomes toxic and perceives one as even being a failure at being wanted. The insidious and pervasive nature of shame can then leave its victim feeling small, weak and impotent.

If one feels small and weak it stands to reason that they need to find protection. They must create defenses so that smallness can never be detected or uncovered by anyone. To be “found out” would serve but one purpose - to be rejected through humiliation! Shame broadens its grip by creating fear... fear that “if others really know me they would be disgusted and filled with hatred for me.” John Bradshaw, a leading counselor in self-help, writes, “A shame based person will guard against exposing his inner self to others, but more significantly, he will guard against exposing himself to himself.” Ah, so this is why shamed persons cannot be told of their mistakes, big or small. To “admit” a mistake would “prove” their “badness.” And, so, defenses must develop in shame’s wake.

One common defense of a shamed person is fury. If ever you have experienced an attempted relationship with a shamed person it is certain you have felt the wrath... the slightest perceived affront sparks an angry flame. It keeps others away. It changes the focus. It changes the complexion of things. Shame has no relationship outside itself... it grows into an identity rather than an experienced feeling. Shame then lives alone and it creates loneliness in souls who then become lonely souls. It has only one relationship and that is with itself.

IT leaves others lonely too.

Reading Suggestions:

Shame & Guilt: Masters of Disguise
Jane Middleton-Moz

Healing the Shame that Binds You
John Bradshaw

Why is it Always About You?: The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism
Sandy Hotchkiss

The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists: Coping with the One-Way Relationship in Work, Love and Family
Eleanor Payson