

Accepting Differences – Without Shaming Ourselves or Others

By Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

It was a crisis. One of my clients was extremely upset. Susan was getting married soon and her fiancé had just informed her that he did not want to wear a wedding ring. “It’s so important to me. A wedding ring is the way that you announce to the world that you are married. I’ve been looking forward to wearing a ring for years. I don’t plan to take it off. What could it mean that he doesn’t want to wear one?”

I acknowledged that this was very unsettling and upsetting. Then I asked if he had explained why he doesn’t want to wear a ring. Was he interested in having other partners after the marriage?

“He said he wasn’t. He wants to feel he is making a conscious decision to be together each day. He doesn’t want to feel trapped.”

The next week, when Susan came in, she seemed much more at peace. “I realized something this week. And I’m actually okay that my husband doesn’t want to wear a ring. We’re different. I feel very strongly about wearing a ring, and he feels the opposite. And that means we’re different people and I can accept that. I’m not exactly happy about it. But I’m glad he could tell me what works for him and I’m glad I could accept it, even though I don’t like it. It feels good to start our marriage by accepting a difference.”

Unlike Susan, many of us have terrible trouble accepting differences, especially when something is important to us. We often react to difference with either shame or blame. Facing important differences in values and beliefs, we often get caught in the concept of right or wrong. Either the other person is wrong—bad, unenlightened, immoral, stupid, etc. Or I am wrong—bad, unenlightened, stupid, etc.

Jane, another client, couldn’t understand why her interactions with her supervisor got her so upset. “Every time we talk, it takes me two days to recover. He doesn’t directly criticize me, but I get the sense that he thinks everything I do is wrong.” As we examined the situation more closely, it became clear that her supervisor saw her job very differently from the way she did. “I really see my work as helping people. He is only concerned with improving the bottom line. Every time I talk to him, I feel inadequate, like I’m no good at my work. I’m incompetent. And my work is what I used to feel best about.”

I explained to Jane that she was having a strong shame response. She was faced with a major difference. And when there is a major difference, you really have only three choices:

1. Blame and shame the other person and see them as wrong.
2. See yourself as wrong and inadequate.
3. Accept that there is a major difference and neither of you is wrong, you just see things differently.

While Jane might have to adapt somewhat to her supervisor's view—or at least give him the impression she was adapting—she didn't need to feel bad about herself or question her own competence. I suggested she sing the opening lines of the song "We Live in Two Different Worlds" to herself when she was dealing with him.

Jane's shame, as I well knew from our previous work, came from the past. The difference with her boss triggered it. I believe that shame and shaming are often triggered by difference. And, as all of us have been shamed, to a greater or lesser extent, it is hard to deal with difference without feeling shame or shaming others.

Shame is a social emotion. Every society uses shame to socialize. The shaming that is used to keep people in line comes both from the larger society and often through the immediate family of origin. The question is not whether a society uses shaming, but how it is used and how severe it is. While the U.S. is not at all the most shaming society, we do have a special problem. Because of our diversity, the society is not in agreement about what is shameful and what should be a source of pride.

We have created one of the most diverse societies in history and one of the most successful at balancing, respecting and coping with differences. But we are still prone to what seems to be a natural tendency to try to eliminate difference through blaming and shaming. We have always had major differences in our society—sometimes, with extreme polarization. Right now is certainly one of those times. And we may try to solve those differences by shaming ourselves—and seeing ourselves and our beliefs as bad or stupid or unsophisticated. That is a reaction to shame Donald Nathanson calls "Attack Self" in his book *Shame and Pride*.

More commonly, when our shame is deep enough and powerful enough, we may try to overcome it by turning it into contempt for others and their beliefs. We see the other person as bad, stupid, unsophisticated—or even evil. This is a reaction to shame Nathanson calls "Attack Other" and it has become all too common today.

When shame becomes severe and painful enough, we try to change the self-focus and sense of hopelessness and freeze by dehumanizing and persecuting others. And while shaming may work to keep things under control when there are only minor differences, it tends to drive beliefs and attitudes underground, where they fester and become more powerful. I believe we have seen this in the last election.

And shaming is not just overt and clear. Neglect, dismissal and discounting are also forms of shaming and produce shame. It is hard to resist the pull of shame or shaming when facing major differences, personal or political. Yet shame and shaming are ultimately counterproductive. I do not have any easy answers for this. But I will say that if, like Susan, we could accept and honor differences and try to understand them, we could avoid a lot of the shame and shaming that make the world a more difficult place.

This is not to say we do not need to take action and fight for our beliefs. We certainly do. And it is important to stand up for ourselves and tell our truth and set our boundaries. But we need to do this with the awareness that the relative, spouse or political opponent on the

other side is human as well. And while it may be more obvious with a relative, it seems to have become harder and harder with political differences.

We need to find a way to accept and respect difference, rather than letting it trigger shame and shaming. This holds true for all major differences, personal and political, even the ones we feel most strongly about. To lose oneself in shame, or resort to shaming, brings past hurts into the present, clouds our thinking and erodes our compassion, both for others and for ourselves. We are all flawed human beings and we have the difficult, challenging task of coming to terms with that basic truth.

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