Counter-Shaming – Part 1
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Part 1: Nobody's Perfect

When clients come to us in shame, it is not enough to be non-shaming. To really do our job, we need to go out of our way to counter the shame they are already feeling. In this article, I will present several different methods for counter-shaming the client, methods that I use regularly.

I recently began work with a depressed client who was adopted as a young boy. He idealizes his adoptive mother, who seems like quite a remarkable woman. The downside is that he feels even worse about himself since, growing up with this paragon of a mother, he still has so many problems. Every time he feels bad about himself, he thinks of all his mother did for him and feels even worse. I agreed that, from everything he said, his mother was indeed wonderful—though human and therefore not perfect. However, when he came to her he was not a blank slate. He had had a difficult time with his birth parents, who fought constantly and didn't take care of him. He already had been subject to "the breaking of the interpersonal bridge," which Kaufman defines as the cause of shame. His mother, sensitive as she was, did not really understand the level of shame he was already feeling. And since he had already been conditioned to keep his pain to himself, he didn't really tell her. While she treated him well, she did not counter the shame that was already bringing him down.

Unfortunately, many therapists find themselves in the same position as the adoptive mother. While being careful not to shame the client—which is actually not easy—they don't realize and approach the shame the client is already feeling.

Shame is a universal emotion. Everyone has it. And some people have it in toxic quantities. The therapeutic relationship, by its very nature, can be shaming. I have a problem. I go to pay money to an expert to help me. In this process, I tell him everything and he says very little. As far as I know, he doesn't have any problems. It is not a level playing field.

Let's start with one example of counter shaming—one that I read about in the magazine now called *The Networker*. This was an inadvertent but powerful counter shaming.

It happened in a small town. A therapist was in a big box store with her little girl. The girl was acting out. She wanted a toy her mother didn't want her to have. As they approached the checkout counter, the argument escalated. The therapist had had enough reasoning and being reasonable and she began screaming at her daughter. The daughter screamed back. As the conversation continued, the therapist noticed someone out of the corner of her eye. It was a client, watching the proceedings with great interest. Completely shocked and ashamed, the therapist picked up her girl, left the cart where it was, and ran out of the store.

On getting home, the therapist checked her appointment book. The client was coming in to see her in three days. She thought about calling the client, but couldn't figure out what she would say, so she just waited, getting more and more nervous about what would happen.

Finally, the day arrived. The client walked into the therapist's office. She had a big smile on her face (the client, not the therapist).

"I saw you the other day at the store," the client said.

"I, I know," replied the therapist, swallowing hard.

"You know," the client continued, "I feel really good right now."

"You do?" the therapist choked out.

"Yeah, I do. I mean, if *you* can't control your child, why should I be expected to control mine?"

I would speculate that this was one of the therapist's most successful interventions—though completely unintentional. She showed her client that she also had problems, that she wasn't perfect. In this way, she normalized not being perfect—and gave her client permission not to get down on herself for not being a perfect mother.

While we may not want to plan an incident as embarrassing as this one, one of the most counter-shaming moves we can make is to let our clients know that we are human, that we also make mistakes. In fact, everyone makes mistakes. No one is perfect.

There are many ways to counter-shame a client. Not all of them will work with every client and each of them has to come from an authentic belief on your part—they can't just be techniques. In the first example above, I humanized the client's mother, gently showing a limitation on her part. I explained the client's state of mind by examining his history. The phrase I use for this is "Of course, you did that" or "No wonder that didn't work out." In the second example, the therapist proved, inadvertently, that she also had problems. *One important way to counter-shame is to acknowledge that nobody's perfect, including you.* In my next post, I will continue with ways to counter shame.

Talk About Shame

The word "shame" can be a taboo subject in many circles. Many therapists are afraid to talk about it or point it out, both because of their own discomfort and because they're afraid it will upset the client. But shame thrives on secrecy. One student reported with surprise that she had visited her mother after the first day of our workshop. Somewhat hesitantly, she had asked her mother whether she felt shame about some family incidents. "Yes," her mother had replied, with great vehemence and appreciation. "That's right. I feel shame. You're the first person who's ever gotten that."

Many people are quite aware of feeling something unpleasant that they may or may not realize is shame. If they are confused, it can be amazingly clarifying— "Oh, that's what I've been feeling. It's shame. No wonder I feel so rotten whenever I….." If someone doesn't know they are feeling shame, it can be incredibly relieving to have it out in the open. Of course, this has to be done with care. But most clients who are not ready to deal with their shame will simply ignore or deny

it. You can drop it and come back to it later.

(To be continued.)