

Healthy Shame

By Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

In working with clients, it is extremely important to bring in the concept of healthy shame vs. toxic shame. While toxic shame feels horrible and produces an amazingly unpleasant state of freeze, healthy shame can actually help you function better. A humorous example of healthy shame is realizing “I can't fly. I wish I could. It would be really nice. I really envy those birds, just soaring through the air. But I can't. I'm human. I have limitations, just as all people have limitations.” This understanding is particularly healthy shame because it can keep us from jumping off cliffs—and being very surprised as we flap our arms. While this is an extreme example, healthy shame helps us to be aware of limitations, reassess our actions and act more appropriately in the future.

I once gave a speech to a group on July 4. I knew that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on July 4. What a great topic for a speech—though it had little to do with the subject I was supposed to be talking about. Impulsively, I mapped out the speech and gave it. It was a disaster. Too intellectual and utterly unsuited to the group. People actually walked out.

My first reaction was definitely toxic shame. I felt terrible. Sick to my stomach. I actually took to my bed for several days. I had blown it, failed. I would never be asked to speak again. Then I began to reassess. I had always prepared carefully for presentations. I had rehearsed and tried out material on my wife and friends. In this case, I had not prepared, nor checked with anybody. I had mistaken the interest of the audience. My original reaction had been “I'm no good at this. I'll never speak in public again.” Now my healthy shame thought was “I did blow it. I didn't prepare properly or run it by anybody. And I really didn't understand my audience and what they were looking for. I will do my best not to make that mistake again. I will prepare carefully and I will be a lot clearer about who I am speaking to. I will also make careful choices about who I speak to.” Instead of ending my career as a teacher, speaker and presenter, I actually took steps to become a lot better at it.

Healthy shame creates a pause in activity and a temporary retreat from the situation, which allows for reassessment and behaving differently. Elements of healthy shame are: self-compassion; realizing limitations are human—everyone has them; taking responsibility for your part in what happened—which feels quite different from self-blame; seeing the big picture; and, when the time is right, reengaging.

As there is healthy shame, there is also healthy shaming. Shame is a primary emotion that is designed to keep us out of trouble, to help us fit in. Every society uses this emotion to try to create some order and structure. The question is: Does it lead to better functioning or to pain and dysfunction? Take an example. Johnny runs into the street. His mother, Sarah, sees him, completely loses her cool and yells, “Johnny, you come back here this instant.” Is this shaming behavior toxic or healthy? We don't know yet.

The first test: does it get Johnny out of the street? If he freezes in fear and shame, the yelling was clearly toxic shaming—and dangerous. But even if Johnny runs back, we don't know yet. It really depends on what happens next. If Sarah slaps him on the head and tells him what a rotten, disobedient child he is, the shaming is toxic and the shame Johnny feels may have long-term consequences. If Sarah says something like, “I got really scared. I don't want anything to happen to you. I'm sorry I yelled, but you can't run in the street, it's too dangerous,” the shaming is repaired and can help Johnny learn an important lesson and still feel loved. It becomes healthy. Even the ringing of a bell to call a class to order is usually a form of healthy shaming. The bell ringing is a gentle way of controlling and structuring a group to get something done.

This distinction between toxic and healthy shaming can be extremely helpful for parents and all those in a position of authority who want to get something positive accomplished without damaging those around them. How can you tell whether your attempt to discipline or get what you want is toxic or healthy? When we are engaged in toxic shaming, we tend to be indifferent to or annoyed with the reaction it produces. There is a lack of concern for the child or adult being shamed. We repeat the shaming words often, like a broken record. And we don't make an effort to repair the broken connection. Healthy shaming is occasional, carefully done and any broken connection is quickly restored.

In my story above, I reassessed and turned my toxic shame, which froze me, into healthy shame, which helped me move forward. This is not always the case for me—or most people. There are areas in which we get stuck in toxic shame and have real trouble moving out of it. This is especially true if we were overwhelmed by shame growing up and weren't recognized in or helped with our sense of pain, isolation and “badness.”

Children often need their parents' help to move into healthy shame. And parents can fall into a pattern of toxic shaming that makes it difficult for their children as adults. If an experience of present day mild criticism or difficulty taps into a childhood wound, a minor setback can become a permanently damaging defeat, bringing in shame's sisters, doubt and despair.

If Sarah, above, says things like, “You're bad,” “You never listen,” “You're hopeless,” “I don't know what to do with you,” those words can stick with the child throughout his or her life—producing a shame-tinged traumatic event that can get reactivated whenever things go wrong.

It is also possible for a child to be shamed by too much praise. I had a client who had become a successful lawyer (not his real career). His mother had given him much praise for his intelligence and ability. She had taught him that he could succeed in whatever he set his mind to. In one way, all of this was a gift and allowed him to be accomplished in his profession. However, he had never gotten the message that it was okay to fail, that he didn't need to be perfect all the time. So he didn't do anything he wasn't good at. He rarely pursued hobbies or outside interests. And even in the law, he never felt he had met his full potential.

The concept of healthy shame can be helpful for clients who think they will always be stuck in shame and hope to get rid of shame entirely. It helps soften the shame by pointing towards an attainable middle ground. Everyone has shame. It is part of being human. It is how we hold the shame that's important. Does it stop us from functioning—or give us a pause in action, an opportunity to reassess? Are we ashamed of our shame, or can we hold it as part of the human condition?

With clients who have a great deal of shame, it is important to begin to work with and reframe more current shaming incidents. Clients with toxic shame from childhood can experience that shame constantly triggered in the present. Our job becomes to help clients see their interactions in a new way. We need to help her see the bigger picture: the shame of the person who shamed her and the part that was her responsibility. We need to help him have compassion for himself in the situation—and a sense that he is human, he has flaws and limitations like everyone else—and that he can make mistakes and still be worthy of love and belonging.

As we begin to de-shame the present, clients will start gradually feeling better about themselves. They will begin to take in the actual mirroring they are getting in the present, including the more realistic and compassionate mirroring we are giving them, as we see and reflect their strengths and underlying basic humanity. They can move out of re-experiencing the toxic mirroring they received in the past. They may move away from some people in their lives who are actually recreating the toxic shaming and seek out new, nurturing friendships. And they will be able to be more gentle, compassionate and loving with themselves.

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