

How Can Shame Be Healthy?

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

The emotion of shame can be very uncomfortable, even painful. It is an emotion that many of us aren't even consciously aware of when we're feeling it. It's often invisible. What we do see may be our reactions to shame.

People tend to react to shame in one of four ways, according to Donald L. Nathanson (*Shame and Pride*, 1992):

1. Attack self
2. Attack other
3. Withdraw
4. Deny

Here's an example from my practice:

A couple has plans for a nice evening out. The husband is late getting home. When he arrives, the wife says (perhaps in an irritated voice), "What happened? Why are you so late?" The husband, instead of telling her he's sorry, that he didn't leave enough time or that there was traffic, responds defensively by saying, "What's your problem? I work hard to make sure this family gets fed! Get off my back!" The wife then goes silent, decides she doesn't want to go out with him, and spends the evening with friends instead. Although they both had been looking forward to a nice evening out together, now they're feeling upset and resentful.

What just happened?

When the couple talks to me about their "failed evening out" each says it's the other's fault. I get curious about this in the therapy session, and we start to break it all down. It's helpful for me to understand the map of reactions so that I can then explain to them what may have happened, and we can take a look at the unexpressed feelings that got ignored or triggered.

We learn: Something happened when he arrived home and saw the look in her eyes. She was already upset before she even said anything. So he started to feel nervous. When she said, "What happened? Why are you so late?" he felt embarrassed, hurt, confused. He went into his shame but didn't feel it. He wanted to be with her but didn't want to be made "wrong," so he got angry, launched into his tirade, and deflected his shame onto her (an **attack-other reaction**). The wife, who was already feeling not valued by his being late, then went into her shame and **withdrew**. Each thought the other was wrong for their reaction. However, when we look underneath the

situation, we see that each person had a different reaction to shame, and it's easy to understand how the scenario played out.

Often these reactions to shame can continue to disrupt the dynamic of the couple. I can help them build an interpersonal bridge by helping them understand how they both went into a painful, shameful place.

Shame lets us know that something is not right. Often there has been a missed communication that left a person feeling left out or controlled or seen in a way that they didn't want to be seen. And sometimes, exploring shame gently and in a counter-shaming way in the therapy process can actually be productive or healthy for the person experiencing the shame, so that they can understand shame more deeply and not be alone with it.

Here are some descriptions of shame reactions and ways they can actually be healthy or positive. I've also included possible responses that may be productive for couples.

Attack Self

In the attack-self reaction, a person is asking herself or himself whether they've done something wrong. This is where a perfectionist tendency may have the person making a list of things to do to improve themselves, trying to be a better person or better at whatever they're trying to do. People may try to keep from feeling shame by having a long list of things to do to fix themselves. Sometimes that can actually help a person grow when it moves them in a positive direction rather than into a frozen stuck point.

A possible productive response for someone in an attack-self reaction might be to say: "I realize I'm putting myself down right now because I felt hurt when you were late. Could you reassure me that I matter to you? Could you comfort me?"

Attack Other

A healthy attack-other reaction would be to get angry at unfairness, to protest when attachment has been broken, to call for healthy shame when someone else has done something wrong, and to demand that wrongs be righted.

For a person engaged in an attack-other reaction, a productive response could be to either express the attachment protest more clearly: "I'm really frustrated. I missed you, too. I really wanted to be with you." Or they could express their anger at a mutual "enemy": "The traffic got in the way and made us late."

Withdraw

A healthy withdraw reaction to shame would be when a person pulls back from someone or something that is painful or confusing and withdraws temporarily in order to protect themselves, it gives the person time to question whether that specific person can be trusted, or to leave a moment or situation that is toxic. It might be good to take a time-out.

A withdraw reaction provides time to assess the situation and can allow the person to re-emerge with a different, bigger picture that might offer more clarity. A productive response might be to reach out to the other and say: “I need to take a time-out for a half hour, I’m going to take a walk. After that I want to talk.”

Deny

At times the deny reaction to shame can actually be helpful. It can allow a person to not be reacting to every little thing that happens, to let go of things that aren’t important, and to put pain aside and continue functioning in a situation (such as a family situation) that requires attention.

The deny reaction can allow a person to avoid the initial impact of the other’s angry words coming at them. It can also allow them to hold back their own automatic reaction, long enough to have a little space to feel into what’s happening inside, and later be able to come back to the relationship in a different way.

Restoring the Bridge

Since shame is the breaking of the interpersonal bridge, I work with couples to restore that bridge through connection with each other. I was able to work with this couple to help them explore how their different attachment styles, and therefore their different reactions to shame, were getting in the way of their connecting. I taught them how to talk to each other in a counter-shaming way—to speak gently and kindly to each other about the tender places they got stuck in—and I helped them understand how they got into a negative cycle in the first place, helping each find a healthy response to shame. Finally, together, using Emotionally Focused Therapy of Sue Johnson combined with shame theory, they were able to join each other with a deeper connection, and many great nights out as well!

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