

Managing a Shame Attack

By Joan Gold, MA, MFT

My client texted me over the weekend, something she rarely does: “I want to stop isolating, but I’m feeling awful about myself. Everywhere I look, my life is chaos. My friend says I need to try harder, but I don’t see how I can. I feel bad, bad, bad. What can I do to make this go away?”

I texted back: “You are having a shame attack. In the middle of a shame attack, all you can do is love yourself. When the attack passes, we can talk about what might need changing.

“In the meantime, be kind to yourself.”

It’s the same thing I tell all my clients—the same thing, actually, that I have learned to tell myself. We are all vulnerable to those sudden moments when the bottom drops out from underneath us, and we are left holding onto...nothing. Except that awful feeling of being bad, bad, bad. For many of us, that moment passes relatively quickly. It just takes a deep breath or two.

For others that “shame attack” lasts longer and has the potential to turn into a full-scale assault on the self. When we act out of shame, we betray our very being. We lose track of our inner guidance; our gauges go flat. We may beat ourselves up emotionally in the mistaken hope enough contempt will force us to change. Or we self-medicate or self-destruct or otherwise attempt to run from our shame—what Brené Brown describes as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”

If, in childhood, you didn’t have anyone to teach you that you are actually a good person even if you’ve had a bad day or done something wrong—like my client—then a sudden shame attack is not that rare an occurrence. We may quit our job or stop calling friends back or refuse to do something else that really is in our best interest—what they used to call “cutting off your nose to spite your face”—because we’re so furious. Mostly at ourselves for being such losers. Sometimes at everyone around us, just because they witnessed our shameful self.

The reason shame is so insidious is that, if you are the sensitive type, the world offers unlimited opportunities to come up short. It’s a Facebook jungle out there, offering a constant barrage of airbrushed images and ideals to which we mere mortals can only aspire.

I may be just a teeny bit sensitive to this myself.

I grew up in a middle-class, Midwestern family, with parents who prided themselves on their superior parenting skills. They never hit a child. Instead, they perfected the long,

soulful, parental stare, accompanied by one of the most lethal phrases in the English language: “Shame on you.” It stopped my brother and me dead in our tracks. I know I’ve spent most of my years in personal therapy trying to pry that shame off me. I still stumble across small, crusty bits of it when I least expect it. Who would consciously do that to a child?

The problem is, when it comes to shame, most of us aren’t conscious. If you’ve been shamed, you shame others. It’s invisible. Talking about shame is the only way to start making the invisible, visible. But, talking about shame—most of us avoid it at all costs. It’s just so damn shameful.

So that client who texted me over the weekend—she eventually texted back: “A shame attack. That’s helpful. I can take care of myself the same way I do with a panic attack. Breathe. Stay in the moment. Remember I’m an adult with lots of choices and people who care. See you next week.”

I checked in with her about our text exchange at our next appointment. She said it was helpful to have me name her experience—she hadn’t realized that the constellation of feelings that she described added up to shame. We talked about how shame shows up everywhere, all the time. “Naming shame is the first step in starting to heal it,” I told her. “Shame feeds off ignorance and isolation. When we break the silence, we open up to the possibility that we are not alone. And we start building a bridge to connect us with nurturing others who can offer us a fuller, more compassionate view of ourselves.

“It was a brave act to reach out when you felt so bad about yourself,” I added, wanting my client to appreciate the importance of what she had done. She sat with that word—brave—for a moment; I could see her testing it for validity. And then, holding onto this new possibility, she went on to other matters.

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