

UNBINDING SHAME

by Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

The session was not going well. I was demonstrating to the group how to work with a mother suffering because her son had been left back in school. Nothing I did seemed to work. After an excruciating 30 minutes, I gave up. “I don’t think I’m really helping you right now. I’m truly sorry.” She politely agreed that it hadn’t helped much. “It did help a little, I guess,” she said, trying to soften my embarrassment. She had calmed down a bit, benefitting from simply being able to talk about the situation. But the kind of calm and peacefulness I had hoped to help her achieve was far away.

Later that night, I went over and over the session in my mind. Willing myself to avoid getting frozen in shame, I tried to concentrate on what had gone wrong. Then it came to me. My client was experiencing at least two emotions at the same time. Our contract was to work on her shame about her son’s being left back. But she was also having a strong experience of grief for both herself and her son. The action tendency of shame is to freeze and hide. Someone in shame tends to circle round in endless loops of rumination. The action tendency of grief is to cry and grieve. We grieve for what has happened, putting it in the past. Shame, on the other hand, keeps everything in the present. We experience a shameful incident, as we experience a traumatic incident, as if it is happening right now. What I hadn’t done in the session was separate her grief—which could be invited to discharge in tears and sadness—from her shame, which had to be worked with quite differently.

We are quite capable of experiencing two, three or even many feelings at the same time. This truth seems uncomfortable for many parents who try to help their children with their feelings. For example, Billy, very upset, comes in crying and tells his mother that he hates Bobby. Mother responds, “You don’t hate, Bobby. Bobby is your brother. You love Bobby.”

Billy probably does love Bobby. But at that moment, he hates Bobby as well. Children do not seem to have the same problem that adults do around emotions. For a child, emotions come in bunches and they don’t have to make sense. They just are. Billy doesn’t worry that his momentary hatred will get in the way of his love.

Nowhere does our lack of tolerance for complex emotions cause more trouble than when shame is present. Sylvan Tomkins, the great emotions theorist, saw shame as a *binding emotion*. Its very nature is to bind with other emotions. It is designed that way for a reason: To keep us from acting. Every emotion has an action tendency. The tendency of anger is to lash out, the tendency of grief is to cry and seek comfort, the tendency of fear is to run away, the tendency of curiosity is to explore and inquire. The tendency of shame is to freeze, hide, disappear. Shame has been called “the master emotion” because it can serve as a control on all of the others. Shame binds with other emotions to lower their affect and prevent a discharge in action. In this way, it keeps us safe and helps us to learn and obey social rules. Unfortunately, shame is so powerful that a little goes a long way. The healthy tendency to stop, pay attention to others and reassess can quickly morph into a freeze state, covering up all other emotions.