

## Working with Sexual Shame in Couples Therapy

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

In the past few years, several men have contacted me after discovering their wife was having an online affair. And several women have contacted me after discovering their husband was engaged in online porn or trying to get together with other women through social media or dating websites. Each of these couples was shocked and shaken because they never thought their partner would do something like that. And even the partners told me that *they* never thought they would ever do something like that.

There's a book by Shirley Glass one of my clients brought in called *Not "Just Friends": Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity*. What Glass says is that if one person is telling secrets or holding confidences with someone outside the relationship and they're not sharing it with their partner, that can be the beginning of the breakdown in the relationship.

What I have found in my practice is that something happens between the couple *before* the withholding of attention, which can, in some cases, eventually lead to an online affair. When a couple stops turning toward each other for support or connection, sometimes one or both start turning toward someone outside the relationship. I find there can be a very small miscommunication that can lead to further miscommunication, and this unintentional misattunement in a couple can lead to deeper disconnection. Sue Johnson of Emotionally Focused Therapy calls this a withdraw/withdraw or pursue/withdraw style of attachment in the couple.

I get curious about what gets in the way of communication. Often they don't feel like telling each other how they like to be touched. Or they don't feel the connection to ask the more tender questions. One or both partners can go into embarrassment or freezing or going numb, or tuning out to avoid the discomfort of that kind of conversation. Both may be trying to tiptoe around the potential feelings of shame that might come up during the conversation by not really having it.

### Shame in Couples

I see shame as one of the primary reactive processes in the dance of attachment between partners. Shame is described by Gershen Kaufman as "the breaking of the interpersonal bridge." I see this happen continually in the negative cycles of many couples. When I work with a couple, I provide a lot of psycho-education on how the primary emotion of shame can affect a person's nervous system and how the cycle of shame can affect a couple. I explain that going mute, being unable to respond verbally, is actually a shame response. When someone freezes, is mute, or dissociates, that can be because they are feeling shame. Alternatively, lashing out can be an attempt to overcome the powerlessness of feeling

shame. And often there is also shame about the shame. I begin working with a couple by using a counter-shaming approach, by acknowledging their bravery and the fear that got the couple to my office.

### The Shame Loop

When one partner turns away it can be experienced by the other partner as the “breaking of the interpersonal bridge.” This can occur thousands of times a day when one person reaches out for attachment and is not met with what they need. This can be as simple as one person answering their cell phone or shaking their head when their partner asks for sex. One may feel left out or alone or ashamed that they need connection with the other. The shame can then escalate into a reactive cycle that is like a hot potato being passed angrily back and forth between the couple in the “blame/shame game.”

Often, just beneath anger, fear, or sadness, is shame—shame at their partner turning away, or shame that they won’t be enough. And there can be shame as a secret feeling or memory that is locked away due to a past trauma or violation from an attachment figure that led to the shame. Shame is so tender, so fragile to unpack. I have learned to move slowly, with great compassion and curiosity.

With each couple, the depth and complexity of the attachment wound may have both partners shocked and shaken. Or one person may think everything is fine. “How could you want to be with someone else?” one partner asks the other. Then I ask the one who was having the online affair, “What were you getting from that other person?” The response may be something like: “He would say good morning to me every morning like I meant something to him.” Or, “She asked me questions about what my life was about. I felt important.” These were all things each may have been wanting from their partner, but then turned to this accessible connection because it seemed easy.

But what is really going on here? Strong attachment feelings are being affected. Attachment Theory and Shame Attachment Theory by John Bowlby, further researched by Sue Johnson, explain what is going on systemically, relationally and biologically. Emotionally Focused Therapy focuses on the “generation of effective dependency.” Sue Johnson teaches “it’s OK to want to be attached, and it’s OK to feel strong emotions when our attachment needs are threatened.” That is attachment behavior and it is wired into our nervous systems.

Once we begin to unpack the blame/shame cycle we can begin to look at the attachment needs underneath. I teach the couple to comfort each other when they are having a feeling of needing too much or being selfish. I then teach them the difference between “I feel shamed,” which points to the other as shaming them and keeps the cycle moving in a blame/shame direction, and “I feel shame,” which can be a gentle invitation toward caring and connection when the person shares their vulnerability.

## Working with Sexual Shame

So many couples have sexual shame. I provide psycho-education about how common this experience is, and this normalizes the shame. Then I explain how challenging sex can be for couples due to all the feelings and sensations involved, each person's belief systems and ideas about sex, the depth of the sexual experience, and each person's attachment longings.

Building a secure base, so that these tender issues can be talked about, has potential to lead to deeper love and intimacy. For example, a simple miscommunication could be felt as a misattunement and lead to blame and shame, isolation, or explosions. But as each issue comes up in a "secure base relationship," there would ideally be room to talk about it. If one person says, "I feel tender about my body" or "I get confused when you tell me to meet you in bed but you stay on the couch watching TV," a conversation could follow that would lead to reconnection.

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