

General Recovery - The Binding Nature of Shame

I often have to define two important terms to help people release the past during therapy: guilt and shame. Guilt is healthy. It is an internal conviction that something you did was wrong. It prompts you to make amends. It helps you to resolve conflict or heal a broken relationship by asking for forgiveness and changing your behavior. Shame is not healthy. It is the internal sense that you are bad- shame is experienced as intrinsic to who you are. It prompts a person to stay self-focused, avoid others, hide his/her past, and become defensive or attacking during conflict. In addition to sabotaging conflict resolution, shame results in many other negative behaviors: 1) Verbal or physical maltreatment- folks who carry shame seek to overcome it by bringing others down; 2) Perfectionism- shameful individuals defend against their shame by behaving so as to prevent any possible future shame; 3) Blaming- persons living with shame try to compensate by putting their own faults on others; 4) Martyrdom- because shame produces intense feelings of worthlessness, many people try to overcome it by being self-sacrificing, to please others and prove their worth; 5) Social Withdrawal- another way to try and prevent any future shaming experiences is to avoid interactions with others altogether. The problem with most of the above shame-based behaviors is that they not only perpetuate our own shame, but they cause us to put it on others. We leave others feeling as we did growing up- that instead of just having made a behavioral error during the course of interacting with us, they are intrinsically bad. In order to heal ourselves from shame and to avoid shaming others, we must distinguish between the behavior and the person (action versus actor). We can learn to apologize for our own behavior and change it for the future. When dealing with others, we can address their behavior ("I am very angry that you...") instead of engaging in character assassination ("You are a bad boy" or "I am very disappointed in you"). Behaviors are not necessarily fixable or redeemable, but **people are always redeemable!**