

Identifying & Releasing *Shame*

Four steps to disrupting shame cycles

Shame is an *emotion*. It is a **self-conscious** emotion, meaning we judge ourselves harshly through the eyes of others or by a certain social or cultural standard.

It can be described as feeling cold, heavy, dark and isolating. It thrives on secrecy. Shame makes us feel different and separate from others, and so recognising *when* we feel shame and *what* we feel shame around can prevent us from buying into the belief that we are uniquely bad or broken.

All humans feel shame at one point or another. Some of us, chronically. The irony is that this *connects* us, even though it makes us *feel* isolated, and like we need to hide away or punish ourselves. The more **aware** and **open** we can be about shame, the lighter, less isolated and more in control we will feel.

Shame cycles can occur when feelings of unworthiness or defectiveness are triggered by an event or memory. When this happens, following these four steps may help you to remain mindful, challenge self-blame and self-destructive urges, and respond **compassionately**.

1) Get *curious*

- An attitude of curiosity is a **useful tool for detecting and defusing patterns** of self-criticism, self-blame and overidentifying with emotions.
- This is the **basis of mindfulness**: observing your inner world without automatically judging or applying meanings.
- Observe your emotional responses, behaviours, self-talk and inner voice: how do they portray you?
- Do they portray you in a negative or critical light? If so, this could indicate shame.
- What is the tone and feel of your inner voice? Is it cold, detached, mean, or warm and supportive?
- Do you readily listen to and believe your inner voice/thoughts/beliefs without questioning or challenging? Explore these with non-judgmental curiosity.

2) Add *context*

- Reflect on where your beliefs and interpretations of yourself stem from - are there any defining moments, situations or relationships that stick out?
- Think about how many events and circumstances **outside of your control** led to the environment in which you were raised; this is helpful for recontextualising your sense of self and challenging the belief there is something broken with you rather than an adaptive response to your environment shaping your relationship with self.
- What messages or social-cultural expectations have you internalised about who you should be or what you should do? Is there anything that feels out of line with who you are?

3) Respond with *compassion*

- How easy or difficult is it for you to empathise with your own emotions and responses? Does it feel uncomfortable or impossible for you to accept compassion?
- What might an understanding, compassionate friend say to you in this situation when you are hurting? Or what might you say to them?
- Can you identify an underlying need for soothing? What does this feel like? Often, connecting with others' stories of shame can be soothing as it **reinforces our common humanity**, rather than fuelling isolation and loneliness.
- Practice validating and empathising with your feelings, and noticing when you are blaming or shaming yourself for your emotions or actions.

4) *Defuse* from your thoughts

- When you are fused with your thoughts, self-critical and self-shaming thoughts can feel like absolute truth, leading to distress and unbearable emotions. It becomes very difficult to see nuanced perspectives outside of your ego.
- Rather than readily believing the thought “I deserve to be treated badly”, observe that “I am *having the thought* that I deserve to be treated badly”. Get curious about this thought; how does it portray you? Add context; where might this thought stem from? Does it make sense in terms of my early relationships and experiences? Respond with compassion; how will I soothe myself through this thought?

Learning to recognise shame and develop a new relationship with it that doesn't compromise your whole sense of self is part of building your self-compassion.

It's not healthy for us humans to turn off or avoid our uncomfortable emotions like shame, anxiety, guilt and regret. Instead, we can choose to engage with the uncomfortable in a soothing and mindful way.