



WORKING WITH SHAME & GUILTY FEELINGS

For some clients, shame and guilt present in every aspect of their lives. Sometimes the impact can be out of the client's awareness.

Causes of shame can come from various sources:

- **Cultural conditioning and norms.** Some cultures stigmatise homosexuality or sex outside a married relationship. Individuals who stray outside these cultural boundaries may find themselves punished or shunned by their community and loved ones. In some communities, loved ones may experience shame by association.
- **Shame through religious doctrine.** Many religions encourage people to feel shame for violating spiritual principles or ideologies. For example, they may feel guilt for knowingly eating prohibited foods or marrying someone outside the faith.
- **Online shaming.** Social media is fast becoming the primary source of shaming people. From tweeting cruel comments to trolling, the online world is becoming the major contributor to projecting and reinforcing shame.
- **Self-esteem.** Clients who have low self-worth may feel shame although they cannot identify specific issues or sources of shame. It is worth noting that in some cases, early childhood experiences and attachment can be significant contributors to shame.
- **Trauma and abuse.** People who experience abuse, often experience shame. It is not uncommon to hear '*If only I ran away*' or '*I should have fought more.*' Some families shame victims into silence by saying that they asked for the abuse or conspired with the abuser.

What interventions can help?

Normalising a client's feelings of shame can go a long way in assisting them in realising that it is an imposter usually introduced by others. Therapists acknowledging their guilt can be incredibly helpful in modelling how to reduce and banish this destructive emotion.

Asking the client to imagine giving advice or comfort to a real or imaginary friend who has a similar shame-inducing problem can be a useful way of reframing their thinking.

The vocabulary of shame

Dr Judith Lewis Herman noted in her paper *Shattered Shame States and their Repair* 2007:

"The vocabulary of shame is extensive. Code words for shame include ridiculous, foolish, silly, idiotic, stupid, dumb, humiliated, disrespected, helpless, weak, inept, dependent, small, inferior, unworthy, worthless, trivial, shy, vulnerable, uncomfortable, or embarrassed."

Therapists should be alert to this vocabulary as it can indicate underlying themes of shame, embarrassment or guilt, which the client may have difficulty disclosing directly.

Reference

Herman, J. (2007). *Shattered Shame States and Their Repair*. [online] Challiance.org. Available at: <http://www.challiance.org/Resource.ashx?sn=VOVShattered2oShameJHerman> [Accessed 27 Feb. 2020].