

# Understanding and Addressing Internalized Shame

By Donna Wasson, MA, LCPC

We've all heard that Taiwan is a "shame-based" culture, but what is shame, how is it transmitted and what are its effects? Internalized shame is a common theme in many people's lives. It is often seen in survivors of childhood abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault. Dysfunctional homes (and who really comes from a "functional" home?) often produce shame in their members. Parents with internalized shame pass it on to their children. Many missionaries struggle with the feelings, and the Taiwanese have woven it into their society.

John Bradshaw in his book, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, says "Toxic Shame, the shame that binds you, is experienced as the all-pervasive sense that I am flawed and defective as a human being. Toxic shame is no longer an emotion that signals our limits, it is a state of being, a core identity. Toxic shame gives you a sense of worthlessness, a sense of failing and falling short as a human being. Toxic shame is a rupture of self with the self." (page 10.) While guilt might tell a woman, "You made a mistake," toxic shame will tell her, "You are a mistake. You are worthless, hopeless, and bad."

Is there healthy shame? Healthy shame recognizes that you can make mistakes and have limits. If I bragged to everyone that I was going to win the Iron Man Marathon Race during TMF conference but then lost (inevitable for me!), I would rightly feel a sense of shame. I thought I was better than others and forgot my own limitations. That sense of shame can be remedied and brings humility. I can laugh at myself for such a lapse in judgment and apologize to those I had offended. Healthy shame reminds me of real boundaries and teaches me to be humble.

How does toxic shame begin? In many cases, children may experience shame for having certain feelings, needs or drives. When an area is consistently identified by the "shamer" (a parent, teacher, authority figure, peer) as bad, a child eventually cuts off and does not allow himself to have those particular feelings, needs or drives. As he grows up and as an adult, those same feelings, needs and drives produce deep emotions of shame and worthlessness. This would be evidence of internalized shame. As many do, he might try to cover his inner bad "self" and outwardly present an idealized "false self" that is extremely good. If he didn't, the world would find out how bad he really is.

"Feelings" can include excitement, enjoyment, surprise, anger, fear, distress, shame, disgust, etc. "Needs" that are shamed frequently include the need for friendship, touching/holding, identification, differentiation, nurturing, affirmation, power, etc. "Drives" usually refers to sexuality, hunger, and anything relating to goals and purpose. All are legitimate and normal, but obviously they must all be managed, disciplined, and developed appropriately.

There are certain behaviors that "shamers" commonly use that instill unhealthy shame and fear. Little boys and girls usually believe only a terrible child would elicit such behaviors and facial expressions in someone they love. They typically see themselves "mirrored" in the faces of parents (and others) and do not like what they see. Typical behaviors associated with a "shamer" include:

- Voice is loud, fluent, abrasive
- Person may point or shake forefinger
- Staring, glaring eye contact
- Sharply cutting off eye contact with shamed person

- Erect posture
- Facial look of disgust or dissmell (like smelling something rotten)
- Aggressive physical approach that violates territorial boundary of the shamed person
- Mocking imitation of the shamed person's behavior or words
- Derisive, sharp laughter
- Use of words that belittle the person shamed
- Physically assaulting the shamed person
- Ostracizing the shamed person in front of a group of people
- Stand "towering above" the shamed person

**Typical behaviors associated with being shamed include:**

- Eyes down (sustained eye contact is intolerable)
- Head hung
- Shoulders slumped
- Face, cheeks flushed
- Paralysis of movement ("frozen in one's tracks")
- Interrupted spontaneity of movement
- Voice stammers, softens, and/or stops
- Extremities become cold (state of physiological shock)
- Changes in galvanic skin response (hands start to sweat)
- Attempts to hide or withdraw
- Fidgeting or squirming
- Crying

When leading a recovery group for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I found these lists elicited strong emotional reactions in group members. They tearfully described childhood experiences of being shamed. It was freeing for them to realize that anyone would have felt shamed in those experiences, and they were not abnormal.

**Stages of Shame**

Shame can be seen in three stages, progressively becoming more generalized and pervasive. Stage One consists of Basic Shame Binds where shame is specifically focused on a particular feeling, need, or drive. The "bind" comes as a child (or adult) has a normal feeling, need or drive, but is made to feel he should not. For example, Johnny falls down and cuts his knee and begins to cry; his father screams at him, "Only babies cry...boys do not cry...stop crying." Johnny's legitimate

pain and sadness has been invalidated, causing him to feel ashamed for crying. If this scene is repeated often enough, he learns not to cry. He might also learn to ignore his feelings *anytime* he feels pain and sadness. As an adult, he may feel stupid and worthless (in other words, shame) *whenever* he feels distressed, telling himself, “I shouldn’t feel like this.” Sometimes, instead of feeling depressed when faced with a legitimately sad situation, he may feel nothing at all. I have heard many Chinese people report an absence of emotions, rather than a clear sense of shame and worthlessness.

In Stage Two, shame is generalized to: A) Body shame—feeling ashamed about everything having to do with the body. B) Relationship shame—feeling bad about their relationships in a myriad of ways and scared of intimacy. C) Competence shame—feeling that you cannot do anything well enough, and if you do, you should apologize (or do it better). MeiLi may have been consistently criticized and humiliated for missing points on her homework and exams, even though she was usually at the top of the class. First by her parents and then teachers, she repeatedly saw looks of disgust and repulsion when she didn’t get first place or 100%. She tearfully remembers her mother ripping up some exam results in front of her siblings because her scores weren’t as high as her cousin’s, asking, “Are you my daughter? How could I have such a stupid child?” Now at age 35, people see her as successful but can’t understand her strange lack of self-confidence and motivation. When praised, she feels deeply ashamed of her inadequacy.

In Stage Three, Character Shame becomes the core of the person’s identity; there is nothing “right” about them. Many counselees with this kind of shame describe a kind of blackness or void at the center of their being, which they are very afraid people might see. If people get too close, they might see and understand and run as fast as they can! OR...if friends get too close, they might get infected and their lives could be ruined as a result. Such is the power of internalized shame. Most would not identify shame as an emotion; for them it is just a fact of existence!

Mary is a deaconess in the church and busy about the work of the Lord. Many see her as the epitome of sacrifice and service, selflessness and faithful giving. The pastor and others feel frustrated in their attempts to know her, because the conversion always gets deflected to something else. If the truth were known, Mary is depressed most of the time but works hard not to show it. She knows she never does enough and doesn’t really “rate” as a deaconess—that was a fluke in the voting last year. She hates her body, and thinks about it as little as possible, rarely looking in a mirror. She wants intimacy but can’t seem to bridge that gap. She feels tired, hollow, incomplete.

## **Controlling and Releasing Shame**

In whatever stage a person might be, he will attempt to control that sense of shame. If I feel bad about myself, I might try to show myself that I am actually okay. And I may want to prove to others that I am an okay person, too. Many people fall into the trap of perfectionism, super-achievement, winning, care taking, rescuing, and people-pleasing in order to control their sense of shame and prove to themselves (and others) that they are really good. Some dare not talk lest they say something wrong. Unfortunately, others become overly critical, blaming, contemptuous and patronizing in an attempt to feel superior...and others feel inferior.

Additional strategies to control shame may include compulsive behaviors that can drive and enslave the individual. Such compulsive behaviors may include dieting/fasting, “workaholism”, cleaning, washing, mental detailing, undoing, hoarding/saving, and being over-scrupulous or puritanical.

Whatever method the person uses to control their sense of shame, there is increasing pressure and stress to live up to the highest possible standard. No one can live with that kind of stress continually and so there must be a break--some way to let go, even if that release is temporary and causes more problems. Some people lose their tempers, have dramatic emotional outbursts, become

unpredictable, or indulge addictive behaviors. Addictions can include alcohol and other drugs, food, sex, video games, spending, excitement, high emotionality, physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and self-injury. All are ways to release tension.

Some busy people suddenly give up, walk away, become ill, or just get depressed, as a way to escape the high stress of shame-based achievement. Regardless of the manifestation of shame, the person becomes increasingly self-oriented and self-indulgent, even though there are many seemingly altruistic behaviors. Such “releasing behaviors” cause the person to feel ashamed and embarrassed. Once again, he (or she) is driven to control the sense of shame and feel better. It is a painful and oppressive cycle. Is there anyway out?

### **Ways of Escape—bringing it into the Light**

Embracing this shame is painful, but “the only way out is through,” says Bradshaw. (pages 115-116). What is internalized must be “externalized” in order to be healed. That which is hidden must be brought out in the light. As Christians, we are in a unique position to address these hidden and internalized wounds of shame. Conceptualizing broadly in terms of grace, love and renewal, the following are some of my preliminary thoughts about the healing of shame.

Give people **grace**, unmerited favor and acceptance! Shame prevents people from accepting themselves or believing that others can love them. People with high shame levels are not always the easiest people to love, because they put up barriers and defenses. These folks need to extend *themselves* grace, but may only be able to understand that as they experience grace from loving people. This is what the Church does best—reaching out to people where they are and giving them a place to belong. (Small groups are great for this.) Hopefully, grace is what Christians can offer, because of the unconditional love and acceptance we have experienced personally through Jesus. God wants to extend grace to these friends through His people! Some of my clients expect me to scold them, or worse, to laugh at them! They are deeply affected by the acceptance and concern offered them, which begins the healing process.

Give people your **love**! This is what people with great wells of internalized shame have never really had. Unconditional love—unearned, no strings attached, never ending. God offers this to us freely...and with His power and grace, we can offer it to others. Obviously love is not easy and who is equal to the task? It takes prayer, commitment, courage and time. The church of Christ is again uniquely positioned to offer God’s unconditional love through its fellowship of believers. One believer alone cannot do this work, but a body of believers can provide a loving, safe, and balanced environment to embrace those who are hurting. Of course, the church is not perfect, and there are those who will site the church as one source of their suffering. We need to go forward humbly, acknowledging our failures, keeping our eyes on Jesus. We love because God first loved us.

Nurture **renewal** when the time is right! “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) Grace and love come first because they provide the safety needed to continue along this path. Renewal then involves being honest with ourselves, God, and others. Instead of avoiding and hiding the pain, it needs to be felt, talked about, understood, and shared with safe people who can accept us. Looking at the hurts and shame is necessary in order to legitimize the suffering of the past, normalize it, and give proper perspective. This feels very scary for people with a lot of internalized shame. When grace and love provide safety, processing can be done slowly with the right people. Professional counselors might be appropriate, but they cannot be the only ones. The church again is uniquely qualified to provide a healing environment. As missionaries, can we look at our own shame issues as well as assisting those around us?

Renewal means flawed assumptions and bitter attitudes need to be examined. It points to rejecting or changing those old messages, as well as accepting new truths about who we are. We are okay,

we are acceptable, we have okay emotions, it's all right to make mistakes, we are beloved children of God, and we can have good things, too. Renewal suggests making better decisions about what I do with my time, which people I trust, and the priorities I set. Discipleship, mentoring and accountability can provide needed scaffolding as renewal and rebuilding takes place. For those of us in ministry, we need to teach our people to renew their self-image by knowing who they are in Christ and the new identity they have in Him.

Continue in **prayer!** My experience has shown that some people with deep cores of internalized shame find it hard to pray, even among Christians. Issues, such as authority, anger, fear, inadequacy, father figures, and injustice (“where was God when this happened?”), can complicate the healing process by hindering prayer. Be prepared. It may be that prayer by others will be the first step, starting alone and later with the person present. If Mary cannot pray to God about her feelings, then I can pray for her, as well as gently following the Spirit's leading in how to work through these issues. Later she can be encouraged to pray herself, perhaps writing her prayers if that is helpful. The real work of lasting renewal can only come through God, and we want to lead them to this place at the right pace.

Many scholars are researching the effects of shame and writing books. However, healing is an intensely personal experience for those recovering from its grip, and they cannot do it alone. Can we minister to each other? Can we reach out to the Taiwanese around us? May He give us the heart and capacity to extend His grace, love and renewal to those hurting with issues of internalized shame.

Quotes from: Bradshaw, John. *Healing the Shame that Binds You*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1988.

## **What If You Have Shamed Someone? Counsel For the Other Half.**

Do you see yourself in this article as someone who has been the offender? If totally honest, we probably can all think of times when we have hurt someone by our words and actions. Perhaps we see the serious consequences of using shame to discipline our children or to get people to respond the way we want them to. What do we do...how do we make it better?

- Pray and seek God's guidance and forgiveness. Bring your confessions to an appropriate third party, such as a pastor or mature Christian.
- Apologize if you can do so without causing further harm. Be specific--what you did, why you did it, why it was wrong. How this is done should be based on what's in *their* best interest. Be prepared to listen and acknowledge their pain. Be honest about your mistakes and the reasons that drove you as this can facilitate healing and free them from self-blame. Don't expect forgiveness or reconciliation, or any other response. You can hope and pray for this, but it is for them to decide.
- Restitution. Can anything be done to make amends? Should you pay for counseling? Replace something you took away?
- Are you still prone to shaming behaviors? Anger and bitterness may be signals that something is wrong. Most “shamers” carry their own heavy burden of internalized shame. Get help now. Find a Christian counselor, a capable pastor, or mature friend who can assist you in getting to the root of these problems.

## Counseling and Other Resources – Bibliography

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--a classic book for survivors listing issues and suggestions for recovery. It can be quite heavy for a survivor, so encourage her to read only what she can handle. The book has received criticism about its stance on repressed memories, but is otherwise a helpful book.

治療的勇氣 作者: 愛倫貝絲 (Ellen Bass) 與 蘿拉戴維絲 (Laura Davis) 出版: 生命潛能

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超然獨立的愛 - 擺脫不健康的共依存 Melody Beattie 著

吳幸宜 譯 出版社: 遠流出版公司 (大眾心理學 164)

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---not a Christian book, but an excellent work on the origin, results, and recovery from internalized shame

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Also good: *Boundaries with Kids*  
*Boundaries in Marriage*  
*Boundaries in Dating*  
*Changes That Heal*

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---a book for counselors by top therapist in this field

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--- a heavier book for counselors and leaders; a classic read

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