

# Overcoming the Paralysis of Toxic Shame

By Benjamin Golden

As an anger management specialist, I've witnessed the powerful impact that shame can have in fueling anger arousal as an adult. Some direct their anger outward, while others focus it inward. Each moment of anger directed in this manner can provide a powerful distraction from experiencing shame or the feelings that may accompany it. Shame, like guilt and embarrassment, involves negatively judging ourselves when we believe we've failed to live up to either our own standards or the standards of other people (H. Lewis, 1971).

Recall a time when you experienced shame, whether it was a reaction to judgment by others or your own. You most likely experienced intense discomfort, feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, and a desire to hide (M. Lewis, 1995). And you most likely felt anger toward others or with yourself.

I agree with Dr. Brené Brown, who describes healthy shame as being guilt (Brown, 2012). Guilt can be healthy in moving us toward positive thinking and behavior. It is specific in its focus. Shame, when toxic, is a paralyzing global assessment of oneself as a person. When severe, it can form the lens through which all self-evaluation is viewed. As such, some words used to express the emotion of shame include feeling insecure, worthless, stupid, foolish, silly, inadequate, or simply less than.

Everyone experiences shame at some time, but not everyone is ruled by toxic or overwhelming shame. Some researchers suggest that shame comes about from repeatedly being told, not that we did something bad, but that we *are* something bad. Consequently, it can close us off from accepting any form of positive regard from others or ourselves.

Paralyzing shame can lead us to feel undeserving of such regard. It can undermine being fully present with others and with ourselves. This makes perfect sense: It takes a lot of energy to protect us against our vulnerability to feel shame. Most important, difficulty with shame leave us prone to anger that results when natural desires for love, connection, and validation are inhibited by the impenetrable barrier of shame.



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## Developing sensitivity to shame

Developing a heightened vulnerability to experience shame most often occurs in our early years. It can form the foundation for feeling unlovable and undeserving and for a harshly self-critical inner dialog. And while single events can yield shame, it is often the result of more pervasive experiences.

Some children may experience shame in response to interactions that express disgust. This was the case with my client, Jeremy, who was plagued by his father's facial expression when he saw that six-year-old Jeremy had wet his bed. Jeremy's intense pain was further exacerbated when his father called in his brothers and sisters to observe the bed. This was just one of many ways in which he had been shamed as a child.

We may experience shame as a result of global criticism as a person, rather than feedback that is specifically focused on a behavior. For example, one four-year-old who accidentally spills his milk may be told by his compassionate parent "That's an accident. We all cause accidents—we're human and not always perfect. Let's clean it up together. And next time—just try to be more careful." By contrast, another child who causes the same accident may be told, "You're so clumsy! You do that all the time. You just don't pay attention."

One reaction labels the specific behavior. The other labels the child as whole. Fast forward in time: Suppose the first child is in a class and informed by his teacher that, "Your paragraphs are excellent. You may want to consider using your dog's name, Buddy, instead of he in that second sentence." More than likely, he would be receptive to the feedback and be able to consider the teacher's suggestion without feeling any sense of personal threat.

Contrarily, the child who was shamed earlier would once again be quick to experience it again. And his natural reaction might be to become angry rather than recognize and sit with feeling shame. Consequently, he would likely become irritated with the teacher-become withdrawn, remind himself that he hates school, or even rip up his assignment.

Shame may also be cultivated by the belittlement of our efforts, achievements, or ideas. These may be conveyed in repeated statements such as “Why are you doing it that way?” “What were you thinking?” “That won’t work” or, more directly, “No matter how much you try, you won’t be as good as your brother (or me).”

Toxic shame may also arise as an outcome of childhood physical, sexual, or emotional abuse as well neglect. A child may initially feel both puzzled and angry when a parent abuses him, whether emotionally or physically. When neglected, the lack of sufficient parental availability and presence can be interpreted by a child to mean, “I’m not worthy of love and attention.”

And yet, being completely dependent on his parents, he may become fearful of such anger and quickly experience shame for doing something to upset his parent. This can lead to shame regarding his anger and, worse yet, his minimizing or even denying his deep hurt—including sadness, betrayal, and powerlessness. He may subsequently conclude that his parent knows best—would not do anything to harm him—and that he is truly wrong.

Certainly, traumatic experiences as an adult can contribute to toxic shame. This may occur, for instance, following actions taken during military combat-actions that lead to shame and even Post-traumatic stress disorder. Or, it can occur, as it did for one of my clients, as a result abusing alcohol, and subsequently racing through a Stop sign and causing an accident that left another driver physically disabled.

### Its Impact

Eluding shame can become a lifetime pursuit. Anger may become the go-to response in reaction to the slightest arousal of shame or thoughts and feelings that might trigger it. As such, some individuals use alcohol or drugs as a form of self-medication to reduce the potential for being more fully present with their shame.

Shame may yield to a harshly self-critical dialogue that acts as a policing power, meant to serve and protect oneself from yet again experiencing it. This may entail a script — internal guidelines that support highly unrealistic expectations which may include the need for perfection and to always be right. In an effort to escape feeling shame, they're intent on proving others wrong.

As with anger, in general, a mindset associated with unhealthy perfectionism involves a perceived threat and inner pain. Tough love and unrealistically high standards may reflect a preemptive effort to avoid the castigation of others and, ultimately, being overwhelmed by shame. Unfortunately, the more frequently we engage in such dialogue, the more prone we become to both fear the devastating experience of shame and any circumstances that might arouse it.

Being argumentative and overbearing are just two ways they manage this internal conflict. Rather than recognize and accept self-doubt or shame, they may use anger to influence others to concede or back away from a discussion or conflict.

The power for change

As revealed by recent neuroscience research, the more we engage in certain thoughts and behavior, the more we become prone to having such thoughts. In essence, such thoughts become habits. The research is solid. While we may believe that our thoughts are a permanent part of our personality, we in fact have greater flexibility in the ability to cultivate new habits of thinking and, consequently, how we feel about ourselves. The term “plasticity” refers to this capacity to change the brain. Engaging in new thoughts and behavior helps to increase the number and strength of nerve connections in the brain. This increases the likelihood of having such thoughts and engaging in such behaviors.

Breaking through the bubble of shame requires the cultivation of awareness, self-reflection, and some degree of optimism that, in spite of the thoughts we experience, we can ultimately loosen their hold.

Key tasks for overcoming the paralysis of shame

Overcoming toxic shame requires you to:

1. Become attuned to the script of your inner dialogue and expand your capacity to observe, but not react to it.
2. Develop greater inner compassion with yourself—being able to choose compassion as an alternative to cultivate a dialogue of increased self-acceptance of your humanity. This means recognizing that, like all humans, you have flaws and weaknesses, make mistakes and suffer. We are not alone, even when we feel that we are.
3. Become a “witness to” and mourn your wounds. This requires the ability to identify and sit with the pain associated with your hurts-current and past.
4. Forgive yourself for feelings, thoughts, or actions of your “former selves.” It is easy to beat yourself with hindsight about the insight that you lacked at an earlier age. However, you can only act from the awareness you have at any given moment.

### Key Strategies for Overcoming Toxic Shame

1. Formal mindfulness meditation is a powerful strategy to become less reactive to thoughts or feelings we experience.
2. Practicing informal mindfulness can strengthen your sensitivity to recognize the inner-hostile voice as an expression of anger and as an effort to avoid shame. Do a daily check-in: Observe your thoughts for one to two minutes, several times a day.
3. Expand your compassionate self by cultivating a more compassionate inner dialog that can serve as an alternative to a harshly critical voice. This involves the gradual cultivation of a vocabulary that reflects forgiveness and self-acceptance, even when you are not always feeling it. Identify what words of compassion you would have wanted to hear as a child and what you need now.

This might include, for example, “I’m sorry for your pain,” “You didn’t deserve what happened to you,” “You’re only human—we all make mistakes,” or, “It’s okay to feel what you feel.”

Opening ourselves to compassion and breaking through the paralysis of shame

Being open to self-compassion involves actively recognizing and accepting the hurts aroused from your past wounds—those that may contribute to the

tendency toward shame. It often calls for making peace with an earlier version of yourself. It calls for acknowledging that it is easy to beat yourself with hindsight over the limited awareness you may have had in your past.

Developing compassion as an antidote for shame requires patience and commitment. But it is an essential challenge to address in order to decrease your vulnerability to destructive anger. Unfortunately, shame itself can undermine your practice of self-compassion. It can force you to reject compassion from others or, even, from yourself. As such, addressing this challenge may require the assistance of a mental health professional.

At a larger scale, I believe we need to help children embrace self-compassion as an antidote for shame. When not addressed, difficulties with shame can impact social interaction, self-worth and certainly academic performance. A background of toxic shame undermines the psychic energy needed for focused attention. Whether through specific programs, integrated in teacher-student interactions, or discussed by the use of literature and composition, shame and anger need to be openly explored and discussed. Doing so leads to increased emotional intelligence when dealing with this potentially debilitating emotion.

Overcoming the paralysis of toxic shame fosters self-assertion and expression. It both enhances our capacity to be more fully present with ourselves and others. It reduces our vulnerability to anger and, ultimately, it helps us to live a more fulfilling life.

#### References

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