

## LOVE IN ACTION NEWSLETTER

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### Where Does Shame Come From?

The October 2011 Love in Action Newsletter focused on “What Exactly is Shame?”. If you missed it, it is archived on my website @ <http://bit.ly/njHTGd>. Simply put, shame is a self-defeating belief that we are not worthy, not good enough, and don't measure up. Shame is a belief of being inherently flawed and therefore undeserving of any success or happiness. This belief about ourselves causes us to perform below our ability. Any success or happiness we do achieve is minimized. We become trapped in a self defeating, self perpetuating, negative behavior patterns:

....self image >>>>>behavior>>>>>performance>>>>>result>>>>>self image...

Why would we do this to ourselves? It all has to do with our own unresolved issues. Our inner personal struggles are continually being reflected through our emotional pathways. Until we get to a place of expression of feelings, our unresolved issues are reflected through our behavior or attitudes. These are the two lowest developmental stages of expression. So especially under stress, we regress to a lower developmental level of functioning. All of this happens on an unconscious level.

Where does this self defeating pattern of behavior come from? I believe it can begin as early as in the womb. A child in the womb absorbs any and all of the mother's emotions. If the mother was shame based or there were any negative feelings about the pregnancy or fear of having a child, the baby would develop an imprint of these negative messages. After we are born, then we begin to learn shame. We are actually taught to have shame. As we explore this, it is not meant to be critical or judgmental toward your family or your past. The purpose is to understand where shame comes from. As we begin to understand our shame, we begin to heal. We then have the power to change it. Basic Post Stress Model Principle - “It is through the expression, processing and understanding of the primary emotion that you can calm the stress and diminish the behavior.” Remember, this is not meant to evaluate you or your family. It is meant to help you understand where you came from so you can change where you're going.

Shame is taught or learned in many ways. The following is not necessarily an exhaustive list. I'm sure there are many more ways that shame develops into self-defeating patterns in our lives. I encourage you to write down all of these examples. Even if you do not recognize the example as happening in your life, it may occur to you later on as you explore examples that are familiar to you. Shame-based people block out the past because it is so painful. Allow yourself time to explore your past. Universal criticism - It means that nothing I do is good enough. If I get three A's and one B, then only the B is focused on. When I clean the house, the dust I missed in one corner is focused on. Neglect - You many have known that you are loved, but there was still a sense that something was missing or that something is wrong with you. This can come from lack of physical presence. On an unconscious level it comes from lack of emotional presence even when the physical presence is there. No rules - Children usually celebrate when they have no rules. The unconscious message is that they are not important enough to have rules. When there are no rules, parents do not pay attention to their children.

Rules that could not be met - this occurs when rules are unreasonably high or too rigid to be met. The unconscious message is that something is wrong with you. Lack of touch - not to being held is very abusive. When you see your friends being hugged and you aren't, the only way to understand it is that there must be something wrong with you. Physical abuse - this is touch or sexualized behavior that is hurtful and given without compassion. The message again is that there must be something wrong with you. Otherwise, it wouldn't have happened. Being made responsible for other people's behavior - this is being responsible for something you have no control over. For example a parent's drinking problems, siblings destroying things, or conflicts in the family. Blame - Regardless of what is happening, it is your fault. You become a scapegoat. Being expected to know but never taught or given opportunity to learn - The message here is that your mistakes make you a mistake. Because you don't intuitively know how to do something, there must be something wrong with you. Sibling comparison - comparisons are made on a wide range from being smart, being athletic, being pretty, to being responsible, and many more. Religion - You were told or you defined yourself as evil or a sinner and need penance to be good. This causes you to be shame-based versus grace-based. Religion and shame will probably be discussed all by itself since it is such a large topic.

You have now identified how shame develops your life. The next question usually is, why does it keep happening? You start over in a relationship or career and the results are devastating again. You continue to experience failure in any number of situations in your life. No rational person wants failure. No rational person would deliberately cause failure. Unfortunately, this is the message shame-based people receive from others. This message obviously produces more shame. As you try to change this in your life, a new expectation for success is established. Your performance fails because of your self definition. Performance failure results in negative behaviors. These are self-defeating in nature. Identify your own self-defeating behaviors. It may consist of bingeing on food, drink, alcohol, or drugs. Multiple relationships or turning to sex to feel better is other self defeating behaviors. Buying things and spending money in order to feel good along with gambling, pornography, and stealing is all acting out, self-defeating behaviors. Many people withdraw emotionally. They shut down and turn their feelings off. Quitting all together and abandoning positive action may also occur. Others pick fights and cause conflicts with those around them. These folks always seem to be in a crisis or another drama situation. Becoming cynical and hostile is another example of a shame based, self-defeating behavior. Some people hide in religion. Sometimes they blame God for everything and wait for him to fix it. Others believe that they're such sinners that they don't ever deserve to be happy. There is usually anger and rage associated with these behaviors. The self-defeating behaviors create additional shame causing situations. You then create a new expectation for success and can't get out of the cycle. Here's the shame cycle:

.....Expectations >>> performance >>> failure >>> self defeating behavior >>> anger/rage >>> another shame causing situation.....

Your expectations are usually set too high. The rationale is I didn't try hard enough or the expectation itself was not good enough. Sometimes the expectations go the other way and people just quit trying. The anger and rage shame-based people experience usually sits there simmering below the surface. Many times they do not know why they are angry. Shame-based people were not allowed to express either their anger or their experience with anger was that it

was always over the top and very destructive. If you find yourself still struggling with anger, then review the August and September Love in Action Newsletters on Forgiveness at <http://bit.ly/nNyPn6>.

Before you can develop solutions for this, you need to identify your shame cycle. First of all, continue to explore where your shame comes from. This is an ongoing process in your life. Next write down your thoughts and behaviors that occur during your shame cycle. Identify a past negative outcome or situation. Then walk yourself through how it all happened. Think about your self talk or beliefs that occurred. Write down specifics of what you did and each outcome along the way. Work to understand yourself better. Understanding yourself is the first step to healing. Understanding is curative. Hang in there, solutions will follow in the next Love in Action Newsletter.

In Christ,

**Ken Thom, LPC**