

LOVE IN ACTION NEWSLETTER

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Releasing the Bondage of Shame I

The October 2011 and November 2011 Love in Action Newsletters focused on “What Exactly is Shame?” and “Where Does Shame Come From? 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. Shame is learned in many ways. A person’s self-defeating shame cycle is a function of their unresolved issues. These articles are archived on my website @ <http://bit.ly/njHTGd>. If you followed some of the suggestions in those newsletters you are now ready to begin changing your shame cycle and experience a greater level of healing. This will only happen when you understand that self esteem is a process of a series of things coming together.

The first step in shifting your paradigm begins when you are able to see the world as benevolent and yourself as worthy. A shame-based person does not see their world is being benevolent because of their experiences that have taught them shame in their life. This may seem to be an overwhelming task considering the condition of our world today. If you don’t see the world as benevolent, then everyone is your enemy. This makes it very hard to get anything good out of this world. This is keeps you in a state of hypervigilance and fear. Max Lucado (Imagine Your Life Without Fear) says “Fear creates a form of spiritual amnesia. It dulls our miracle memory. It makes us forget what Jesus has done and how good God is.” Fear causes you to miss the beauty and goodness that exists in the world. I realize that we all experience bad things in our lives. Romans 8:28 (NIV) provides us comfort. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” The program of Alcoholics Anonymous consistently talks about having an attitude of gratitude.

Secondly, shame-based people need to start taking risks. When taking risks, you may lose something of value. What shame-based people fear losing the most is the little bit of self-esteem they already have. This part of the paradigm shift consists of separating yourself (who you are) from your experience. For example, a failing grade does not mean you are a failure. An offer not being accepted is not a rejection of you as a person. It is simply a rejection of your offer. Shame-based people get their self-worth from performance. Separating your self worth from your performance can be a difficult task. Allow your faith to help you do that. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV) affirms “And we all, . . . are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, . . . “. Growth in life is a function of taking risks. Healing takes place through the processing and understanding of our feelings that are associated with the risks we take. This is a basic stress model principle. Remember you don’t have to do this alone; Jesus will share your burden “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:30 (NIV).

The third step in this paradigm shift is distinguishing between risks that have potential positive outcomes and those risks that are a setup for failure. Initially you need to begin by not repeating previous failures. Identify patterns of failure. Get some help in identifying different ways to do things. Ask for wisdom from God and gain more understanding of yourself. “The one who gets wisdom loves life; the one who cherishes understanding will soon prosper.” - Proverbs 19:8 (NIV). Use your support system for encouragement and new ideas. The final step is where many shame-based people stumble. Most shame-based people I have talked to know what they need to do different. The problem is that they do not follow through with a decision that has a potential positive outcome. There are two components of not following through. A shame-based person’s internal definition is not congruent with success. That incongruence keeps a person from following through. There is too much unconscious resistance to taking that first positive step. The second component is a spiritual battle. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 7:15 (NIV) - “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do but what I hate I do.” As Christians we also know that “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”. - John 10:10 (NIV). Pray about all your decisions and ask others to pray for you. “I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.” - Philippians 4:13 (NIV). Identify a task that you believe you can realistically achieve. This means a task or area in your life that you believe you deserve to do better. Don’t take on the biggest bully in the block. Evaluate the risks you will have to take and decide if you’re willing to take them. Distinguish what can be successful. Ask yourself if you’re willing to make a decision. If you are willing to make a decision, then are you willing to act on it?

The biggest obstacle in success is fear. Your emotional management of all situations is critical. Like I said before, most people know what they need to do different. In order to grow out of your shame-based cycles you need to work through fear, panic, guilt, loneliness, and feeling paralyzed. Identify and write down all the feelings you have associated with a certain task or decision. Now assess your value of that feeling. The value of that feeling is your belief about that feeling. Determine if your value or belief is rational or irrational. You may want to substitute the words healthy and unhealthy for rational and irrational respectively. It is important to act on your healthy values or rational beliefs. Initially that will not feel comfortable. Continuing to do what is comfortable will maintain the chaos and dys-regulation already present in your life. Keep doing healthy behaviors and get support for doing healthy behaviors until they become more comfortable. Here are a few irrational beliefs. It’s not okay to be angry. Everything is my fault. I don’t deserve good things. No matter how hard I work it’s not enough. Don’t trust anyone. Hard is better, easy is less acceptable. It’s nobler to suffer than enjoy. Work isn’t work unless it’s brutal and you’re exhausted when you’re finished. You may need help from others in deciding what is healthy and unhealthy. You may also need help in deciding a healthy value to replace an unhealthy value or belief.

It is now time to decide what to stop doing and what to start doing. Make a list of stop behaviors and a list of start behaviors. Stop behaviors are those that continue to re-enforce your negative self definition. Some of these may be hard, that’s why it’s important to have support in doing this. Start behaviors are those that will enhance your self esteem as well as help you follow through with whatever you’ve decided to do. It’s hard and nearly impossible just to stop a negative behavior. You have to interrupt the negative conditioning by intervening with a positive, start behavior. Starting with small, doable behaviors is important to achieve success.

Focus on self care. Begin with some simple things like improving your personal appearance, taking a bubble bath, or getting a massage. Go to lunch with a friend, have a picnic in the park, go swimming, or just relax and listen to your favorite music or read a book. Start a fitness program or a savings account. Take time for prayer and meditation and reading the Bible. Keeping your connection with Jesus is very important. John 15:5 (NIV) - "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Affirmations - positive self talk - are a useful self motivation tool. Identify the negative shame messages that are conditioned responses to situations in your life. Replace them with uplifting, positive messages to yourself. There may also be certain people, places, and events that you need to stay away from. Part of your self care is not exposing yourself to shame producing stimuli. Obviously you may not be able to avoid everything that produces shame in your life. However, there are many situations that you can just stay away from. For those situations that you can't avoid, use your new self awareness and be mindful of your situation. When someone or some event gives you a ticket for a ride on the shame bus, you now have the choice to not take the ticket. If you unexpectedly take the ticket, you don't have to get on the bus. If for some reason you get on the bus, you can get off any time you want. Finally, don't have a start list with 30 things to do. Keep it short and simple to begin with and as you experience success, you will be able to add more start behaviors.

Most of the suggestions have been behavioral. The emotional management of your shame is just as important. Healing from shame involves dealing with the woundedness of childhood. There is grief work and giving voice to all those traumatic events that no one likes to talk about. Until these emotions are verbalized and understood, the left brain cannot make sense out of them and they remain painful and fearful. Shame is not "resolved". Trauma is not "resolved". Resolve is a cleaner that you buy on a super market shelf. Trauma and shame can be integrated and therefore become a part you that you carry differently. Until that is accomplished, trauma and shame are disowned and are a separate part of us. You can read more about the process of putting words to your emotions in the August 2011 and September 2011 Love in Action Newsletters on forgiveness @ <http://bit.ly/njHTGd>. Corinthians 13:8 (NIV) - "Love never fails." Apply this to yourself. Loving yourself never fails. Next month's Love in Action Newsletter will focus on relationships and finances.

Be brave and press on through your healing journey.

In Christ,

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