

WHAT EXACTLY IS SHAME?

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The Love in Action Newsletter focused on forgiveness the past two months. Writing about shame may not seem to be an obvious transition to many readers. It is for me. Shame can be a block to forgiveness. Many times a person feels that they are not worthy of forgiveness. They cannot forgive themselves because they do not feel they are good enough. Shame is misunderstood. It is confused with guilt. There is a tendency to minimize shame. Shame is not talked about. It is avoided. It is important to understand shame because it can interfere in many aspects of our lives. Shame can literally paralyze us from moving forward in life. Shame blocks emotional healing. Shame is a spiritual affliction that cuts us off from God. Shame, like any other challenge or stress in our lives, needs to be identified. Shame needs to be understood and processed in order to decrease its negative impact in our lives. 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." People avoid talking about shame by miss-labeling it as guilt, low self image, lack of self-confidence, or low self-esteem. No doubt, all of these are a part of shame. They are all components of the shame dynamic. It is important to know "what exactly is shame?"

I usually start out by asking a person to define guilt and then define shame. Just for fun, don't read any further until you have completed this writing assignment. Write down your definition of guilt. Now, write down your definition of shame. Do this as a learning exercise. The answers I get are varied. They usually have a similar theme. Guilt is usually defined correctly. However, many of the characteristics of shame are included in definitions of guilt. Shame is rarely defined correctly. I don't have empirical data to support that statement. However, that is my experience over the last 25 years of working with families. The definition of shame usually includes a blending of the two definitions. Sometimes when defining these terms people get confused. Many honestly say they just don't know the difference. Without out knowing what shame is, it is impossible to deal with shame. Most of the time, people are trying to resolve guilt when in reality they are experiencing shame. That would be like treating a person for depression when they have hypothyroidism and sleep apnea. All three disorders have common symptoms. All three disorders have specific treatments. All three need to be acknowledged and be part of the focus of treatment. Since shame is so ugly, no wants to admit that they experience it. Even when a person is beginning to understand their shame, I usually hear them talk about guilt. I then ask them if it's shame or guilt they're experiencing. I usually get a funny look and an acknowledgement that it's shame.

Guilt is defined by Webster as having committed a breach of conduct, the state of one who has committed an offense, feelings of culpability - especially for imagined offenses or from a sense of inadequacy, self-reproach. Shame is defined as a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety; a condition of humiliating disgrace or disrepute, deep personal humiliation and disgrace, dishonorable conduct. There is a significant difference in the definitions of shame and guilt. Shame and guilt can exist simultaneously. Many times they do, which is why they are confused and are not differentiated. Guilt is more concerned with doing something wrong. Making a mistake produces guilt. Guilty people fear

punishment. Shame comes when a person is judged because of doing something wrong. Shame carries with it a feeling of not being wanted. Shame based people do not feel worthy. Shame carries with it a judgement that a person doesn't measure up. This judgement can come from others. Most detrimentally, it comes from the person. A shame based person never gets away from their own self-condemnation. Physical characteristics of shame include: looking away from eye contact, a racing heart when in social situations, blushing, nausea, strong desire to get away, and the inability to speak or think. Shame people fear abandonment. Oh no, there's that word again. Shame began in the Garden. The account of this can be found in Genesis, Chapter 3. Sin entered in where there had once been perfect love. This produced fear. Adam and Eve hid because they were afraid. They had become separated from God. I believe their fear was fear of abandonment. I believe they hid because they did not feel worthy (shame). Spiritually, shame keeps us away from God. Shame keeps us away from others. It interferes in all of our relationships. Shame interferes in the manner in which we interact with our environment.

Shame becomes a self-perpetuating, self-defeating cycle in our lives. This cycle begins with the development of our self image. Self image is our definition of ourselves. Self image is the way we see ourselves. It is the way we define ourselves. Our performance is based on our self image. No one can outperform their own self image. You may be asking yourself, "How does that happen?" This is how it happens. Self image results in behavior. Behavior results in performance. Performance is our results. Results re-enforce, conditions if you will, our own self definition. A simple example of this comes from sports psychology. A golfer is coached to imagine himself hitting the ball a certain way. I don't believe it's that simple but that's the basic concept. In order to imagine yourself doing something, you need to actually believe it in the first place. Self image defines our self esteem. Self esteem is the value that we place upon ourselves. It is our worth and the competence we place upon ourselves. Our expectations, options, and limitations are defined by our self esteem. Competence defines self confidence. Confidence comes from two Latin words "con fide" which means "with faith". Competence comes from two Latin words "com potence" which means with power. The two complement each other. They can perpetuate a positive feedback loop to reduce the self defeating shame loop. To help you keep it simple, remember:

....self image >>>>>behavior>>>>>performance>>>>>result, then back to self image...

I have countless experiences of helping families and individuals begin their healing from shame. They are freed from the bondage of their past. They are able to move from surviving to thriving. Every aspect of their life is improved. As you heal from shame, you are able to put "Love in Action". You will even become emotionally safer for your children. I encourage you to be brutally honest with yourself. Shame is not necessarily black and white. Shame is on a continuum. It may be more apparent in some areas of your life and not as apparent in other areas. Shame develops strong holds in areas of our life. Regardless of where you are along the continuum of shame, it is important that you honor your shame so you can move beyond it. Next month's Love in Action Newsletter will focus on how the shame dynamic develops in our lives. Before you can understand this, you need to have a clear understanding of what shame is.

In Christ,

Ken Thom, LPC

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