

Holding Shame Tenderly in Your Healing



a workbook by
the cove
therapy

On Tending to Shame

In the following pages, we explore the complex and often intertwined relationship between trauma and shame, and share some ideas and exercises for holding shame tenderly in your healing journey. As always, please take what resonates, and leave the rest.

Shame can isolate us, undermine our self-worth, and hinder our healing process. Understanding our own personal experiences of shame and what this experience needs from us (often to be named and witnessed) can be a revelation in the direction of recovery, wholeness, and healing.

If shame is an experience you know well, our hope is that this resource will be a balm.



What the professionals say:

A few quotes to get us started:

“SHAME IS
THE LIE
SOMEONE
TOLD YOU
ABOUT
YOURSELF”

Iyanla Vanzant

“The antidote to shame is connection.” - Dr. Becky

“People often want to believe that shame is reserved for the folks who have survived terrible traumas, but this is not true. Shame is something we all experience. ... To feel shame is to be human.” - Brené Brown

"Unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being something wrong." - June Tagney

"Shame is one of the strongest emotions; it can influence a person's actions in significant ways." - Alice Walker

"Shame is the lie someone told you about yourself." - Iyanla Vanzant

"Shame is the most disturbing experience individuals ever have about themselves; no other emotion feels more deeply disturbing because, in the moment of shame, the self feels wounded from within." - Gershen Kaufman

“There is no better place for shame to hide than in those stories in which it does not seem to be that prevalent” - Patricia A. DeYoung



What is shame?



Shame is a complex and deeply ingrained emotion that arises from a sense of inadequacy, unworthiness, or disgrace about oneself. It often stems from an internalized belief about our perceived flaws, mistakes, or failures. In short, shame is the fear of disconnection from self or others.

Unlike guilt, which focuses on specific behaviours and actions, shame goes beyond actions and attacks the very core of our identity.

Shame can show up in various ways, from a fleeting sense of discomfort, to intense and persistent feelings of distress. Regardless of how it shows up, most of us have felt shame at some point in our lives. While some might be very aware of shame, others might not recognize the presence of shame, as it often disguises itself as other feelings or emotions.

A trauma-informed lens

Shame is a common response to trauma, but... why?

Shame often arises as a response to trauma for several reasons:

Self-blame: Individuals may blame themselves for what happened, believing they somehow caused or deserved the traumatic event. This self-blame can lead to feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Violation of values: Traumatic experiences can violate a person's core values or beliefs about themselves and the world. This dissonance between their values and the reality of the trauma can result in shame.

Stigmatization: Society sometimes stigmatizes certain types of trauma or reactions to trauma, which can lead individuals to feel ashamed of their experiences or their responses to them.

Fear of judgement: There may be a fear of judgement or rejection from others if they were to disclose their traumatic experiences, leading to feelings of shame and a desire to hide or suppress those experiences.

Loss of control: Traumatic events often involve a loss of control over one's circumstances, body, or emotions. This loss of control can evoke feelings of helplessness and shame.

Cultural factors: Cultural beliefs and norms can influence how individuals perceive and respond to trauma. For example, in some cultures, there may be strong expectations around stoicism or emotional suppression, leading individuals to feel ashamed of their natural reactions to trauma.

Internalized messages: Messages received from others or society about worthiness, strength, or vulnerability can turn inward and contribute to feelings of shame.

Shame Responses

Since shame is such a complex emotion, it can sometimes be difficult to recognize, and can show up differently for everyone.

Take a moment to look through some common thought, physical, and reaction indicators that might be a clue that you are experiencing shame.

Thoughts:

- “There’s something wrong with me”
- “I am bad”
- “I’m unlovable”
- “I’m not good enough”
- “I am going to be abandoned”

Reactions:

- Withdrawal
- Avoidance
- Anger
- Lying
- Rage
- Blaming and shaming others
- Dissociating
- Putting yourself or others down
- Depression
- Keeping secrets
- People pleasing

Physical indicators:

- Lowered head
- Collapsed posture
- Flushed face
- Difficulty keeping eye contact
- Feeling uneasy in the body
- Tight throat
- Increased heart rate
- Lowered voice
- Using hands to hide/cover face
- Dry mouth



Holding Shame Tenderly: An Exercise

Take a moment to think about what has been helpful for you in the past when you have felt distressed, uncomfortable, or intense emotions. Feel free to use the space below to reflect on that experience.

A large, light green rounded rectangle containing 20 horizontal white lines for writing.

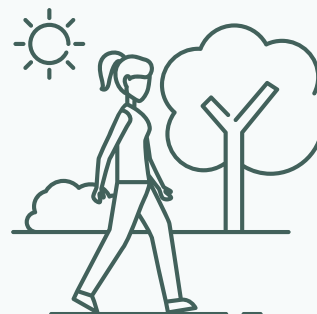


It can be VERY difficult to tend to shame if we aren't aware that we are experiencing shame. Mindfulness is one tool that we can practice to help strengthen our awareness of our own experiences and enhance our ability to cope with difficult experiences. Mindfulness can also help us observe or notice when we are in a shame experience (or shame spiral!) which will allow us more opportunities to respond to our shame with the tenderness it deserves. Mindfulness can be practiced in many ways. Here is one way to integrate mindfulness:

The Mindful Walk:

- 1 Choose a location where you feel comfortable and safe - a park, nature trail, or quiet neighbourhood street are some of our favourites.
- 2 Set an intention for your walk. This could be something as simple as focusing on your breath, noticing your surroundings, or being fully present to sounds during your walk.
- 3 Before you start walking, stand still for a few moments, take a few deep breaths, and really bring attention and awareness to your body.
- 4 Ground Yourself: Take a moment to notice how the ground feels beneath your feet.
- 5 Focus on Your Breathing: Take a slow, deep breath and focus on a long slow exhale
- 6 Start walking slowly while continuing to focus on your breathing.
- 7 Engage Your Senses: Whenever you feel your mind begin to wander, gently bring your attention back to your surroundings by engaging your five senses.

- What do you see?
- What can you hear?
- Do you smell anything?
- What can you feel?
- Do you taste anything?



Getting closer to our shame experiences

If it feels safe enough in your mind and body, consider an experience that has evoked a mild (mild!) experience of shame for you. Allow yourself to bring up that experience or memory, and then follow along with the exercise below. Please skip this exercise (or practice with a licensed mental health professional) if you have any concerns about your own well-being.

1. What body sensations accompany shame for you? Write these body sensations below:

2. How might you tend to these body sensations - what might bring a small amount of comfort to your physical body?

3. Does the shame have a voice or a particular message it's trying to share with you right now?

Write those words below (notice any space or difference between the shame voice and your own voice - your own voice might be how you might speak to a close friend having a similar uncomfortable emotional experience):

4. Take note below of all your resources for tending to your experiences of shame. Take a moment to practice one now. What do you notice?

Building Shame Resiliency

Shame Resilience Theory, developed by Brene Brown, outlines four key steps we can take to build resilience against shame:

1

Recognize Shame and Identify Triggers

Understand when you are feeling shame and what is causing these feelings. Be mindful and self-reflect to recognize what is happening when shame is triggered.

2

Practicing Critical Awareness

Actively and thoughtfully examining your beliefs and experiences to understand them better. This involves acknowledging the cultural and societal expectations that contribute to feelings of shame and questioning their validity, and understanding how this might influence feelings and behaviour.

3

Reaching Out to Others

Share your experiences of shame with people that you trust who can offer empathy and support. Building connections and talking about your shame can help reduce its impact.

4

Speaking About Shame

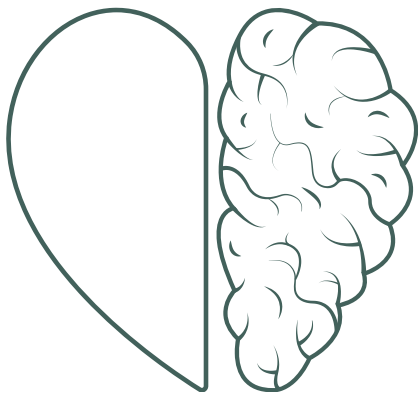
Openly discuss and share your shame experiences with others. By doing so, you take away shame's power and prevent it from thriving in secrecy.

From Shadows to Light: Team Reflections on Shame



Team members at The Cove have bravely opened up to share a little bit about their personal experience with shame, and path towards healing.

“Sometimes I feel like shame wants to swallow me whole. Most of the time, I’m not even sure why. For me, that’s the thing about shame - it comes flooding into my chest cavity but can be really hard to pinpoint what exactly triggered it. I still try to be curious about the triggers - the what activated the swamp of emotions. I try to tenderly disentangle what other emotions are swirling around with the shame. And perhaps most importantly, I now turn to my closest people and try to talk through what’s happening for me. While my own shame experience hasn’t gone anywhere, I’m more swift to respond to it (with tenderness) than ever before. That’s been the work for me, and I’m proud of that work.” - Danielle



“For as long as I can remember, I’ve struggled with a deep belief that I’m not good enough and that I’m unlovable. This feeling has been a constant shadow, making me believe I’ll always be this way. It wasn’t until I started to dig deeper that I was able to recognize that these feelings are rooted in shame. I still feel shame often, but being able to name the emotion and learning more about it has allowed me to start to see my own worth, and offer myself love and compassion. This healing journey is tough, but incredibly rewarding. By talking about my shame experiences it feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and has helped me to discover my authentic self.” - Paige



Thank You



Thank you for being here. We hope that the insights and tools provided have offered you support, understanding, and a path towards healing.

Remember, healing is a journey, and you are not alone. As you continue to navigate your path, may you find strength in vulnerability, resilience in the face of challenges, and compassion for yourself and others.

At The Cove, we are passionate about mental health. If you have questions, comments, or if you'd like to work with us, we'd love to hear from you. You can find us at hello@thecovetherapy.ca

