

## Shame Psychoeducation Handout

This exercise is for new clients experiencing high shame and self-criticism, or ongoing clients for whom shame emerges as an issue.

**Marker:** Therapist and client agree that client experiences a high degree of shame, and/or shame seems to interfere with valued life directions.

## What is shame? How might it affect you?

Shame is a normal part of being human and something almost everyone experiences. It is also one of the most painful emotions we humans experience. When you are feeling shame, you are most likely reflecting on yourself in a critical way. Shame **thoughts** tend to be focused on beliefs that there is something wrong with you, though sometimes people find that their minds go blank or they feel confused when they are experiencing intense shame. You may feel “small,” inferior, helpless, powerless, or exposed. The **body sensations** that frequently accompany shame are typically very painful or uncomfortable. Some people might have body sensations of nausea or stomach upset when they feel shame, whereas other people might feel pain or tension in the chest, shoulders, or the face. Shame **urges** usually involve wanting to hide, run away, withdraw, or disappear from view. Shame **memories** may or may not occur when you feel shame. Shame memories are mental experiences of past events in which you felt shame. When you are feeling shame, memories of other times when you felt shame often come rushing back as well. Research shows that shame memories can sometimes be like flashbacks - feeling like they flood in all at once or that you are reliving the original experience all over again.

## What is the purpose of shame?

At first glance, this may seem like a strange question. How can something so painful and disruptive have a purpose? Although shame is a deeply painful emotional experience and our reactions to it can often cause difficulties, emotion researchers have found that shame can sometimes serve a purpose. Shame can **motivate us to conform** to what might be most socially acceptable. Specifically, shame can keep us from behaving in ways that may result in us being rejected by others. In addition, shame can sometimes **alert us when we are doing something that does not align with our values**. On the other hand, sometimes shame doesn't have any useful purpose and is simply a result of internalizing past experiences of being devalued, objectified, humiliated, or abused. This is especially true when shame is chronic or frequent.

- ? Can you think of a time when it might be helpful to listen to shame? Was there a time in your own life when listening to shame was useful in some way?
  
- ? Can you think of a time when it might not be helpful to listen to shame? Can you recall a time when listening to or getting caught up in shame actually got in the way in terms of your interactions with others?

## How does shame affect our thoughts?

There are certain types of thoughts that tend to show up when we feel shame. Basically, you can be pretty confident that your thought is related to shame if the thought is a negative judgment about yourself as a person. For example, if you have the following thoughts there is a good chance you may be feeling shame:

*There's something wrong with me*

*I am stupid*

*No one would ever love me*

You may also have thoughts that have to do with thinking you are seen negatively by other people, or feeling exposed, like these:

*People look down on me*

*People can see my defects*

Or thoughts that compare you to others or to your own ideals, like these:

*Other people are more important than me*

*I don't measure up*

Or thoughts about being unworthy or undeserving, like these:

*I don't deserve kindness*

*I'm worthless*

? **Do you usually notice your thoughts when you are feeling shame? Do your thoughts race? Does your mind go blank?**

? **When you do notice your thoughts related to shame, what do they say?**

## **How does shame affect the body?**

Feelings of shame go along with a particular body “display.” If you feel ashamed, and don’t try to hide it, you will most likely have slumped shoulders, be looking down and avoiding eye contact, and your chest will be a little bit caved in. That’s a normal shame posture. Interestingly, people in certain cultural groups, like ours here in the United States, usually hide these shame postures. We do so because we don’t want others to know that we are feeling shame because in at least this culture, shame is typically thought of as a negative thing. This an example of feeling shame about feeling shame!

- ? **How do you think you appear when you are feeling ashamed? If someone were to see you, are there any signs they could detect that you are feeling shame?**

In addition to the body display of shame, there are changes that happen inside the body when we are in shame. Shame comes with an increase in stress hormones and an increased immune response and inflammation. Chronically high levels of shame can put the immune system on overdrive and result in it not working well when we need it. Shame researchers believe these changes happen because the body thinks it is under attack when you feel shame, and it is preparing to heal from wounding.

## **How does shame affect our relationships?**

As mentioned previously, shame makes us want to withdraw and hide. This can sometimes protect us from humiliation by people who likely to be abusive or neglectful. At the same time, you can also see how this tendency to withdraw and hide, especially when those feelings of shame are chronic and pervasive, may be detrimental to our ability to connect with people. When we are busy hiding what we feel is shameful about us, we can end up feeling disconnected, isolated, or lonely. But experiencing shame in and of itself doesn’t have to lead to disconnection and loneliness. In fact, because feelings of shame often present opportunities to be vulnerable with trusted others, which is one of the keys to building intimacy , **learning new ways of relating to shame can actually that make fulfilling relationships more likely.**

- ? **Are there times when you retreat from others when you feeling shame? If so, when does that tend to happen?**
  
- ? **Can you think of a relationship in which your reactions to your shame may be interfering with developing a deeper relationship with someone you care about?**

## **What helps when we are stuck in shame?**

We are beginning to understand the ways in which we get trapped in shame and how to find our way toward greater self-compassion, self-expression, or acceptance. Maybe a first step that we can see from this handout is that shame is neither all good nor all bad. Taking the posture of being curious about shame when it shows up, asking in which ways it may be helpful and in which ways it may now be getting in the way of having the life we want, can allow us to let go of our struggle with shame and respond more effectively when it shows up. The problem with shame isn't so much that we experience it, but that we can get stuck in it or respond to it in rigid or unhelpful ways.

While the path forward varies from person to person, there are new forms of psychotherapy that can help you relate differently to shame when you experience it. Research is starting to help us understand how shame may be related to our ability to connect with others and identify ways in which we can begin to heal disruptions that shame may cause in relationships. Therapy can also help us to be kinder to ourselves, to learn more flexible ways of responding to shame so that it doesn't have to interfere so much with our lives, and to develop stronger relationships with others so that we can get the support that every human being needs.

- ? **Reflecting on your own experience of shame, how do you hope therapy would help?**
  
- ? **If you no longer struggled with feelings of shame, how do you imagine your life, your relationships, might be different?**
  
- ? **What might be the single most important change in your life that you think could possibly happen if shame was less of a presence in your life?**

Just take a final minute to reflect on that last question about the single most important change that you could imagine for you life, if you were no longer ruled by shame... If it were possible for that to happen, maybe with the help of a therapist, would that be worth working for?