

Toxic Shame

Toxic Shame - defective, unlovable

It is very important in recovery to start making a distinction - drawing a boundary - between being and behavior. Growing up in dysfunctional societies taught us to equate our worth - and judge the worth of others - based upon external appearances. We experienced love as conditional on behavior. Someone who behaves badly - i.e. not the way we want them to - is a bad person. Someone who behaves the way we want them to is a good person.

It is very important to stop judging our worth based upon the dysfunctional standards of societies that taught us it was shameful to be imperfect human beings.

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"When I use the term "judge," I am talking about making judgments about our own or other people's beings based on behavior. In other words, I did something bad therefore I am a bad person; I made a mistake therefore I am a mistake. That is what toxic shame is all about: feeling that something is wrong with our being, that we are somehow defective because we have human drives, human weaknesses, human imperfections.

There may be behavior in which we have engaged that we feel ashamed of but that does not make us shameful beings. We may need to make judgments about whether our behavior is healthy and appropriate but that does not mean that we have to judge our essential self, our being, because of the behavior. Our behavior has been dictated by our disease, by our childhood wounds; it does not mean that we are bad or defective as beings. It means that we are human, it means that we are wounded.

It is important to start setting a boundary between being and behavior. All humans have equal Divine value as beings - no matter what our behavior. Our behavior is learned (and/or reactive to physical or physiological conditions). Behavior, and the attitudes that dictate behavior, are adopted defenses designed to allow us to survive in the Spiritually hostile, emotionally repressive, dysfunctional environments into which we were born."

Quote from codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls

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At the core of codependency is toxic shame - the feeling that we are somehow inherently defective, that something is wrong our being.

[And I want to make note here, that anytime I talk about shame, rather I use the adjective toxic or not - I am talking about feeling toxic shame in relationship to "being," feeling personally defective. Some people in the field, notably John Bradshaw, make a distinction between toxic shame and healthy shame. I find it much simpler, and more useful, to use shame in reference to "being" and guilt in reference to behavior. I believe there is healthy and unhealthy guilt (as I talk about in Discernment in relationship to emotional honesty and responsibility 2) but any time I use the term shame I am talking about toxic shame. (The example that I have heard Bradshaw use of what he calls healthy shame, is that it is what keeps us from running down the street naked. I find that not only blatantly a judgment of behavior - but also based upon cultural standards that are not necessarily aligned with any kind of Spiritual Truth. Some of John's Jesuit

background showing I think. ;-)]

The emotional trauma we suffered in early childhood created within us the feeling of toxic shame.

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"We do not need fixing. We are not broken. Our sense of self, our self perception, was shattered and fractured and broken into pieces, not our True Self.

We think and feel like we are broken because we were programmed backwards.

We are not broken. That is what toxic shame is - thinking that we are broken, believing that we are somehow inherently defective.

Guilt is "I made a mistake, I did something wrong."

Shame is "I'm a mistake, something is wrong with me."

Again, the feelings of that little child inside who believes that he/she deserves to be punished."

Quote from Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls{/xtypo_info}

At the foundation of our relationship with our self - and therefore with other people and life - is the feeling that we will die if we reveal ourselves to other people, because then they will see our shameful self. I felt deep within me (in those rare instances of breaking through my denial and blaming to a moment of honest clarity), that if I let anyone see who I really was, they would run away screaming in horror at the grotesque, deformed, shameful being that I was.

Our lives have been dictated by an emotional defense system that is designed to keep hidden the the false belief that we are defective. We use external things - success, looks, productivity, substances - to try to cover up, overcome, make up for, the personal defectiveness that we felt caused our hearts to be broken and our souls wounded in childhood. And that personal defectiveness is a lie. That feeling of toxic shame is a lie.

It was so painful that we had to lie to ourselves about it. We were forced to be emotionally and intellectually dishonest with ourselves by the codependent defenses we adapted. We had to learn how to live in denial of the pain and shame at

the core of our relationship with ourselves. Codependency is a vicious form of Delayed Stress Syndrome, of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. (Codependence as Delayed Stress Syndrome) The emotional trauma caused us to disassociate - to not be present in our own skins in a conscious way - and to rationalize and deny our emotional experience of life. We built up a dishonest self image to try to convince ourselves that we had worth based upon some comparative external factors: looks, success, independence (the counterdependent rebel), popularity (people pleasers), righteousness (better than others, right to their wrong), or whatever. That false self image was not completely dishonest because it was formed in reaction to some basic aspects of who we Truly are - but it was a twisted, distorted, polarized perspective of our self adapted in response to toxic shame for the purpose of giving us some ego strength, some reason we could feel better than others.

That false self image, the masks we learned to wear, is something we invested a lot of energy into convincing ourselves was the truth. But deep inside, in our moments of insight and clarity, we knew we were hiding a shameful secret. Often we got that toxic shame about our being confused in our memories with some behavior in our childhood that felt shameful. It is very common for us to have a secret that involves a way in which we were abused - physically, sexually, etc. - that we go to great pains to avoid because we associate the feeling of toxic shame with that incident and think it was our fault.

We do not want other people to see in to us, because then they will learn our shameful secret. We have a fear of intimacy because of the false belief that our relationship with our self is based upon.

We have spent our lives trying to protect ourselves from a lie about who we are. We have spent incredible energy in our lives trying to keep the toxic shame hidden. The secret that is killing us and has made our lives miserable, the secret we have lived in reaction to - is a lie. We have been compulsively - because we were reacting to what felt like a threat to survival - living our lives in reaction to our need to keep secret who we feel we really are in the deepest part of our being.

"Because

as small children we did not have any perspective or discernment (prior to the age of reason, which occurs about 7 as our brains develop) we were incapable as viewing our parents as anything other than perfect Higher Powers. Our God and Goddess. Because our Higher Powers were wounded and did not know how to Love self, we were wounded and got the message that something must be wrong with us. Toxic Shame.

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"That shame is toxic and is not ours - it never was! We did nothing to be ashamed of - we were just little kids. Just as our parents were little kids when they were wounded and shamed, and their parents before them, etc., etc. This is shame about being human that has been passed down from generation to generation.

There is no blame here, there are no bad guys, only wounded souls and broken hearts and scrambled minds."

Quote from Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls{/xtypo_info}

Out of our codependent relationship with life, there are only two extremes: blame them, or blame me. Buy into the belief that they are to blame for what I am feeling - or I am to blame because I am a shameful unworthy being. The emotional pain of feeling unlovable to our parents - which is a reflection of unbearable anguish of feeling separated from The Source - can feel like a bottomless pit of agonizing suffering. At the core of our wounding is the unbearable emotional pain resulting from having internalized the message that God - our Source - does not Love us because we are personally defective and shameful.

Our addictions, compulsions, and obsessions; our continuing quest to reach the destination, to find the fix; our inability to be present in the now through worrying about the future or ruminating about the past; are all tools that we used to avoid the emotional pain. Our behavior patterns and dysfunctional relationships (of all kinds, with other people, with money, with our gender and sexuality) are symptoms. Codependence is a defense system that was adapted by our damaged egos to try to avoid falling into the abyss of shame and pain within.

We formed our core relationship with self, other people, and life based upon this feeling of toxic shame."

Chapter 2 of Attack on America - A Spiritual Healing Perspective

Because of the feeling that we were somehow shameful, were unworthy and unlovable, we adapted defenses to protect us. Those defenses caused us to keep recreating the emotional dynamics of our childhood.