

How to Work With Shame That Developed in Childhood, Part 1: The Generational Effects of Shame on Loved Ones

Dr. Buczynski: How do we prevent the shame from a client's past from affecting their future?

One of the trickiest parts of shame is that it has a long shelf-life.

And as Dr. Sue Johnson shares, when shame goes untreated, its damage can be generational.

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Dr. Johnson: From the point of view of a couple and family therapist, or if you're in interpersonal therapy, the real problem is that shame is a painful experience and it cues hiding and retreating, and that can be a real problem in relationships.

For example, I was working with a family at the children's hospital and a little boy was acting out wildly all over the place, being violent – being extreme. He has anxiety disorders – all kinds of problems.

One of the key issues is that when I get him into the therapy to talk about how angry he is at his dad – he doesn't think his dad wants him and he doesn't want to be his dad.

It's easier to work with kids because their longings are right there – I get this little boy and I say, “What would you really want from your dad? If you could really talk to your daddy, what do you want from him?” He turns to him and he reaches his arms out for him. It just took everybody's breath away in the room – it was so poignant, and the father freezes.

I say, “Could you help me, Scott (the father)? What's happening right now?”

He says, “What... what did you say?” It's as if he's losing his balance. You can see him in the room – he's freezing up.

With EFT, I slow everything down. I mirror back what just happened and I help him. I go in and support him with a soft voice and I say, “What just happened here?”

He looks at me and says, “I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I'm not good at being a dad. I never saw how to be a dad. I don't know what to do,” and he stares at the floor.

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I say again, “Could you help me? Something's getting in the way. When your son reaches for you, somehow what you hear/what you go into is that you don't know what to do and this must mean that you're a very bad dad.”

He says, “Yes.” And I say, “But you're a good dad because you're in here in the room.” I validate him: “You're in here. You've come! You're trying to and you want to help your kid. You're doing the best you can and you're right – nobody ever showed you how to be a dad. But if you look into your kid's face right now, what do you see?”

He says, “Hmm, I don't know. He looks sad. He looks like he wants to be with me.”

I say, “Yes!”

He says, “But I don’t know how to do it.” I say, “Can you just turn to him and say, *I get so worried that I’m a bad dad, I freeze up and I don’t know how to turn and hold you.*”

He just looks at me, and then he turns and says this to his kid. His kid reaches for him.

In another session, when the kid isn’t there, we talk about how this man hides from his wife and hides from his kids – he stonewalls them and creates rage and anger and despair in everyone in the family because basically he’s decided that he’s a failure even before anyone says anything. He just wants to shut down.

We talk about that and he says, “As a human being, I’m only good at computers. I work 18 hours a day and I bring money home for the family – this is what I’m good at.”

He talks about how his sense of self as being unworthy, and that’s really what shame is about.

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This man had no parenting. He was basically told as a kid “you do the things you’re told – you do chores, you do tasks, and if you are upset or you want affection, just go up to your room until it passes.”

That’s what he was told. So he doesn’t really have any feeling of competence at being able to give his family affection.

Dr. Buczynski: Shame can touch so many lives beyond our own. And this in turn can keep our clients stuck in a perpetual shame cycle.

Here’s Dr. Ron Siegel, Dr. Kelly McGonigal, Dr. Joan Borysenko and Bill O’Hanlon with some further insights on Sue’s thoughts.

Dr. Siegel: We haven’t talked much about Peter Fonagy’s work in the UK on mentalization. There’s a whole system of therapy primarily developed to help borderline folks be less reactive and get themselves into less hot water.

It breaks down remembering incidents – what do you imagine the other person was thinking or feeling in that moment? Often, when we have shame experiences, we have in our minds this imagined idea about what’s going on in the other one’s mind.

Even though it’s a real interaction, our assumption about the other one’s thoughts and feelings colors very much what our experience is. Clinically, I wind up doing this a lot. When people can zero-in on the relational shame moment, you can imagine what was happening in them at that moment.

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That often tends to release it, because then the shame starts to look like a struggling, conflicted, suffering human being.

When it's just imagined (or, in other words, when there isn't a reference of an incident), we can go into, "Well how do you imagine it is for others? What do you imagine others' sexual feelings or habits are?"

Through this, we can define some kind of pathway to common humanity and challenge the assumption that I'm the only one who is flawed in this way.

Dr. McGonigal: I took a slightly different take on this. In talking with people about their inner critic and what that voice sounds like, people often will come up with a person they've had a relationship with – "Oh, that voice in my head sounds like my father," or my mother, or my older brother, or that coach who was hard on me. It actually sounds like someone in an internalized voice of shame.

"Is that a message you actually heard growing up that your father or coach said?"

Very much in the way that Ron was describing this process of mentalizing, I've found it useful once people articulate it. "Oh, it sounds like..." – is that a message you actually heard growing up that your father or coach said?

"Yeah, that's something I heard. I was given that message. There was something wrong with me for..." – whatever the source of shame is.

Then, go into the place, "Well, what do you think that message means? What was it like for the person delivering that message? Where would that message come from?"

When you're being criticized by someone else who is relentlessly critical, you're getting the same sort of criticism as them. You're receiving it now, and you know how terrible that feels. That is their lens on life. Twenty-four hours a day, that's the experience in their head. What do you think that might be like?

So, if you are a young man who is criticized for not being masculine enough – or, maybe you're interested in make-up, or you're interested in arts rather than sports – and you're getting shamed by an older brother or father for not being the right kind of man. How painful that is.

Now imagine, in a head that twenty-four hours a day, the conversation is, am I enough of a man? Am I enough of a man? – Where might that come from?

I've found this is useful in a non-clinical setting with people just exploring the voices in their head that sound like inner criticism or inner shame. Start to see a narrative threat that really is about other people's suffering, as opposed to letting it feel like the voice of truth when that relationship was with someone you admired or wanted to seek the approval of.

Dr. Borysenko: First of all, I want to disclose that I'm chairman of the advisory of something called 'the Hoffman Quadrinity Process.' It helps people go back in their life, process what happened with their parents, and get to a place where they're no longer running their lives by either wanting to be like their parents – so that they would be loved and accepted, or living their life in reaction and anger against what their parents were – but that, instead, they were getting in touch with their own, true authentic self.

First, you have to do what they call 'the prosecution of the mother and the father.' There's some homework before the process. You look at a list of about 100 different beliefs and behaviors, and you check off something if it's true for you. And if so, was it true of either one of your parents?

Then, you reflect on what these beliefs have cost you as a human being – how they've impacted your abilities and relationships, and how you carry the past with you.

It's somatic. As part of the process, you get the anger out by bashing a pillow with a whiffle bat. Then, you move toward a process which is compassion for the parent and, without going through the whole thing, you begin to develop empathy and recognize where your parents were coming from.

This leads you to a remarkable insight – everyone is guilty, but no one is to blame. In other words, we're all doing the best we can, depending on what our own conditioning was.

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It's a complete reorientation of understanding where your parents or caretakers were coming from, and not internalizing that – and therefore, not holding on to the shame and anguish, and hopefully not passing it on then to your own friends, family, and relationships.

This came out of a personal experience of mine.

I grew up in kind of a tough family. They were pretty critical. I'm not much of a crier.

Now, this will carbon date me – I used to watch The Waltons when it was on television. It is a great family show, and I would cry every time at the end.

What happened at the end of it? They just showed their house and there was a light on, and then someone would say, Goodnight, John. Goodnight, Mama. Goodnight, Daddy. Goodnight...

They would just say goodnight to one another, the whole family – all six or eight kids or something like that, and then the lights would go off. And I would cry every time I saw that.

And I thought, “Why do I always cry at that?”

I realized it was the opposite of what I was growing up with, with the kind of critical unkindness that happened in my family. This was kindness. There was just such kindness and connection.

So, I use that as inspiration to say, “Okay, tell me what television show or movie really touched you and moved you. Tell me what scene, specifically, really touched you or moved you. Then tell me what that's about.”

It was a way in, towards exactly what Joan was talking about, to identify what the shameful wound was, what the shame was, and then identify the opposite.

Those were kind of non-verbal ways.

Dr. Buczynski: We heard some interesting takes on how shame is tied to our history of relationships.

In the next video, we'll look at ways to help clients move past their painful childhood shame.

I'll see you then.