

How to Work With the Inner Voice of Shame

Dr. Buczynski: How can we help clients escape the “burden of worthlessness”?

Some clients hold onto this deep sense of shame – a feeling that they’re just plain bad.

Dr. Richard Schwartz says that there’s often one part of themselves that’s keeping them in this negative space.

And it’s protecting them from something even worse.

“Shame gets a bad name in psychotherapy.”

Dr. Schwartz: Shame gets a bad name in psychotherapy.

For me, it’s a natural, human emotion. We’re born with the knowledge that our lives depend on being accepted by our tribe. We’re mammals, and we’re not going to survive without the help of a tribe or a family or community.

There’s a terror, then, that comes with being shamed – a survival terror, like if I am seen as a liability or I’ve done something bad, the young parts of us fear for our survival.

To counter us from doing anything that might bring on that shame, we have what is commonly known as an inner critic – who again, gets a bad name in our field. Generally, that inner critic is just desperately trying to keep us from getting shamed by the outside world.

For people who have a lot of experience with shame, and with shame as a child in particular, that critic can often take on the voice of the shaming parent. It’s desperate to get you to behave the way that a parent wanted you to – all so that you don’t get more shame from that parent.

So, shame for me is that. It’s that critical voice that says, “You’re bad and if you do this other thing, you’re going to be even worse.”

Then, there’s one of these exiled parts – a young, vulnerable part – that believes you’re bad, you’re worthless. That message came from one of those parents and goes right to the heart of these young exiled parts, becoming what I call the burden of worthlessness.

In that way, shame is a two-part phenomenon. There is a critic who says you’re shit, and there’s this young part that believes it. Usually, there’s then yet another part whose job it is to get away from the shame, and sometimes that will resort to extreme behaviors that can then actually bring on more shame.

“In that way, shame is a two-part phenomenon.”

When they feel shame, a lot of clients will go get drunk, for example, or will act out sexually, or will do something to get away from that initial feeling. – Or they will get enraged with somebody, because if I feel rage, I’m powerful, and I’m not feeling so worthless and bad.

The part that does the rescue from the shame then brings on more shame from the outside world, which fuels the critic. You get this viscous cycle going inside. That’s how I see shame.

Particularly, that critic is very maligned, but it's just trying its best to keep you safe – either by shaming you into behaving better, looking better, performing at a higher level; or by shaming you so you don't take any risks, so that you feel worthless to the point where you don't go outside the house, or you don't say anything that might be risky with another person.

I recently did a consultation with a trauma survivor client, and we started out with the critic. That's where I often start, because if you don't work with that part first, it's going to sabotage everything – usually because these critics can't afford to let the client feel better. It's very scary to them to have a client start to feel good about themselves.

So, I would have her focus on the critic and have her find it in her body. Usually they're in the head.

And I asked, "How do you feel toward it?"

And again, she was very intimidated by it, scared, and kind of believed it also.

"These critics are very prominent in people's systems, and they're used to having a lot of power."

So we had to get the parts that were afraid of it and bought into what it said, to just step out – which is again, how we do it. I would have her ask those parts if they would give us some space so she could handle it. I'll call her Mary – so Mary could handle those critics with my help.

And that took a while, because there is so much. These critics are very prominent in people's systems, and they're used to having a lot of power, and people are used to believing what they're saying.

So, what we did – and I got her – "How do you feel now toward this critic?"

She's curious about why it's calling her names all the time.

In asking that question and then the follow up question – which is, "what's it afraid would happen if it didn't do that inside?" – we learned about this very young part that was a little girl, who, when she was being sexually abused, was trying to resist and was getting really angry.

This critic came in to keep her from showing any of that – because if she did, she would get more abuse.

As people witness that, they then have compassion for the critic and can extend that to it. It becomes a kind of hero, in a way. At least, when she was that young, it needed to do that to save her life. Basically, in this case, her life literally depended on that.

"When she was that young, it needed to do that to save her life."

So, we can let that critic know all that.

Then, as we get permission to go to that little girl, there's another part that comes in that's really afraid to let us do that. And as we ask questions about the fear, we learn that if we were to go to that girl, that would trigger this self-harm that would come in and make her do things that she hadn't done in a long time to her body.

And so, we had to go to there before we could go to the girl and get to know it and work with it and get its permission.

Then, finally, we go to that girl and have her show the scenes of abuse, and then get her out of there. Then the critic sees it doesn't have to save her life anymore.

Another thing about these parts, especially these protective parts, is if you were to ask your critic — because we’ve all got one — how old it thought you are, often the answer comes back in single digits.

These parts think we’re still five years old, and they still think we need their services in the way we did back then.

Dr. Buczynski: That’s an interesting part of our critic’s design – how it often sees us as perpetual children.

These judgmental parts can fuel so much of our clients’ shame. For another take on how to approach this critical part, here’s a thought from Dr. Joan Borysenko.

“When the inner critic comes up, say, ‘Alright. Get thee behind me, Zelda.’”

Dr. Borysenko: One very simple way is through humor – naming the inner critic.

When the inner critic comes up, say, “Alright. Get thee behind me, Zelda,” or whatever your name is. I think I’ve mentioned this once before. The musician Karen Drucker has a great song called taming your inner critic. She brings in levity and sophistication about the inner critic and what it does.

Beyond that, I’ve used a meditation that I heard from Louise Hay back in the day. It must have stemmed from the mid ‘80s when she was working with AIDS patients. That was a time when so much of the world was shaming young men with AIDS, saying “God is punishing you for your sins because you’ve done this thing that’s wrong.”

I think Louise’s success came a lot from working with AIDS patients and loving them instead of shaming them. Being with her was a safe place. She used to have these events in California that she called Hay Rides. They were attended by gay men, and she would give this meditation. “It’s time to turn the mirror around and say, ‘How can I be more compassionate and patient with myself?’”

It is a visualization exercise where you start by seeing yourself as a baby, and holding yourself in your arms – and really trying to put yourself into that baby self, with all the love that you would give to this little being. Then, tuck the baby into your heart.

Then, see yourself as a 5-year-old, and go through the same kind of loving compassionate process before also tucking the little 5-year-old in your heart. Then, when you were 10, and then 15, and then when you were a young adult or whatever age you are now.

I find that this gives people an amazing chance to have things come up about themselves at different ages and feel compassionate toward themselves. It helps with the inner critic, because I find that the inner child work is a very important part of dealing with shame.

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Dr. Buczynski: We’ve seen how challenging it can be to work against the inner critic. In the next module, we’ll look at one direct approach that can break the power of shame.

I’ll see you then.