

How to Unravel the Shame in Relationships, Part 1:

The Crucial Role of an Attachment Figure in Treating Shame

Dr. Buczynski: Dr. Sue Johnson claims that one of the hardest parts of shame is the sharing of it.

You see, sharing brings exposure which then invites judgment, which then brings more shame.

It's a loop that becomes very difficult to get out of.

But as Sue tells us, when a trusted partner steps in and does this one thing, it can disrupt the painful cycle.

Dr. Johnson: First, we need to validate the shame. We help people talk about it, and we help people name it.

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We say, “You feel like you’re failing.” We move people into their shame and we validate them – we support them, but the main thing we do is help them get support from their attachment figure.

Here’s an image I use with my therapists: A good EFT therapist with relentless empathy and lots of validation, has a small 20-watt light bulb to shine down into somebody’s pit of shame. Their partner (or attachment figure) has a stadium floodlight. One of the best things you can do is to turn the stadium floodlight on.

I’ll say to myself, “If I can turn the partner’s stadium floodlight of acceptance onto this shame five times, it just dissipates.” This reminds us that you just don’t do this once!

What I often see in couples in particular is they do something once and then they say, “Oh, I’ve done it.”

Dr. Buczynski: Right, or they might say, “It didn’t work.”

Dr. Johnson: Right. So, in EFT training we say that if somebody’s not used to hearing this validating message, they’ve got to hear it at least five/six times.

Dr. Buczynski: If they’re frozen, they have to thaw out.

Dr. Johnson: Right, you have to give people time – we train therapists to say: Can you take in the message that this part of you that you feel so ashamed about is what the other person wants you to share? They want to comfort you. They love and care for you. Can you take this in?

We ask that question, and then we have to ask it again and again. Finally, they begin to own the feeling and their whole body changes.

You see this in couples’ therapy all the time.

You can see it in one of our training tapes called *Re-engaging Withdrawers*, where John says, “I’m not going to turn and tell her that I’m scared of talking to her about these things because she’ll think I’m a wimp, and I am a wimp. I’m pathetic. I can’t do this emotional stuff – I’m not going to turn and tell her.”

I try to validate that he tries, and he just resists me. He just says, “Yes, but... Yes, but...”

While I'm working with him, I'm also working with her, and I turn and ask her to respond. She's beautiful as she turns to him and says, "You're amazing right now. You're showing so much courage. I love that you're risking to reach for me. I love that you're showing me who you are and you can talk about your fear. It makes me want to hold you. I love that you're doing this."

I have to help him – he struggles, a bit, to take it in.

People just can't take in what feels strange to them, even if it's something good. You have to let them struggle a bit, and I help him: "Can you hear her? Can you hear her?" He says, finally, after about three tries as his whole face relaxes, "Yes, that helps."

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The point is you have to be in a situation where you actually risk showing them this part of you that you feel shameful about.

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We all have shame – we talk about it in trauma survivors and in vets. We talk about it in incest survivors.

We know that people blame themselves for the bad things that have happened to them or for not being super heroes every minute.

We all have these parts of ourselves that we're scared to show.

One of the amazing things about good couple therapy is that when you create a safe environment where people can show the most

important person in their lives this scared or shameful part of themselves and receive validation and caring, this is a huge corrective emotional experience.

I talk in my book, *Hold Me Tight*, about a Vietnam vet who killed all kinds of people in Vietnam, and he's tortured himself for years about it and says, "I'm a monster. I'm not a human being. If you really saw me, you would leave."

He doesn't see that in the session, as he talks about this, which he doesn't usually do at all, his wife is weeping. The therapist can hold him and soothe him and get his wife to respond. Never mind his heart – it breaks the therapist's heart, too.

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She says, "John, will you please come home from the war? You've beaten yourself up every day of your life for what happened in Nam. Will you please come home? You're the man I want. You're the man I chose. You're a good man. You were a 22-year-old in Vietnam. You've paid for all that. You're my man. You're a good man. You're the man I want. You're the man I choose."

Again, he can't process that – he needs a few minutes to take it in.

We always assume that people can take in love, caring and support, but if they're not used to doing that, they can't actually take it in. They need help.

But, in this case, he does start to take it in – and that changes everything.

Shame is such an interesting emotion. We contain it more than other emotions in EFT because we don't want people to go off and hide – we want them to be out interacting with their partner.

“We validate the shame – this toxic negative feeling – and then we create corrective emotional experiences as an antidote.”

But we also have to listen to their shame and validate it by saying: Yes, of course, this is hard for you. You never learned how to do it. Of course, you shut down. Of course, you did this – it saved your life, but now you're so scared that if she sees you, you won't be the one she wants.

We validate the shame – this toxic negative feeling – and then we create corrective emotional experiences as an antidote.

Dr. Buczynski: As Sue shared, some clients are unable to accept even the simplest gestures of love and caring.

It can be almost as difficult to deal with as the shame.

For some further thoughts on these ideas, here's Bill O'Hanlon

Mr. O'Hanlon: I think of a particular case I had – a male/female couple. The guy would do things that were kind of hurtful and cold. He would just go cold. Then he would do or say really hurtful things.

And she was just so mad at him because to her, he was unthinking and cruel and cold. She loved him, and he loved her, but they had a lot of conflicts.

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At a certain point, they came in for a session. She was really mad at him because she'd heard from his nephew that he had filed for divorce a couple of weeks before and hadn't told her.

Then when they started to get along a little better, he went to the lawyer and withdrew it.

He had started the divorce proceedings. So she was so mad that he'd done that unilaterally without discussing it with her. And the fact that he'd told his nephew – that humiliated her. So she was really mad at him.

When I was talking with him about this, he said something that really struck me:

He said, “We were having such troubles, I was afraid she was going to file for divorce, and I will never be left. I was left once before, and I'll never be left again.”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said when he was nine years old, his father left his mother. And he was really close to his father, and he didn't see his father again for 10 years. His father just left.

And he remembers the day his father left. He was out on the front porch, and he wanted to go with his father because he was really close to his father, not so much with his mother.

And his mother had to hold him back while he was screaming and yelling, “Dad, don't leave. Don't leave.”

His dad didn't even look back. For whatever reason, he was either angry or just couldn't bear to look at his son when he left. And his son just remembers crying and screaming and yelling on the porch.

And he said, "That was the worst experience of my life, and I'll never be left again."

As he talked about this, and I said, "What was that like?" he just started to cry. This guy was not a very emotional guy. He was mostly angry. That was his emotion.

And to see him just weep, he was a very tough guy, and his wife just melted. I mean, she was just reached over, touched his arm, and she had never heard this story. He didn't share this kind of person stuff, typically.

When they came back the next week, she said, "Ever since I heard that story and saw him cry, everything has changed. When he gets kind of cold and mean, I just see this scared, crying nine-year old. And I just melt with empathy for him. And I don't react like I usually react, which is to get angry at him, and then he reacts to that, and we're off to the races." She said, "That made all the difference for me."

So she was angry. And when he was able to be vulnerable in his shame, she developed empathy for him, and that softened the whole thing.

Dr. Buczynski: In the next video, we'll look at what happens when shame is met by an even more difficult emotion.

I'll see you then.