



# *The Hidden Life of Shame*

*Shame helps us to regulate the boundaries  
between ourselves and other people.  
It influences how we make contact with people  
and with our environment.*

Shame is a belief, expressed as a feeling that we are fundamentally unacceptable or unworthy, don't measure up, or are deficient in some way. In contrast, guilt is a feeling we get from doing something wrong.

**We are not born with shame** although its belief structure may begin in infancy with the primary relationships we form, often through non-verbal exchanges. Shame can arise from feeling judged, rejected, neglected, or abused.

As a child, we can perceive messages that our needs are unacceptable, which may grow into a permanent link between these feelings and a lack of support. Then every time a need arises, we experience shame and interpret the negative feelings as being about ourselves, instead of about our environment or others.

Perceiving unspoken disapproval can become permanently integrated, so we see the world as condemning, which then influences the way we interpret and communicate with others.

**Shame has a range of expressions** from healthy to unhealthy or toxic shame.

**Healthy shame** includes the temporary feelings we may experience when we make a small faux pas or create a social mishap. It is a signal of the difference between our wants and the boundaries we experience in our environment. Its significant characteristics are that it is:

- Short-lived.
- Associated with appropriate disapproval.
- Followed by forgiveness.

**Toxic shame** is a painful, internalised experience of being seen as flawed or defective. It comes from a sense of inferiority that can result from unexpectedly being seen by yourself and others.

In this case, the experience no longer serves to show that a want or a need will not be received. It becomes the belief that it will never be met.

Toxic shame can manifest as a creative way that we learn to protect ourselves, for example, a desire to hide, avoiding the fear and pain of shame. The shame-response itself is also a creative way that we learn to adjust to an unsupportive environment.



The defensive strategies we use to hide and escape from the distress of shame can include:

- **Withdrawal** (reduces exposure and allows us to escape from shame).
- **Rage** (hostile or explosive outbursts act to insulate ourselves by keeping others away while creating a protective barrier).
- **Contempt** (distances us from others by elevating ourselves so others appear less than us).
- **Attempts to control, including criticism and/or perfectionism** (attempts to erase any shortcomings and compensate for feelings of inadequacy).
- **Addictive or obsessive behaviours, violence and other abuse.**

Other defensive reactions can include difficulty speaking, blushing, sweating, averting eyes, head hanging, disorientation, shrinking body, frozen or facial masking, or taking an apologetic attitude.

Often the beginnings of shame are laid during infancy—our pre-verbal stage, where communication is mainly conducted through body language. It is important to be aware of our bodies and their responses for the following reasons:

- To build self-support.
- Develop accepting and non-judgemental relationships.
- To create a sense of safety.
- Experience new ways of making contact with oneself and others.
- To develop an understanding of the complexities of shame and gain insights into your own shame responses and defensive behaviours.

**Growth and change are available.**

**“Our deepest most profound stirrings of self-appreciation, self-love, and self-knowledge surface in the presence of people who we experience as totally accepting.”** Joseph Zinker.