

SHAME - INFOSHEET

Shame is a powerful, deeply unsettling and for most of us an awful feeling. That is its nature. The message of shame that many of us live with is that we are fundamentally wrong or flawed, do not deserve to have good things or be loved, etc.... However, this is not meant to be the functional role of shame in our psyche or society.

Kathy Kain, a senior Somatic Experiencing practitioner and teacher, described shame as having a specific social purpose. In a healthy shame experience, a person is shamed when they have crossed a moral line. The purpose is to teach them about how to be a good citizen. Shame is intended to be short-lived, action (not person) specific, and the underlying message should be: *We love you so much that we do not want you to be expelled from the group, which will happen if you keep doing those things; so we are telling you how bad those things are so that you understand and desist and can stay part of us.* This is not usually how many of us experience shame or being shamed. (Kathy Kain, Lecture, 2018).

Shame is also a very natural response within our physiology to having let ourselves, or others, down: to not having been able to escape/rescue or ward off/protect from threat. It is a similar message: *I love myself and/or that person so much that it brings a feeling of shame, of wrongness, that I did not defend myself or them adequately.* Again, we often get stuck in this shame and lose sight of the fact that yes, it matters to us that we defend ourselves and others, but in that moment we were not able to for understandable reasons.

Since shame is a message of inadequacy or wrongdoing or harm, a plea to change behaviours, a call to make amends, it can be very helpful when experiencing shame to take the behaviour out of the core self. Rather than, "I am bad for doing that" think about, "I did a really bad thing, that I am ashamed about, do not want to do again and want to make better in any way I can." Or, "I wanted to defend myself or others and it upsets me that I couldn't, but now I can learn how."

When we can see shame for the deeper longing or love it expresses, we can transform it into a moment of forgiveness or understanding, of grief for what was lost and not able to be achieved, of yearning for what still wants to happen. We can use it to learn to protect, express, reconnect, understand, make things right with ourselves and others. We can bring curiosity and compassion to our experience of shame and discover what it is telling us that may benefit our and others' healing and growth.



NOTE: There are many ways that shame can manifest and become stuck. We may find we are carrying the shame of others, or rage at others can become shame or self-hatred in ourselves, etc.... It can be complex. The thoughts outlined above are to cut through and offer a simple understanding of what shame offers us, as a starting place for any exploration of our perhaps more tangled experience of shame.