



Understanding Shame

Notice It, Understand It, Respond Differently

Adapted from concepts in the ACT with Compassion worksheet, "Learning About Your Experiences of Shame."

Shame can be difficult to recognize. Sometimes it feels like wanting to hide or disappear. Other times it shows up as anger, defensiveness, anxiety, shutting down, or harsh thoughts about ourselves.

When we don't recognize shame, **it can influence what we do without us even realizing it.**

The goal isn't to never feel shame. The goal is to **notice it, understand what it is telling us, and choose what happens next.**

1. What Happened?

Think about a recent situation when you felt embarrassed, judged, rejected, exposed, disappointed in yourself, or simply **not good enough**.

Briefly describe what happened:

What did the situation seem to mean to you?

Examples: *They think I'm a failure. I embarrassed myself. I messed everything up. I'm not good enough.*

People will judge me if they find out.

2. How Did Shame Show Up?

Shame doesn't look the same for everyone. Check anything you noticed.

In my body:

- ☐ Tension or emotional pain
- ☐ Feeling small or exposed
- ☐ Racing heart or anxiety
- ☐ Numbness or shutting down
- ☐ Wanting to look away or avoid eye contact
- ☐ Something else: _____



In my thoughts:

- ☐ I'm not good enough.
- ☐ There's something wrong with me.
- ☐ I'm a failure.
- ☐ People will judge or reject me.
- ☐ I wish I could undo what happened.
- ☐ I don't want anyone to know.
- ☐ Something else: _____

In what I wanted to do:

- ☐ Hide or disappear
- ☐ Avoid people
- ☐ Keep something secret
- ☐ Get angry or defensive
- ☐ Escape the feeling
- ☐ Apologize or make things right
- ☐ Give up
- ☐ Please others so they won't reject me
- ☐ Something else: _____

3. Shame or Guilt? There Is an Important Difference

Shame and guilt can overlap, but they aren't exactly the same.

Guilt focuses on what I DID:

"I did something I don't feel good about."

Guilt can sometimes be useful when it helps us take responsibility, repair harm, learn, or make a different choice.

Shame focuses on who I AM:

"What I did proves that I'm a bad, weak, worthless, or broken person."

Shame can turn one mistake, weakness, relapse, rejection, or painful experience into a judgment about our entire identity.

Ask yourself:

Is there something here that I genuinely need to take responsibility for?

If yes, is there anything I can do to repair it, learn from it, or handle it differently next time?

Am I judging my entire self because of one behavior, mistake, weakness, or experience?



4. What Does Shame Want You to Do?

Shame often pushes us toward **hiding, avoiding, attacking ourselves, attacking others, escaping, or giving up.**

What is shame pushing you toward right now?

Now consider:

If I followed shame's instructions, where would that probably lead me?

What could I do instead that would be healthier or more helpful?

Examples: *talk honestly with someone, make amends, challenge an unfair judgment about myself, tolerate the feeling without acting on it, ask for support, learn from what happened, practice self-compassion, or take one constructive next step.*

5. Finish With This

Complete whichever statements are useful to you:

Something I can take responsibility for is...

Something I need to stop punishing myself for is...

Something this experience can teach me is...

One healthy next step I can take is...

Remember:

You can take responsibility for something you've done without turning it into a judgment about everything you are.