HOW NOT TO USE SHAME

Like all emotions, shame serves a function; we feel it when we do something that violates our values. Shame is a particularly excruciating emotion, and it lets us know we've done something we never, ever want to do again.

But once the event that causes us to feel any particular emotion has passed, and we've changed our behavior to cope with the situation, it's important to let that feeling go. Shame is no different.

If we feel angry or afraid from a threat, and we've stopped or escaped that threat, learned from it, and prepared ourselves to avoid or counter such a threat in the future, then we don't need to keep feeling angry or afraid about that event anymore. Our emotions have done their job.

We *can* feel those things, of course, any time we like. We can direct our thoughts to that event, imagine that we're in that situation again *before its resolution*, and we'll easily be able to feel angry or afraid through our memory.

If the event was serious enough, or if it was never resolved well, we'll probably continue to have feelings about it occasionally. Even though the event is long past, our imaginations allow us to *feel like* we're still there; and those feelings become bigger, take up more of our conscious awareness, and color our world, the more we practice going back there.

For decades, part of the focus of some psychotherapy has been to encourage people to practice going back to the past, to find the most painful events of the past, and relive them. The theory was that this somehow helped to resolve those issues and heal from them.

But this isn't how feelings work. If we feel angry about something, and we practice getting angry about it, we'll get very good at getting angry, and we'll become angrier in general. And, as a bonus, we'll get all of the negative effects of that anger, including relationship problems and the increased likelihood of heart disease.

For the "type A" personality, it's the active hostility and *expression* of anger that's the link to heart disease, not the suppression of anger, or the other factors such as competitiveness and time urgency (see Martin Seligman, Authentic Happiness, page 69).

To actively, purposefully swim around in negative feelings is more than an indulgence or a bad habit; it can actually be dangerous. With shame, this has been shown to lead to a greater likelihood of repeating the shameful behavior itself.

In a study by Daniel Randles and Jessica Tracy of the University of British Columbia, they found that recovering alcoholics who showed signs of being ashamed of their past behavior were more likely to relapse over the next 3-11 months; and those relapses were more severe, and their health

declined significantly compared with those who did not express shame about their past.

Shame serves a function, and it’s a common scold that you should be ashamed of yourself for your past transgressions; but here’s a great example of how once an emotion has served its purpose, we should strive to let it go. There are no benefits to overtime work from our emotions. In fact they just end up loitering and causing trouble, since they’ve already fulfilled their function.

If we’ve done something shameful, we should feel ashamed; but there’s no benefit to walking around afterward feeling ashamed all the time. We should face the shame, feel it, acknowledge our behavior that caused it, express remorse and make amends to those we may have hurt, and learn from our experience so that we never, ever do that again.

Once we take care of the mess we’ve made, then, like any other emotion, the best thing to do is to get on with life; get on with living a better life, now that we’ve stopped doing what we felt ashamed of.

Of course, to do this, we have to change the behavior, or else we’ll keep feeling ashamed anew – as we should, because our shame will be serving its function, which is to say to us, "Hey, stop doing that! It’s hurting you, and hurting other people, and you’re acting against your values!"

Trying to let go of shame without changing our behavior is like trying to let go of physical pain while continuing to hold our hand on a hot stove. If we keep burning our hand, we’ll keep feeling pain; and that pain and the damage it reflects will intensify. If we keep behaving shamefully, we’ll keep feeling ashamed, and the damage our shame reflects will intensify.

But holding onto shame after we’ve learned from and corrected our mistakes is like holding a match to our formerly stove-burned hand to remind ourselves how much it hurt. The pain we inflict is no longer relevant.

And continuing to feel ashamed once we’ve learned from our mistakes and changed our behavior makes it more likely that we’ll fall back into that behavior, giving ourselves something, once again, to be ashamed of.

Life is not static. Our feelings, behavior, and thoughts, are continually in motion. Our lives are about creating order out of disorder; directing and taking action toward goals; connecting with and deepening our connections with others; engaging and triumphing over the challenges of life.

When you have an experience, feel it, deal with it as best as you can Then learn from it, grow from it, seek to understand what happened and what you did, so you get better at dealing with similar situations in the future.

But once you learn from an experience, and change your behavior accordingly, your feelings have

done their job; don't keep dwelling on them. Let them go so they can be ready to work well for you the next time they're needed.

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