

Finding an Antidote to the Poison of Shame

Every time Grace, a gifted drama teacher, taught a class, she returned home with an awful sinking feeling. She didn't understand why. "I had such fun and did a great job," she thought to herself. Yet, rather than expand from the delight and exuberance of her time in the classroom, she contracted.

Grace's contraction comes from the experience of shame, a poison that keeps us from experiencing our own joy and disconnects us from the aliveness within and around us. Whereas guilt is associated with a particular memory or event and having done something wrong, the feeling of shame is about being wrong at our core. It is a debilitating feeling we have about ourselves that comes from a core belief that we are basically and unalterably flawed.

Sources of Shame

The poison that is the root of shame is absorbed in early childhood. As a result of not being seen and loved for who we are, we develop the belief that we are unlovable and that something is inherently wrong with us. Perhaps we were told outright that we were bad, stupid or undeserving, or perhaps we were physically abused, from which we concluded we had no value. The thing we may have done "wrong" might have been simply expressing our joyful authenticity. Like Grace, we learned that it is not safe to be who we truly are.

Purpose of Shame

Oddly enough, shame gives us the illusion of safety. It provides us with a feeling of control over other people's feelings and actions. If we are not getting what we want in life—in our personal relationships, in our work, even in our experience of self—a sense of

power comes from "knowing" that it is because we are inadequate. If our perceived "defectiveness" is causing the results we see, we believe there is always something we can do about it. We can do things "right."

Clinging to the belief that our inadequacy is the cause of other people's behavior towards us prevents us from accepting our inherent helplessness over others' feelings and actions. When we begin to understand that all people at all times are simply exercising their free will and it has nothing to do with us, healing can begin.

The Antidote

The poison of shame can be eradicated by taking certain steps towards healing:

- The first step is to identify your shame, to become aware of how it feels in your body.
- Once you recognize the feeling, notice shame every time it arises and experience it fully; name it and feel it.
- Be willing to express your authentic feelings—including your joy and sense of true power. Reverse the shutting down effect shame causes by giving yourself permission to fully "show up."
- Accept that other people's feelings have nothing to do with you. With compassion, choose to no longer take their behavior personally.
- Practice forgiveness—for those whose behavior led to you feeling shamed, and for yourself.

Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like help releasing the false belief that you are defective so that you can affirm the unique and marvelous individual that you are. ✱

10 Ways to Start (and Maintain) a Good New Year

The best way to have a good year is by living life fully on a daily basis, and by letting the good days accumulate, one by one. And it doesn't have to be New Year's Day to make the resolution to have a good year. Start anytime. Today, for instance.

- 1. Take time and slow down.** Be mindful of the present moment.
- 2. Care for your body.** Eat well, exercise, treat yourself to loving, nurturing self-care.
- 3. Spend quality time with family and friends.** Communicate, keep in touch. Say "I love you." Tell people you appreciate them.
- 4. Take time to renew yourself.** Take a walk, read a poem or a good book, listen to music. Bring beauty into your life. Retreat from your daily routine.
- 5. Clean up what needs to be cleaned up.** Make amends, fix what's broken, clear away clutter, forgive what needs to be forgiven and let go.
- 6. Commit to a project you really want to do.** Learn something new, or go for what you want. Set achievable goals and work towards them every day.
- 7. Give yourself to a cause.** Volunteer at a nonprofit, a community group, a place of worship, or lend a hand to an individual or family who could use your help.
- 8. Practice your spirituality.** In whatever form you express it, practice daily.
- 9. Laugh every day.**
- 10. Take time to dream.** What will make this a great year? ✱

A Letter From

Risa Davis-Ganel, LCMFT



We're off and running in a brand new year. And that may be part of the problem—running, that is. That's why "Take time and slow down" is number one on the list of Top 10 Ways to Start (and Maintain) a Good New Year.

And what would the turn of the year be without New Year's Resolutions? Two out of every five Americans make them, and you can be fairly certain by the time spring has blossomed, two out of five have broken them. How can we better support our intentions?

Many people like to start a new year by keeping a journal. It's a good place to write your resolutions and also to track your progress as you move through the year. A journal is a great tool for self-exploration and working through issues, such as feelings of shame, which is the subject of our front-page article.

A sensitive subject is addressed in this issue: male bashing. While it is true that men are still predominantly in positions of power throughout the world, we can all, men and women alike, contribute to a healthy gender balance for future generations by putting an end to this currently popular phenomenon.

Enjoy this issue of the newsletter. If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

Best wishes for a wonderful year. May each of your days be filled with peace and love and joy. *

How Well Do You Communicate?

Nearly every contact we make involves communications skills. Speaking and listening, our attitude, speech patterns, the words we use, the tone of our voice, our body language, and sometimes even the silences all play a part in how successful our communications are. To find out how well you communicate, answer each statement true or false.



True False

- 1. I use "I/my" statements and take responsibility for what I say.
- 2. I keep my message and my language simple. I speak specifically and personally, and don't try to impress people with verbal gymnastics.
- 3. I hesitate before I speak or respond, giving myself a pause to be sure I want to speak and am clear on what I want to say.
- 4. My body language corresponds with my verbal language and my tone. I check my tone (including in written communication) to be sure it corresponds with my message.
- 5. I listen to the other person and don't respond until they have completed their thought. I don't try to formulate my answer while they're still speaking.
- 6. I don't have to fill every pause. I understand silence can sometimes play an important part in communication.
- 7. I don't hold back when I need to say something. If I know what I need to say might cause tension, I ask for time to talk instead of choosing a moment when the other person is distracted or there isn't enough time to explore the subject.
- 8. I don't gloss things over or say something isn't important when it is, or that it doesn't matter when it does. I mean what I say and say what I mean.
- 9. I understand communication is two-way. I don't just have my say and not listen to the other person's response.
- 10. When I don't understand what someone has said, I ask for clarification.
- 11. I don't assume anyone else knows what I'm thinking or feeling unless I tell them.
- 12. When I say something out of line or something for which I am sorry, I try to correct my misstatement and make amends or apologies where necessary.

Scoring: Give yourself one point for every True response.

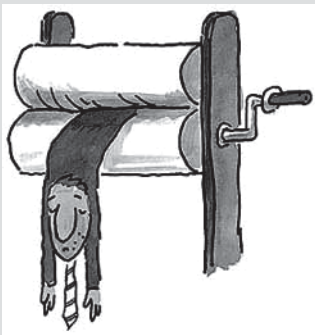
- 10-12 Congratulations. You've got good communications skills and use them well.
- 7-9 Though you may understand good communication skills, some practice might be a good idea.
- 0-6 Some training and education in communications skills might be of benefit. Call if you'd like support in this.

Male Bashing: Let's End the War

Much attention for the past five decades has been given to the status of women in the world, in an attempt to redress the historic inequality experienced by women over the centuries, including the stereotype of women being submissive or incompetent. You'd think that, five decades later, we'd have come to some parity.

Not at all. Now we have male bashing.

The put downs and negative stereotypes of males are all over the place—in the media, in jokes, on clothing, in everyday conversations. Men (and boys)



are routinely portrayed as insensitive, unintelligent, blundering fools. Fathers are characterized as hopelessly clueless, husbands as lazy dolts, brothers as disgusting pigs—and the comic portrayals are growing increasingly negative. Anti-boy sentiments are plastered on girls clothing

(such as T-shirts that read "So Many Boys, So Little Minds" and "Boys Lie"). At worst, men are depicted as controlling and violent.

The main message: males are fundamentally wrong, inferior and unworthy of respect.

Of course, no one is condoning violence, abuse, neglect or irresponsibility. But this collective message distorts the culture's view of men, affects friendships and romantic relationships and hurts our boys.

Wendy McElroy, author of *Liberty for Women: Freedom and Feminism in the 21st Century*, says: "It cannot be overstated: Most men are good, hard-working human beings who love their families and never raise a hand in violence. Because their decency is not sensational, they are ignored by media and politicians, who focus instead on men who rape or otherwise give their gender a bad name. A better reaction is to hold the decent men closer to us and value them more."

The Effect on Our Boys

Seeing the contemptuous images of men in the media and hearing the belittling, disempowering comments about males, boys may come to believe that not much is expected of them, and that things like childcare and deep emotions are over their heads. Even worse, when we bash males *for being males*, we strike at the core of

a boy's identity, a surefire recipe for problems with self-image and self-esteem.

This seems to be showing up today in numerous ways. Our boys are falling behind in school, earning fewer college degrees and committing suicide at a significantly higher rate than girls.

It's time to stop.

Here are some things you can do:

Take a Personal Stand

Stereotypical male-bashing portrayals undermine the core belief of the feminist movement, which is equality. Few men want a return to the "good old days." We all, men and women, need fresh vision in seeing ourselves and each other so that we can put a stop to the gender war.

Here are some ways we can take a personal stand, as urged by McElroy and others:

Refuse to participate in male bashing. Don't hurl insults at "all men." If a man has wronged you, address him personally, not by gender. Don't laugh at jokes that skewer males.

Object to advertising that portrays men in an offensive way. J. C. Penney ran a TV ad showing a father at the breakfast table, with his infant crying and throwing things. The father asked the child when his mother would be home. When several people objected to this image of an apparently incompetent and uncaring father, Penney's got the message; their subsequent holiday ad featured a father, mother and son all happily shopping together.



Train yourself to become more aware of male bashing. When you hear claims with specific gender references, switch the gender and think about the message.

No matter what your gender, be aware of praising the males in your life. None of us tries harder as a result of criticism or failure. Rather, we build on success. Let the men and boys in your life know their success in your eyes. Be a safe space in which they can explore what it means to be male.

It's not only for the sake of our men and boys that we need to stop male bashing. We all benefit by learning to live in partnership rather than power struggle, recognizing how we can complement and support each other, with mutual honoring of our respective vulnerabilities and strengths. ✱

Journaling to Grow and Thrive

A journal is a way of recording and reflecting on your inner life. It is a way of expressing yourself freely, trying out outrageous ideas, tapping into inner wisdom, gaining clarity, recording your dreams, venting emotions, tracking your personal growth, and delighting in unexpected "Ahas"!

There's no right or wrong way to keep a journal. The tools are a notebook and a pen. You can use a computer, and there is even software available to support you in your journaling. However, writing by hand allows you to be more in touch with the right-brained, intuitive part of your nature.

The only rule about journaling is "Allow!" Here are some helpful guidelines:

- **Write every day if you can.**

The morning is a good time to write: your mind is fresh; your dreams are still alive. Practice writing your dreams down whenever you can.



- **Write for at least 10 minutes.** Don't stop. Simply allow the words to come with no concern for spelling, punctuation or grammar.

- **If you get stuck, keep your hand moving.** Write, "I don't know what to write," or "I'm stuck." Always write from wherever you are and it will move you to the next place.

- **Leave your censor outside the door.** This is free writing. Simply

allow the words to come and let yourself be surprised. Have fun!

There are many ways to find a starting place. Here are some suggestions:

- **Begin with a few chosen words.** "Today I...," "I feel...," "I want...," or "I remember..."

- **Be imaginative.** Write about what color you like and why, your kitchen drawer, or your mother's hair.

- **Describe what you see.** Look out of your window. Describe the

weather or your room. Let it lead you somewhere.

Using a journal to communicate with people or things can provide insight and lead to the transformation of a challenging situation. Here are two ways to do this:

Letters. Write a letter in your journal to anyone: family members (even people who are no longer living), pets, bosses, or your future longed-for beloved. A letter provides a way to say what you want even if you can't say it in person. Write letters to inanimate things—businesses, countries, or your home. Write a letter to Love, to Anger, or to yourself.

Dialogues. Have a written dialogue with people, situations, an aspect of yourself, or a part of your body. Next to your name or initials, write a statement or question. Write your dialogue partner's name or initials, then allow the answer. Simply trust the process and write down whatever comes to you.

Journaling teaches us to both trust and nourish our inner lives. *

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A graduate of the University of Maryland with a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, I have been in practice since 1994, providing individual, couples and family therapy. My vision is to empower individuals, couples and families to THRIVE even in the face of difficult challenges.