Understanding the Paralysis of Shame

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This week I’d like to take a closer look at a common obstacle to recovery: Shame. If you’ve been unfaithful, the appropriate question is probably not, “Are you dealing with shame,” but more aptly put, “How are you handling the shame?” If you’ve been betrayed and your spouse seems extremely uncooperative or ambivalent, your spouse may be feeling imprisoned by shame. To be perfectly honest, he or she may not even know it.

What Is Shame?

It’s easy to confuse guilt with shame. Guilt is that rock in your stomach when you know you’ve done something wrong. It’s not necessarily a bad thing; typically guilt means we are aware of our responsibility for an action we regret. Hopefully when we feel guilty, we take responsibility for our actions and then work to make amends (when possible) with the offended party. Shame, however, is a far more entrenched mindset about ourselves. Shame says “I am bad” rather than “I’ve done something bad”; it changes your identity instead of simply accepting responsibility. We feel guilt for what we have done, but when we’ve done something we feel is shameful we take that on as our identity. Shame continues to instill the idea within which says, “I am not worthy.” Shame loves to instill feelings of inadequacy, self-contempt and a deep sense of inferiority.

The problem with shame is that it is completely self-centered. Shame continues to make everything about me and prevents recovery. When I’m dealing with shame and playing the “I’m such a horrible person” card, I can’t focus on the damage I’ve done to others and experience empathy for them because my focus remains on me. It selfishly puts my betrayed spouse in the position of trying to build me back up and give me a new identity, or at the very least to curb some of their recovery to acquiesce to my needs. As long as the unfaithful spouse continues to remain paralyzed by his or her own self-absorption, their mate can’t truly heal. Shame doesn’t accept responsibility for the choices made, it is just another form of justification: “I can’t help my bad choices if I’m a bad person.”
Three Symptoms of Shame

Shame has a way of bringing out the worst in me, and I can always tell I’m in shame when I’m acting out of fear, blaming others for my actions, or when I’m disconnected from others.

Fear: Shame is fueled by fear. When I’m in shame I’m terrified to bring things out in the open. I’m afraid of being considered inadequate, that if my spouse really knew me she would never accept me. Shame tells me that if I let my guard down for even a moment everyone will finally realize what a complete and total failure I am and I’ll face my ultimate fear: rejection. When I’m allowing shame to make me fearful, I can never be fully known, and therefore I will always feel the need to hide.

Blame: Shame by nature refuses to admit the truth. No one can make me feel shame; they can only trigger my already existing shame. As I said earlier, shame is a type of justification. Of course I do bad things if I’m a bad person, I can’t help it. It’s not my fault. This is the lie shame tells us and, quite frankly, it’s the cowards way out. I’m letting myself off pretty easy if I hold myself to such low standards. The problem is that my mate can never heal if I can’t take responsibility for my actions. If I’m playing my shame card to justify my actions, my spouse has no reason to believe I won’t make the same mistake again. Shame does not allow for safety in recovery. Once shame takes over, the pain expressed by the offended party often results in outbursts of anger from the unfaithful spouse because that shame has been triggered. It renders us incapable of being safe for our mate’s healing.

Disconnection: Shame at its core is one of the main villains which rob me of my ability to feel compassion for my mate. Initially I may feel compassion for the way I hurt my spouse through my betrayal, but then something happens. It’s a small yet poignant shift as I encounter the pain of my choices. This pain I’ve caused feels like too much, like it’s lasting too long, and I pull back as though I can hide from my choices. We can’t process everything and fear creeps in, which then causes us to blame others and we find ourselves alone. Sometimes, for those still involved in the affair, the only one they’ll run to is the affair partner or addiction because that choice is easy. It requires nothing of me to sink deeper into shame. When I don’t feel worthy, I can’t connect with my mate and shame remains the
primary voice running through my mind. It’s this disconnection that allows for a deep loneliness which separates me from the ones I love and need most. I’m isolating myself and blaming others out of fear. Unfaithful spouses swing towards shame frequently and it’s the primary component which blocks true connection and empathy for the betrayed spouse.

Hiding in Shame

The unfaithful are in many ways led to the slaughter through shame. Take for example the recent story by Samuel, a blogger and survivor of infidelity, about his shame growing up:

My father and mother divorced when I was about a year old after he returned from the Vietnam War. My father would remarry a couple times till his death when I was 25, and my mother would also remarry. The first man she married was an older man, a former professional boxer and a wonderful man, in his own right. He had served time in prison and was a survivor from the streets. He had a big heart, but didn’t always know how to express it. When I was about 8, after growing up with him around more than my biological father, he left us. I think he just couldn’t adjust to life with a son that wasn’t his and a marriage with pressures, responsibilities and expectations. He eventually came back one day when I was about 10. My mom had warned me that would be coming over when I got home from school. After he left, my mom started working full time, so I would ride my bike home from school and be there alone till she arrived about three hours later. I didn’t hate him. More than anything I was confused and terrified of what to do. He had left and if I’m being honest, I think I felt like I caused most of it. I loved him and while he wasn’t my biological father, I think for his history and how he grew up, he really did his best. Nevertheless, I was confused and for one of the first palpable times in my life, I remember feeling ashamed. I saw his car pull up and watched him get out. I immediately turned off the TV and any lights and made it seem as though I wasn’t home. I ran to my closet in our tiny house, and closed the closet doors and simply hid. It only took him a few minutes to walk through our house and try to find me. Eventually I think he was puzzled a bit and just left. I didn’t cry. I didn’t yell. I barely remember feeling anything. To this day, I can see the closet and I can feel the loneliness and surreal experience. I hid from someone who loved me and wanted to reconnect with me. I hid from a moment of possible restoration out of confusion, shame and misunderstanding. I wanted to
run to him and hug him and welcome him back, but I felt paralyzed. I was in over my head emotionally and had no idea how that moment would mark me.

Looking back, when I made my horrible choices that led to infidelity, I wanted to hide in a closet of shame from everyone. Not just God, but my wife, my friends, any and all father figures and even myself. I felt alone and wanted to hide into my own cave as I felt like my life had been a mistake on so many levels.

Disempowering Shame

There is no quick fix for shame. It’s an identity issue. However, we are not without hope and shame doesn’t have to have the last word. Like so many who have come out of the shadows of shame and found freedom from fear, blame, and disconnection, we do have the ability to find new life.

Shame thrives in secrecy; community is key. It’s one of the reasons I’m such a big proponent of small groups in recovery. When we can share our stories, gain a higher altitude of what we’ve done, and still be loved and accepted, we experience safety. This safety translates over time into love, acceptance, and a strong sense of belonging, all of which are antidotes for shame. To the captive of shame, vulnerability is about as exciting as going for a root canal, but if done whole-heartedly, can lead to incredible freedom. When we can finally admit what we’ve done and be honest, and if we can accept who we are, it’s freeing. As long as I live a performance-based lifestyle it will remain all about me and how I am doing. It’s fueling the fires of self-deception and an inability to find compassion for my spouse. When we think we have the power to do everything right and when we think we have to be perfect, we will crumble every time. Prisoners of shame in many ways can be performance addicts. We actually try and be like God and think we can do it all on our own. The cold hard truth is we will make mistakes. You must accept that you (and your spouse) will screw up sometimes, and find freedom in knowing that, accepting it, and loving each other anyway.

Don’t get me wrong, if you’ve frequented the Recovery Library, you know there is no excuse for infidelity. My response to life and to my mate’s struggles is my responsibility. Bad marriages don’t make a person cheat, bad choices do. I’m not excusing addiction or infidelity and I’m certainly not suggesting the unfaithful spouse get off easy. However, if we want to find freedom, healing, and (possibly)
reconciliation, we cannot allow our spouse or ourselves to be imprisoned anymore. Wounding those we love by betrayal can be shameful, but it’s not what defines you. You need to accept what you’ve done and bring honor back to your name by now doing the right thing.

Victims of shame need brokenness and humility. To conquer shame you must learn to embrace your weakness and come to a greater understanding of unconditional love. As long as we’re only conditionally known, we’ll only be conditionally loved. Until we’re willing to be open and free, we’ll never experience the unconditional love that’s waiting for us both from a loving and forgiving God as well as possibly a loving and forgiving spouse.