

The Relationship Between Shame & Complex PTSD

Shame is central to the human experience. Shame is caused by **Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** (C-PTSD) or relational trauma. Relational trauma or, Complex PTSD, can be understood as experiences of cumulative and chronic traumatic events, of an interpersonal nature, involving primary caregivers and arising during the child's development from infancy to adolescence. Relational distress between siblings and peers at school also affects the child's developing brain and body. Complex PTSD is deeply ingrained in attachment theory, which describes the bonding process and experiences between an infant/child and their parent. Our most vital relationships may become emotionally ruptured through prolonged experiences of various forms of childhood maltreatment, emotional neglect, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape, bullying, witnessing domestic violence, narcissistic abuse, abandonment, racism, rejection, role reversal, traumatic loss and other forms of attachment betrayal.

When the vulnerable child does not get their mind-body needs met during developmental milestones, they feel emotionally abandoned, rejected, or betrayed by their parents. Relational experiences of emotional maltreatment feel traumatically overwhelming to the child. Unresolved emotional and relational experiences with our primary caretakers cause us to feel unworthy of love and insecure in our relationships with others and ourselves. The helpless child **blames** themselves to protect the bond with their parents so they can feel safe and secure. Chronic self-blame morphs into **shame after the age of two**.

Bonding-Deficits Affect Whether You Will Develop a Positive or Negative Self-image

- Complex PTSD causes the child to abandon their authentic needs and feelings.
- The parents' chronic lack of attunement to the child's inner world of emotions, and neglect of their needs ultimately develops into **internalized shame**.
- Shame is also caused by childhood experiences in the world through humiliation, social threats, abuse, and bullying.

- Shame is the feeling that you are bad, broken, or unworthy of love. It leads to a fear of being seen. As adults, shame manifests in feelings of loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression.

Adults experience shame when they ruminate about their personal defects, focus on their inadequacies, believe they are not worthy of love or do not believe that they can impact their future. Shame is a circuit breaker for *joy, pleasure, connection, and vitality*.

How Shame Creates a Negative or Positive Internal Self-image in the Child

The nature of Complex PTSD is that caregivers are unable to support the core emotional, psychological, and physical developmental needs of the child.

- Nurturing deficits are caused by a *lack of validation from the parents or lack of feeling heard, seen, and understood*. The child feels overwhelming emotional pain in response to their authentic emotions, being denied, dismissed, and shamed. The emotional overwhelm the child feels is traumatic because their developing nervous system and stress response are not developed enough to manage their pain.
- When the child does not get their feelings reflected back, they will deny their true feelings and thoughts to maintain the bond with their parents.
- The level and amount of emotional maltreatment manifests in whether we develop a negative or positive sense of self.
- Many parents cannot tolerate negative emotions from their child, especially sadness and anger. The vulnerable child splits off their feelings of sadness and anger in two ways – acting-in or acting-out.
 - They act-in by repressing emotions, denying them, withdrawing, disengaging, dissociating, regressing, or self-blaming.

- They act-out neglected emotions by hitting, lying, stealing, bullying, or developing oppositional defiant disorder. These behaviors are defenses or survival strategies to help the child manage the chronic overwhelming emotional pain of being shamed, neglected or rejected.
- Children have to blame themselves for attachment failures in order to survive. The child makes themselves bad, and their parent's good to feel safe and secure.
- Self-blame and turning the anger against themselves cultivates shame — "I am bad," "I deserve this," or "It is my fault." This process is unconscious. The child's shame-riddled identity persists into adulthood, manifesting itself unconsciously in adult relationships.
- The helpless child also projects their internalized "badness" on to the environment. (i.e., the Boogey monster under the bed).
- Now the child has shame and blame woven into their self-image and hence a negative self-image.
- Internalized negative feelings, beliefs, and attitudes about the self create the **inner critic**.
- Shame also gets internalized by a child's social interactions in the world such as at school when they feel humiliated or embarrassed, with friends when they get rejected, or when they fail at tasks.

How Shame Informs the Internal Relationship with your Adult Self

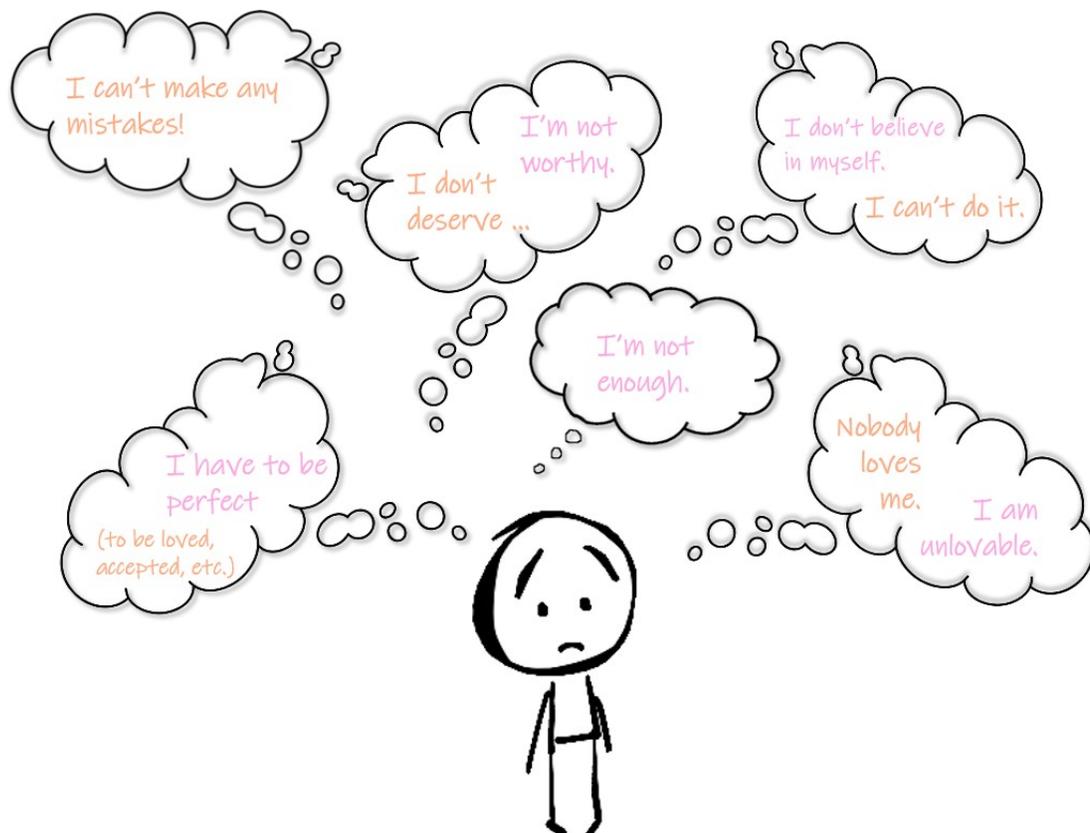
By the time you reach adulthood, you have developed an internal relationship with yourself and others, based on the way you were treated as a child.

- Shame is often at the root of your identity – who you take yourself to be; whether you hold a negative or positive internal self-image, whether you feel self-worth, self-love, or self-hatred. The internal image you have creates your relationship with yourself.
- Experiences of shame become interconnected; it is no longer a feeling but rather, it lies at the core of your identity and manifests as survival skills/defenses, behaviors, default emotions and thoughts.

- As an adult, shame causes you to self-abandon by not expressing your authentic thoughts, feelings, and needs.
 - When your differences were de-valued, you internalized that your differences or unique qualities were wrong.
 - Your sexuality, emotions, and needs can be bound in shame.
- Perfectionism, power, control, accommodation, and people-pleasing are pride-based ways to compensate for shame.
- Avoidance is a shame-based behavioral pattern.
- The internalized pain of shame causes addictions to substances and compulsive behaviors as coping mechanisms.
- Dysfunctional coping strategies fuel a shame spiral – you feel shame about having compulsions or addictions that soothe your pain, and then you turn to these things to ease the shame you feel. This cycle turbo-fuels more shame.
- When shame is severe, it is intensely experienced as heaviness in the chest.

Shame-Based Statements

- I can't relate to people.
- I am a failure.
- Nobody could love me.
- I am unlovable.
- I can't do it.
- I don't believe in myself.
- I am not worthy
- I don't deserve (positive things) ...
- I can't make mistakes.
- I have to be perfect (to be loved, accepted, etc.)
- I'm not good enough; I'm not enough.



Shame Causes You to Feel Broken, Defective and Unworthy (Negative Self-Image)

- Now, as an adult, when shame feels overwhelming, you resort to acting-in or acting-out (see *Shame Compass*).
- Situations in which you are seen or heard by others or feel vulnerable can cause overwhelming fear because it is so far outside the norm you're used to (since you did not receive this as a child), so you withdraw or freeze (see *Shame Compass*).
- Shame can cause you to feel misunderstood and can manifest as social anxiety (acting-in).
- Repeated experiences of humiliation or embarrassment as a child may lead you to become hypervigilant towards people or situations that feel threatening, which manifests as anxiety or panic attacks (acting-in).
- When shame is not resolved, it leads to feelings of **learned helplessness**.

- Helplessness is an internalized belief that there is nothing you can do to make up for your shame; this causes anxiety.
- Helplessness and anxiety cause avoidance, which causes more anxiety (acting-in).
- Anxiety is often a sign that your authentic emotions are trying to bubble up to the surface, particularly from the suppression of anger or assertion.
- You may compensate for your feelings of shame by striving for perfectionism or power. If you lose your compensation for shame, you are left feeling vulnerable, and thus will likely experience anxiety.
- Continually ruminating on your defects and being self-critical causes you to feel depressed (acting-in).
- When you engage in comparison because of your perfectionism, you may end up feeling depressed (acting-in).

The Role of Shame in Your Interpersonal Relationships

- Shame fuels fear of abandonment in relationships. You may often feel as if you are the victim of other people's behaviors, responses, and judgments. This is especially the case if an older adult ignored or belittled your pain or did not help you soothe it.
- Looking for love can be shame-filled because your attachment system was starved of positive relational experiences, and you can develop an affinity for **serial dependence**.
 - Serial dependency is an overdependence on relationships for our identity, safety, and self-worth.
- Repeated experiences of shame create self-criticism, which can cause you to avoid interpersonal relationships out of a fear of receiving criticism and disapproval from others. This is especially the case if you experienced chronic emotional maltreatment. Emotional abuse causes an automatic assumption that people will reject or criticize you – this forms a negative concept of others.

- When you engage in perfectionism as a way of compensating for shame, you may self-abandon when in love.
- Shame may cause you to cling to others, out of a feeling that you are unworthy of love and fear being abandoned.
- Shame may also cause you to go the other direction and create a desire to be small or want to disappear from others (act-in/withdraw)
- You can also become dominating, controlling, and antagonistic to feel powerful or protect yourself from feeling vulnerable in your intimate relationships. You might also blame others as a way to transfer shame from internal to external, or you may go into a self-protective rage. These are all ways in which you might act-out or fight shame.
- You might cover shame by aiming to outdo/outperform others or by being vigilant about having the edge over others (act-out/fight).
- Whenever someone becomes significant to you — whenever another person’s care, respect, or value matters to you — the possibility for shame emerges.
- Core love wounds of shame may manifest in the belief that you are not worthy of love, or you will tolerate abuse, self-abandon, or settle for less than you deserve.
 - These love wounds create **trauma bonds**. A trauma bond is a relationship created with a person who is abusive toward you, yet you remain loyal to them, despite their betrayal and exploitations of you.

Survival Skills Developed to Manage Shame & Self-Love Deficit



Shame, guilt, and self-hatred are not primary emotions.

They do not lead to emotional completion.

You Can Heal Shame by Connecting to Your Core-Self, Calibrating Emotions, and Raising Your Relational IQ

Connecting to Your Core-Self to Create a Positive Self-image

For personal growth to happen, you must accept yourself and be open to change in order to generate self-love and self-validation. With a self-affirming identity, you become empowered to own all of your

imperfections and differences. Learn to value your uniqueness and differentness – these are inherent qualities that set you apart and must be recognized and savored by you.

Personal validation creates a secure positive sense of self. Reflect on the following:

- What survival strategies of acting in or acting out do you still use? (Refer to the Shame Compass). Recognize how your life-saving survival strategies developed in childhood are still being carried forward in adulthood, when they are no longer relevant or useful.
- What are your habitual compulsions, obsessive thoughts, and/or addictions? As you gain insight into your survival strategies, and coping mechanisms, you will rely less on them and make choices from your conscious, adult mind.
- You need to build a robust **inner witness** that can observe the programmed thoughts of your inner critic and choose not to believe them. Cultivating an inner witness is the skill of being present in the moment.
- Understand that your inner critic developed as a survival strategy. You had to blame yourself so you could stay attached to your parents, so you could survive. Your inner critic can also be an internalization of your parent's mean, dismissive, or hostile voice. Do not identify with what it says. The meanness and self-doubt of your inner critic are not necessary anymore. This harsh voice is not yours. Observing your negative shaming thoughts, yet not identifying with them will increase your self-worth and heal depression.
- You need to nurture yourself with compassionate internal self-talk.
- You cannot avoid your fears. Take risks and take action. Tolerate approaching what you fear so you can build authentic confidence, which creates a positive self-image. Feeling competent eases anxiety and helplessness.
- Understand that mistakes, failures, and rejections are inevitable and do not mean that you are not worthy. Reframe them as a normal human experience that promotes growth.

- Gain insight into what gives your life meaning and purpose and commit yourself to that endeavor. Cultivating meaning and purpose creates internal happiness and is a shamebuster.

Emotional Mastery = Emotional Regulation & Self-Possession

- At the root of all mental health issues is the inability be with your emotions and self-soothe. Do you act your emotions in or out? (See *Shame Compass*)
 - Personal growth requires practicing new adult emotional responses.
- It is important to understand that all emotions are *not* created equal. Learn to distinguish between your **primary and default emotions** – this is different for everyone.
 - **Primary**: the authentic, spontaneous expression of your inner experience.
 - **Default**: emotions that take you to familiar reactive, blaming, or passive-aggressive shame-filled territory.
- The skill of **self-referencing** is how you connect to your authentic self.
 - Self-referencing is a practice of listening to your primary emotions in the present moment. Primary emotions originate from the midline of your body (the heart, chest, and stomach).
 - Tend to, befriend, and validate your core-self.
- Connection with yourself allows you to clearly express your thoughts, feelings, needs, and values. Committing to this practice stops the cycle of self-abandonment and heals shame.
- Gain control of your emotions. Containing your emotions is a two-part process.
 - First: check in; what emotions are you are feeling? If they are your default ones, pause and acknowledge them, but do not let them dictate your behavior.
 - Second: if they are your primary emotions, build your capacity to be with them, and tolerate the sensations you feel in your body. Do not deny or judge your primary emotions. Practice not acting them in or out. Accept what you are feeling, validate it, use it as vital information.

If necessary, problem-solve. Be with your emotions; you are now are influencing yourself, rather than allowing your emotions to run wild and influence you. This is self-possession!

- Integrate anger by identifying it, feeling it, and containing it. If you default to anger get curious and see what vulnerable emotions, you might be protecting.
- If you are afraid of your anger separate the fear of anger with simply experiencing it in the body. Once anger can be felt and integrated it can be used as information and expressed as strong assertion, strength, and emotional individuation. Anger is constructive; rage is destructive.

Cultivate Your Relational IQ

- Gain awareness of how your brain and heart were wired for connection to others, beginning with your early relational experiences with your family of origin (attachment style).
- Do you withdraw, run, or hide from social experiences due to social anxiety caused by shame?
- What relational patterns did you develop to stay attached to your parents?
- What attachment pattern do you have as an adult with your intimate partners today?
Anxious, Avoidant or Fearful-Avoidant?
- When emotionally triggered or in conflict with your intimate partner, do you default to fight, flee, freeze, avoid, or fix? Knowing this will help you respond from your conscious adult-self.
- Try to tolerate ambiguous or negative responses from people without becoming reactive and resorting to automatic relational reactions. Make a flexible, conscious choice when in conflict with others, from your genuine adult-self.
- Your **social imagination** is your belief that people are out to get you or are judging you. Is this belief true, or are you projecting your inner critic and shame onto others?
- When you are feeling rejected or judged, take an emotional risk and explore these feelings with the other person. You can then have a corrective emotional experience that heals shame.

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- Take responsibility and seek to foster relationships with people who treat you with kindness and respect and who have your best interest in their hearts and minds.
 - For positive intimate connections to manifest, you need to learn **differentiation** – the ability to honestly express and reveal more of who you are while being in connection with others. Differentiation can also be described as the ability to hold on to yourself when the essential people in your life pressure you to conform. When learning differentiation, you also develop an awareness and acceptance of your partner as separate and different.
 - Differentiation creates positive intimate relationships in which both people can be connected and have agency.
 - To respect yourself, you must tolerate the anxiety of setting boundaries.
 - You need to grieve the lack of love and attunement that you did not receive from your parents.
 - **Through these different actions and interventions, you build internal and external resources to influence yourself. By connecting to your core-self you can create a positive secure self-image. You can have agency! You can create the life and relationships you want because you a sense of your value in the world. This is self-worth. You now have agency, resilience and VITALITY!**