

Overcoming Shame: Making Connections Is The Key, Says Researcher

ScienceDaily (Sep. 9, 2009) — It would be difficult to find someone who has never felt shame in their life.

Shame is a common reaction when someone feels that they have fallen below social norms or their own standards. From being intoxicated in front of one's peers and superiors to failing an important test at school or being rejected at the school dance, shame can be an internal alarm that ensures that we know when we are at risk of finding ourselves outside the lines of societal acceptance and desirability.

University of Alberta researcher Jessica Van Vliet's study, published in the British Psychological Society journal, *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, indicates that, while it may seem difficult when one is stuck in shame, there is hope for moving beyond this painful emotion.

"Shame can prompt us to make changes that will help protect our relationships and also preserve the fabric of society. It's important to emphasize that shame is essential and has value," said Van Vliet. "The problem is when people get paralyzed with shame and withdraw from others. Not only can this create mental-health problems for people, but also they no longer contribute as fully to society."

Van Vliet's research shows that people who feel debilitated by shame tend to internalize and over-personalize the situation. They also seem resigned to being unable to change their feelings or their fate.

"When people experience shame, they may say to themselves 'I'm to blame, it's all my fault, all of me is bad, and there's nothing I can do to change the situation,'" said Van Vliet. "They identify so much with shame that it takes over their entire view of themselves. That leads to an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness."

Van Vliet notes that one of the key components to overcoming these feelings is to step back from the problem and view the picture in a different light. When sufferers can identify external factors that contributed to their actions or situation (for example, discrimination or peer pressure) and differentiate between being a bad person versus doing something bad, they can begin to break the grip of hopelessness that plagues them.

"When people move from a sense of uncontrollability to the belief that maybe there's something they can do about their situation, such as apologizing or making amends for their actions, it starts increasing a sense of hope for the future," she said.

Van Vliet found that one of the key steps to overcoming a profound sense of shame is making connections, be it with family and friends, a higher power, or humanity as a whole. While it is one of several aspects of moving forward, Van Vliet notes that the step can often blend or lead into others.

"Connecting to others helps to increase self-acceptance, and with self-acceptance can come a greater acceptance of other people as well," said Van Vliet. "People start to realize that it's not just them. Other people do things that are as bad or even worse sometimes so they're not the worst person on the planet. They start to say to themselves, 'This is human, I am human, others are human.'"

Adapted from materials provided by [University of Alberta](#), via [EurekaAlert!](#), a service of AAAS.
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