

# LEARNING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES OF SHAME

## COMPLEX EMOTIONS

Sometimes it can be hard to tell when we are feeling shame. We can get so stuck in shame, insecurity or self-hatred, that it's hard to even notice that we are experiencing an emotion. Or we might have little practice in identifying shame, and so we may react on autopilot. Sometimes shame only occurs in little flashes and is quickly followed by anger or is mixed with fear or self-hatred. There are a whole range of reasons why it can be hard to detect shame. However, if you can't notice it when it happens, shame just operates in the background. Then shame, not YOU, is deciding what you do.

*Look for a time when you think you might be experiencing shame and fill out this handout. You can either fill it out at the time you think you are experiencing shame, or you can fill it out afterward if you have a sense that maybe you were experiencing shame. Either is fine. This can help you see whether you are currently experiencing shame or some other emotion and also help you learn more about how you respond to shame. As you do the worksheet, check off those items that apply to you.*

### **STEP 1: DESCRIBE THE CUE THAT TRIGGERED THE EMOTION.**

Use the options below to help you:

- Did the cue occur in your thoughts? (e.g., a memory of something you feel bad about)
- Did the cue occur inside your body? (e.g., you felt an emotion that seems like it's not OK to feel)
- Did the cue occur in your behavior? (e.g., you did something you felt ashamed of)
- Did the cue occur in the environment? (e.g., someone said something mean or you)

*Describe the cue that triggered the emotion as best you can below:*

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### **STEP 1B: IF THE CUE INVOLVED ANOTHER PERSON, TRY TO UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR BRAIN MAY HAVE INTERPRETED IT.**

Remember, high self-critics tend to interpret low intensity cues of rejection or criticism very strongly or interpret ambiguous cues as threatening. Use the checklist below to help. Did your brain interpret their person/cue as:

- Being cold, harsh, critical or rejecting
- Treating you like your viewpoint is wrong or doesn't really matter (i.e., invalidation)
- Exploiting you when or where you were vulnerable or mistreating you indicating you did something wrong

*Describe any other ways your brain may have interpreted the other person's behavior:*

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### STEP 2: INVESTIGATE WHAT YOU ARE FEELING IN YOUR BODY:

Sensations typical of shame (often mixed with fear):

- I feel intense emotional pain or tension all over
- I can feel my heart beating hard or fast
- I feel exposed or naked
- I feel small

Sensations typical of overwhelming shame:

- I feel empty
- My body feels numb and detached from reality
- I feel like I am going to collapse
- I feel disoriented

Sensations typical indicators of embarrassment:

- I feel uncomfortable but it is not too intense
- I can feel myself blushing
- I want to smile

*Describe other bodily sensations here:*

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### STEP 3: OBSERVE YOUR URGES AND DESIRES:

Emotions typically come with a desire to act in a particular way or an urge to do something. Check the ones that fit for you below:

Urges typical with shame:

- I want to disappear or not be seen
- I want to hide my face
- I want to keep something secret
- I want to please the people around me or submit to their wishes
- I want to curl up into a ball

Urges often related to shame, that along with shame, or are confused with shame:

- I want to apologize or repair a harm I have caused someone (maybe guilt)
- I want to laugh and/or fidget (maybe embarrassment)
- I want to run away (maybe fear)
- I want to fight or attack (maybe anger)
- I want to be clean or rid myself of something bothersome (maybe disgust)
- I want to be left alone (maybe loneliness/hopelessness)

*Describe other urges you notice here:*

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### STEP 4: OBSERVE HOW YOU SOCIALLY SIGNALLED:

If you were in a social situation (i.e., in the presence of one or more people) when the emotion occurred, observe how you socially signaled:

- Did you find it hard to make eye contact or did you tend to look down?
- Were your gestures tight or constrained?
- Were your shoulders hunched or your posture collapsed?
- Was your face flat or expressionless?
- Did you turn away or hide your face?
- Was your speech rate slow or your voice tone flat?
- Were your movements slow?

*Describe any other social signals you might have given in the interaction, for example in what you said:*

### STEP 5: NOTICE THOUGHTS:

- I am thinking negative thoughts about myself (e.g., "I'm broken," "I'm bad.")
- My mind is blank and thoughts are fragmented or unclear
- I am thinking thoughts about being rejected or left out
- I am remembering images or past experiences of abuse, rejection, failure, or ostracism
- I m thinking over and over about something I wish I would have done differently

*Did you have any other thoughts about yourself or others? If so, write those here:*

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### STEP 6: NEXT STEPS

When we are feeling shame, this is usually not a time to act quickly. Usually we need to spend some time taking care of ourselves first before we act. Here are several options for taking care of yourself once you have noticed shame. We encourage you to experiment with which options are most helpful/soothing for you. Check the ones that you decide to try:

- Label the emotion, for example, "This is shame." Or "this is shame and fear," or, "this is shame and numbness." Practice labelling until you land on labels that resonate with your experience.
- Validate the emotion. Use this script for yourself: "It makes sense I'm feeling this because \_\_\_\_\_"
- Validate the pain you are feeling by telling yourself, "Ouch," or, "this hurts," like you would do for a child who just fell down (e.g., "that knee hurts, doesn't it?")
- Place a hand on the place in your body that hurts the most. See if that part of you can feel the warmth from your hand. Say lovingkindness phrases to yourself like, "May the part of me that hurts be safe, may the part of me that hurts be well, may the part of me that hurts be at ease."
- Take deep breaths. Breathing slightly longer on the exhale than the inhale engages the parasympathetic ("rest and digest") nervous system and may have a soothing effect.
- Remind yourself of who is in your tribe, even if it is just one person. Write out, "\_\_\_\_\_ is in my tribe." You get to decide.
- Offer yourself something physically warm like a cup of warm tea or a warm bath. Research shows that physical warmth helps to increase a sense of emotional warmth.
- Practice a mantra that reminds you that shame is human. You may want to consider phrases like, "Shame is human," "Other people feel shame too," or, "I am not alone."
- If you are feeling overwhelming shame, you may be disoriented. In that case, it may be helpful to notice the sensation of your body sitting in a chair, or feet touching the floor, or it may be helpful to use a stronger sensory experience to re-connect to the present moment. For example, you could hold an ice cube, or eat a very sour candy. Alternately, it may be helpful to engage your sympathetic nervous system by doing some vigorous exercise like running in place or jumping jacks for 60 seconds or so.

*Is there anything else that you tried? What was most soothing to you?*