**Shame**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Between the ages of 1 ½ and 2 children become aware of themselves. Around this same time, they develop emotions related to self-awareness like shame and hubris. These are called secondary emotions by psychologists, as opposed to primary emotions like sadness, happiness, fear, etc., which babies feel from birth. These feelings precede a child’s ability to reason about the feelings probably because the neural substrates for emotions develop before those important for reasoning. Some secondary emotions – those related to self awareness – include:

**Pride**[[2]](#footnote-2)– positive self-affirmation because of some specific success.

**Guilt** – negative self-critique because of some specific failure (tends to focus on repairing the negative consequences of the action/inaction).

**Hubris** (arrogance) – global positive self-regard, not rooted in any particular accomplishment.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Shame** – global negative self-regard, often triggered by some failure or social stigma but often is rapidly used as a general negative self assessment;[[4]](#footnote-4) accompanied with a desire to hide, withdraw or escape.

**Entitlement** – a self-directed expectation for getting and keeping what is believed to be deserved. Often, there is an effort to recruit others to satisfy these demands. It is an active and demanding posture.

**Self-pity** – a self-directed compassion when feeling aggrieved (i.e. real or perceived). Often, there is an effort to recruit others to agree and show compassion for them. It is a passive and resentful posture.

**Empathy** – *feeling with* another person (e.g. feeling sad because they are sad).[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Apathy** – feeling nothing toward another person (i.e. this can be related to autistic spectrum or attachment disorders; it can also be the effect of failing to develop empathy).

You may notice that these terms are defined in such a way as to form opposite pairs. Pride and guilt are alike because they are specific self-perspectives. Shame and hubris are alike because they are generalized self-perspectives. Self-pity and entitlement are alike because they are focused on personal rights or perceived needs. Empathy and apathy are alike because they are focused on another person rather than self.

This paper focuses on shame & hubris.

**Shame**

1. **Situational shame**

Shame may be felt when we fail to achieve a goal or keep some rule/standard. We fail at something and hold ourselves in contempt for it. We negatively evaluate ourselves.

Shame may be felt if we believe others have ‘judged’ or ‘put us down’. In this case, we may not have failed to keep our own goal, rule or standard but someone or some group lets us know that we have violated their goal, rule or standard. This kind of situational shame awards outsiders evaluative power.

Finally, people may feel shame simply when they realize that they are being observed, even if they have done nothing wrong.[[6]](#footnote-6) So, some shame may be:

* shame connected with guilt.
* shame connected with non-moral failure

1. **Intrinsic shame**

Certain personalities are, by virtue of their social sensitivity, more liable to feel shame. Others have a general sense that they are unacceptable owing to some loss,[[7]](#footnote-7) some unusual attribute,[[8]](#footnote-8) being associated with an ‘unacceptable’ activity, person or group or from abuse, whether sexual, physical or verbal.

* The shame connected with abnormality
* The shame connected with associations
* The shame connected with abuse

1. **Unhelpful shame coping mechanisms**

The feeling of shame may be temporarily avoided through various defenses like repression[[9]](#footnote-9), masking[[10]](#footnote-10) or other defensive strategies[[11]](#footnote-11) that shift attention or blame elsewhere.[[12]](#footnote-12) These are unhelpful reactions and only result in shame being expressed in other ways later on (e.g. depression, rage, narcissism, suicide).

**Dealing with Situational Shame**[[13]](#footnote-13)(learning to turn away from inordinate self-attention)

The process of dealing effectively with situational shame includes:

1. **Admit shame**

Admitting shame involves personally acknowledging the feeling of shame, embarrassment or exposure.

It’s important to not quickly withdraw and shift attention to other things because unexpressed shame manifests in unhelpful ways. For instance, efforts to escape shame can backfire and lead, over time to depression, rage, narcissism or suicide.

1. **Specify shame**

Instead of cringing, shrinking back and thinking/saying globally negative things about yourself, concentrate attention on the specific thing that happened leading to feeling so exposed. What led you to feel so exposed and ashamed? (i.e. something you did or failed to do OR something someone did to you or failed to do for you).

If the shame is rooted in guilt, deal with the guilt in the following manner.

* + Bring it to the cross

Agree with God that you did something wrong.

Consider what this sin says about your view of God (Romans 1 suggests that all sin begins with a failure to acknowledge or thank God). David found out, through Nathan, that his central sin was despising God & his provisions.

Remember the work of Jesus to atone for this sin; that, in Christ, your are not condemened.

* + Confess to a person

Find a mature friend and confess your fault to them.

Confess your sin to the one you sinned against. However, keep in mind that we may put the person we confess to in a position where they feel shame: 1. at what you did to them (e.g. gossip) and 2. at not wanting to forgive immediately. Make it easy for them to tell you how your sin affects them. Don’t try to escape shame by demanding they immediately ‘forgive’ you. Offer to give them time to process things apart from you and re-approach them.

The more severe the violation (e.g. adultery), the longer this process may take.

* Do what you can to repair the damage.

If you’ve done something wrong, rather than fixate on your awfulness, you could move to resolve the specific wrong done. In this way, the unhelpful broad negative characterizations we make about ourselves (i.e. shame) are reinterpreted to the specific wrong thing that we’ve done (i.e. guilt) and about which we can do something.[[14]](#footnote-14)

If the shame is rooted, not in guilt, but in a sense of public humiliation (e.g. perhaps you are experiencing some suffering), confession is also helpful.

There is a kind of ‘fish bowl’ effect of living our hardships in community; a sense that everybody’s watching us. We should pull aside our close friends and admit how awful we feel around others at times. If we find ourselves seething at the clumsy and self-centered things people say and do we can kick it around with our mature friends.

1. **Re-orienting when shamed**

* Remember and reflect on the truth that God is not ashamed of us.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Jesus died for our sins and for our shame. When we feel exposed before others we can choose to ponder the one who knows us completely and binds himself to us in love – forever and irrevocably.

But, we need to prefer this contra-conditional acceptance by God over the acceptance of others if we are to enjoy its benefits.

* + Choose to focus away from self onto something/someone else

Part of the trap of shame is its ability to lock our full attention on self but the longer and more carefully we attend to ourselves the more negative things we notice and the more we tend to evaluate the behavior of others as being somehow related to our flaws. It’s a terrible trap. It’s like grabbing onto an electrical wire, it seems impossible to stop attending to ourselves when we feel shame. The more intense the shame the harder it is to look away from ourselves.

So, if part of the problem of shame is inordinate self-focus, part of resolving shame involves choosing to re-direct attention elsewhere. Of course, without admitting & specifying the shame, the following suggestions can simply aid repression but having admitted and specified they can help overcome its debilitating effects.

* + Direct attention toward God – praise & thanks are typical responses to shaming experiences in the Psalms.
  + Direct attention toward others
  + Direct attention toward a project

Turning from self-focus to an outward focus helps us regain a larger and more balanced view of things. We are, after all, a very small part of a very large universe and this incident is barely a blip when compared with eternity.

* Laugh about it

This is useful in some circumstances more than others and more useful for some people than for others but it is a way to emotionally join the observers rather than to stay in the spotlight.

It is a useful, for instance, when we’ve committed some social *faux pas*. The Latin singer Sade was once singing on Saturday Night Live with a huge smear of lipstick on her teeth during the first number. By the time she sang the second number her teeth were clean and she playfully smiled and licked her teeth while singing – she laughed at the social mistake and thus defused the embarrassment of it.

The formula for many comedians is Tragedy + Time = Comedy. Many of us howl with laughter when our friends tell their most embarrassing stories and so do they when we tell our own. Recently a young comic modified this formula by bringing her current hardships to the stage to comic effect.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This is also a way to not take our own fleshly tendencies so seriously. I have a friend who, when praised for teaching well, says to his friends, “I finally matter.” This tongue in cheek response is a way to make light of his flesh’s tendency to live and die on the praise of others.

Others may simply refer to their irritations and perceived slights as an observer rather than one who is given over to the irritation or embarrassment. The question, “How are you doing?” may be met with the response, “Terrible, people are just not holding me in god-like regard the way they are supposed to.”

**Dealing with Intrinsic Shame** (learning to live from God’s perspective)

Those whose identity is rooted in shame will benefit from the material related to situational shame but they have to also deal with the more difficult problem of shameful negative self-assessment. It’s been my experience that those with intrinsic shame have an accompanying need/craving/demand for respect or, minimally, to not suffer critique. This belief – “I am worthless or shameful” – along with the demand – “I must be respected or not criticized” – drives much of their way of life. Their intense feelings, behaviors and thoughts are driven by these beliefs/demands.

1. **Journal in order to see the pattern**

It is difficult to change if you cannot understand why you think, feel and act the way you do. More importantly, change is difficult if you cannot see the core beliefs/demands that drive how you feel, think and act the way you do.

I like to have people journal using the following template. I ask them to notice when they have intense feelings, overwhelming thoughts or inappropriate behaviors and then ask themselves, “What happened[[17]](#footnote-17) that I felt/thought/acted this way?”

Different people will tend to notice their feelings or their thoughts or their actions first. Wherever they begin, I ask them to move to the other areas: “What was I thinking when I felt/acted this way?”; “What was I feeling when I thought/acted that way?”; What did I do when I felt/thought this way?” I ask them to ‘work their way around the circle’ so that they can see their own patterns.

Triggers

Feelings

Thoughts

Behaviors

Core Beliefs

Core Desires

Eventually, on their own or in dialog, I want them to understand what they must believe and desire that they think and feel and act this way. This is important because many blame others or circumstances rather than seeing that their own beliefs and wants are the real driving force behind their feelings/thoughts/behaviors. I may feel that I don’t confess my faults or take criticism because someone is harsh and judgmental but I’m mostly trying to avoid the awful feelings of shame I have within my own nature, whenever I fail or am seen by others as a failure.

1. **Replacing the core**

Shame filled people need to replace their core. Some suggest replacing negative beliefs with positive affirmations. Others bring critical thinking skills to bear on their thoughts & beliefs in order to see themselves more realistically (i.e. cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT). There is much to commend this latter approach, not the least of which is its efficacy. No other therapeutic method of psychological change is shown to be as effective as this.

Biblically speaking, however, there is a great deal of material devoted toward knowing and preferring the identity that God confers upon believers. There is also a strong biblical emphasis on desiring the glory and kingdom of God over our tendency to desire the glory and kingdom of ourselves. If, through meditation, memorization and choices, we increasingly know and prefer what God says over what we or others say and crave God’s glory over our own, then how we think, feel and act will also change because we are replacing the core that drives everything above the line.

* Learning & meditating on God’s perspective

A person feeling that they are shameful, who intensely desires freedom from all critique and daydreams about being honored could begin to reflect on Zeph.3:11 that when they stand before God they will not be ashamed for the sins they have committed; on Romans 8:1 that they are beyond condemnation because of the work of Christ on the cross; Heb.2:11 that he is not ashamed to call us brethren; and etc.. They could also consider Christ’s consistent orientation in the gospel of John to live for the glory of God rather than the self glory that comes from the opinions of others; Matt.11:29 that giving control of our strengths to God’s glory (i.e. meekness) and occupying our thoughts with God & his purposes (i.e. humility; cf Lk.17:1-10) are an effective way to replace self-glory with a desire for God’s glory.

* Welcoming threats to our ‘fleshly’ core and taking God-directed actions that risk shame & dishonor.

We could decide to believe that, when we are criticized, God has allowed it in order to weaken our addiction to the opinions of others or even our own negative opinions of ourselves.

We could ask God to lead us into spiritual deeds that are a direct threat to our false beliefs so that we can practice living from/for what He says rather than what I or others say.

**Replacing your core**

1. Meditate on & practice preferring God’s POV

* What He says about His relationship with you, in Christ
* What He says about His provisions for you, in Christ.
* What He says about the importance of attending to His Kingdom & glory.

1. Identify with your spirit instead of your flesh

Romans 7

Learn to speak about your flesh in third person instead of 1st person (e.g. “my flesh wants....” instead of “I want...”

Learn to speak about your spirit in 1st person.

It’s not a mental trick...it’s a practical way to identify with the Spirit instead of the flesh and to alert yourself to the fact you have more than one motivation.

1. Welcome CB/CD threats

Some part of you should smile when criticism comes your way or some public activity ‘might’ reveal your weaknesses. God wants to free you from the addiction to the opinions of others and one way He does this is allowing our fleshly beliefs to be validated and our fleshly desires to be thwarted. In this way we can more clearly seize the opportunity to adopt God’s POV.

1. Take CB/CD risks that align with God’s will.

Positive love output

A short bibliography

The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog, Bruce Perry

This is a series of case studies of kids from chaotic or abusive backgrounds that the author uses to outline his theory of neural development. It is a good start toward understanding the needs of abused children.

Released from Shame, Sandra D. Wilson

Shame Interrupted, Ed Welch

I find Welch a little tedious to read but there are a few good nuggets. I particularly appreciate the efforts of the CCEF folks to offer solutions that are gospel centered.

Shame. The Exposed Self, Michael Lewis

Probably the most recent academic book on the topic.

Shame and Guilt (Emotions & Social Behavior) June Price Tangney PhD & Ronda L. Dearing PhD

An academic treatment of the topic particularly in how it relates to interpersonal relationships. Each chapter has a final summary that’s helpful if you want to skim the book quickly.

1. Much of this material is from, *Shame The Exposed Self,* Michael Lewis, Ph.D. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In our culture and in the Bible, ‘pride’ is used to mean both the joy of accomplishment and the moral weakness of overvaluing self. Here we call the first use ‘pride’ and the second use ‘hubris’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These definitions are about a person’s real internal state, not their public presentation. Some people who act arrogantly are really using a defensive strategy called ‘masking’ to hide their shame. Some who act in self-condemning or self-deprecating ways are using a defensive strategy to take control of how they are perceived from their audience [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I fail a test, shortly afterward I think, “I’m such a loser.” I’ve had a specific failure but generalized it to my whole person. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sympathy is *feeling for* someone (e.g. sorry that someone is feeling sad). Its opposite might be antipathy – feeling against someone or schadenfreude feeling happy about another’s difficulties. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Saying, “Have you lost weight?” to someone in a group, invites everyone to evaluate their weight. Some might respond in shame, wishing to escape scrutiny and possible critique. Similarly, personal suffering can induce shame for a variety of reasons: fear of being scrutinized, blamed, labeled, etc.. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Boys who lose their mother through death at around age 10 may struggle with the shame of being different than others; if they are not allowed to grieve they may feel ashamed of their legitimate grief; etc. There’s a strong correlation with rage behavior in adult men who lost their mothers around the age of 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The biographer of Truman Capote seems to connect his adult narcissism to the shame of his voice, stature, same sex attraction & absent parents. By the way, this abnormality doesn’t have to be objectively true or as severe as we imagine. The soap manufacturer Dove recently filmed a forensic artist sketching women by their own self descriptions and then sketching them using the descriptions of another person. The distorted self-perceptions were striking as were their reactions to the two sketches when they were side by side. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Repression involves keeping shameful feelings largely unconscious; this can happen automatically through dissociation; by shifting attention toward performance (i.e. a frenetic effort to outperform our shame.); ‘numbing out’ - through drugs/alcohol; eating; sleeping; entertaining (TV, video games, etc.); hobbies; sexual stimulation, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Masking is pretending in order to manipulate the opinions of others: arrogance - pretended perfection; self-deprecation – pretended humility; flat affect – pretended disinterest in the opinions of others [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There are many defensive strategies including flooding, punishing, recruiting, denying, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. When we feel exposed we find a way to get the scrutiny off of ourselves and onto others. “Who broke my glasses?” “You shouldn’t have left them so close to the edge of the table,” the glasses breaker responds. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I’m focused here on situational shame not on an identity that’s shame based – intrinsic shame. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I can apologize for being unkind in a conversation (guilt) but how do I fix, “I’m an complete idiot!” (shame)? [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rev.3:18 the gospel covers our ‘nakedness’; Zeph.3:11a ‘...on that day you will feel no shame b/c of the wrong things you did against me’ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The comic Tig Notaro went on stage in the middle of a series of tragedies including pneumonia followed by a potentially lethal bowel infection, followed by the death of her mother, followed by breast cancer. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. this is a trigger question [↑](#footnote-ref-17)