

Shame

Shame is a painful emotion which can be caused by feeling guilty. Guilt says, "I made a mistake." Shame says, "I am a mistake," (Today, April 1). Healthy guilt can be useful to us, letting us know where we have violated our belief system. Shame is devastating to us as it feeds the feelings that we are worthless and inadequate.

Self-talk such as this may be very deep in our subconscious, but it can be at the root of our feelings and perceptions. If we have thoughts such as, "Nobody could possibly like me," or, "I am the sickest person in our group," or, "My past is so awful I can never be forgiven," or even, "I cannot take a fourth and fifth step because no one could accept me," we can attribute these thoughts to shame. These thoughts of shame are not based on facts; they are in fact myths.

When we were just small children, we may have been told, "You are a BAD girl. Shame on you!" as opposed to a simple, "No, we don't tear the pages of books," or, "You bad, bad boy! You wet your pants again," instead of, "Let's go get some dry clothes." Of course we began to believe that we were indeed, bad, shameful people. It's what we were told. Shame could also be a result of verbal put-downs from a parent such as, "You're fat," or, "You'll never amount to anything." Shame could also be the result of indifference on the part of a parent, such as not attending our high school graduation, or not giving praise when praise was due. It may take a lot of forgiving for us to get past these traumatic hurts, living with and in shame often means we minimize our achievements. Our feelings don't seem to count nor do our opinions or needs. We feel we are not worthy and don't believe we are special, so we certainly could not do anything special.

Minimizing words, such as "just," and "only," are usually a part of our vocabulary. We say things like, "I only got 92 on my test," or, "I just have a small, older house and car," or we might say to a friend, "You deserve the biggest piece of pie." By using words and sentences such as these, we are saying, "I don't count," "I don't deserve love, I am not worthy." How much better to say, "That's one of the highest grades I ever received on a test," or, "My house is comfortable and cozy," or, "We'll share the pie equally." In the latter sentences, the positive attitude comes through instead of negativity.

Shame can give us false security. It helps us build a wall which nobody can break through to see the "real" person. It can become a comfortable friend—one which can keep others out of our lives. It goes very deep and must be dealt with so we can accept our humanity. It helps to admit we feel shame.

If we grew up in a dysfunctional family, we felt shame when a parent was behaving strangely, especially in front of our friends and when we were not clothed and fed like other children. Maybe our parents were poor, which caused us to be ashamed of our parents and their behavior. This could have been the start of our shameful feelings. As adults we may not even be feeling and doing to ourselves and others and the possible love they have to share. Hiding shame even from ourselves will keep us from becoming healthy. We will continue to reject ourselves and others until we deal with our

humanness. We must be willing to accept ourselves each day, and not be discouraged if we fall short of our ideals. We look for the positive and learn to accept that we are doing the best we can.

Even though we express shame openly (consciously or unconsciously), it continues to build up inside us. Friendships can be hard to maintain. Who wants to be with someone who is continually negative? We like ourselves less and less, so how can we like anyone else? We want to be perfect and cannot accept ourselves as imperfect. We don't want to believe that everyone makes mistakes.

In Emotions Anonymous, we learn to rely on a Power greater than ourselves. We learn that our Higher Power loves and accepts us no matter what. We learn it is all right to make mistakes and we accept that the past is over and can't be changed. Today is what counts.

When we attend EA meetings, we become aware that many others have had this same problem of living with shame. We hear how the 12-step program has helped them to accept themselves and their humanity. Their self-worth has increased and they are finding a new self-confidence and self-respect. For the first time in many of their lives, they have learned to value themselves.

EA makes promises to us which may seem to be extravagant, but they are not. They have been proven time and time again by those who are striving for a better life. Two of these promises are: "We realize a new freedom and happiness," and, "We do not regret the past or wish to shut the door on it." These alone should encourage us. But there are others to work for as well. There are many useful tools which are part of the program such as the slogans, "Look for the good," "Know yourself—be honest," and, "This too shall pass." They help us to focus on important values.

Attending meetings faithfully continues to show us that, "We are not alone." Hearing others share stories of their emotional difficulties and how they are now, "living a new way of life," gives us a much different perspective on shame and other emotions. It helps to know that others have had the same problems with shame and are no longer helpless. Their pain has diminished. All of their problems have not been solved but their lives have been improved with the help of a Higher Power.