

Shame is an unacknowledged national epidemic that is wreaking havoc on our entire society. Until it is acknowledged, challenged, and treated, we will continue to experience spiritual suicide on a massive scale.

S h a m e i n a n a d d i c t i v e s o c i e t y

We live in a society that is terrified of feelings. In the addictive system that characterizes our culture, feelings are avoided through the institutionalisation of shame and the use of the addictive process. Both are diversions. Both are taught and supported by external forces. Each feeds upon and reinforces the other. Alternatively, shame is used to avoid facing an addiction and then the addiction is used to avoid facing the shame. Both are used to distort, deny, or divert feared and unwanted feelings. The use of the addiction as a "fix" to avoid experiencing shame is a temporary solution; it merely results in compounding the problem by increasing the shame. And so the cycle continues.

Acceptance of shame as a useful technique is based upon the acceptance of systemic addiction in our society. An addictive society as one in which social problems are denied, the majority of the population are not able to achieve personal fulfillment, individual lack of success is regarded as a personal flaw, the importance of feelings is denied, and unsuccessful people are shamed. All of society operates within the addictive paradigm and holographically the components mirror each other as well as the larger system and its relations with other societies and the universe. This results in individuals, families, organisations and the entire society all operating addictively. Shame is necessary within an addictive system.

This is what one woman had to say about the way she experienced shame: "When I experience shame I feel as though I am looking at the world through shattered glass. Nothing is clear. I cannot hear anything that is said. Colors blur. My mind goes blank. All my attention is riveted on hiding my deficiency. It seems as if everyone can see right through me--and can see that I am inadequate as a human being. At that point, all I know is that I must hide. I must divert everyone's attention from my inadequacy. Sometimes I disassociate so as not to feel. Sometimes I lash out in a 'rage attack' as a diversion. It has devastated my self-esteem."

Nobody seeks help with the express purpose of dealing with shame but as you start analysing issues and problems, shame often surfaces. You have to learn how to recognise and name it. The more you learn about shame the more you will see it as very different from feelings such as hate, love, anger, fear, happiness or joy. It has a bigger presence in one's life than these feelings. It takes over. It operates like an addiction. Addiction is any process over which we are powerless. Then you start realising that shame supports addiction and addiction supports the experience of shame.

The two major flaws in traditional approaches to shame

Helen Lynd (Shame and the Search for Identity): Shame is holographic. Shame is accepted as a necessary element in a society that wishes to control its population. This idea is based on the philosophical belief that children and adults need outside forces to regulate their actions. Studies on shame have usually focused on the difference between "healthy, necessary" shame and "unhealthy, debilitating" shame. These studies do not question the legitimacy of the cultural belief that social control of the individual and the use of shame as a control are necessary. The acceptance and use of shame as a necessary component to control society is found to be rooted in the addictive paradigm. In this paradigm, all of Western society operates addictively. That is, our culture is founded on a hierarchical, control-driven world view in which the primary principle is that humans must be molded away from their natural instincts. This molding away from natural instincts occurs through disassociation (Anne Wilson Schaef).

What is not commonly recognised is that the act of disassociation is abusive. This is equally true at the individual, family or system level. We can see that disassociation on the individual level often leads to not knowing what is good for you and what is harmful. Disassociation can be seen in blackouts, accidents, addictive behaviors, and other dysfunctional behavior. Dissociation from the larger system means disconnection from nature and the world at large. When individuals and groups are disconnected from nature and themselves, they are incapable of discerning what is good for the system.

During the past 10 years, the connection between shame and addiction has been firmly established. What has not been recognised is the connection between systemic addiction and systemic shame. This is a serious flaw in most psychological thinking because it leads to focusing only on individual and family shame which is, at best, a band-aid approach to dealing with shame. Systemic shame must be examined if recovery is to occur.

Shame

Virtually everyone in our culture has experienced shame at one time or another. Many of us, however, experience shame as a formidable underlying force ready to rear its head without warning. Shame results in disconnection: from self, from others, from the universe, from a Higher Power. When experienced on a regular basis, this disconnection leads to spiritual suicide, the death of the spirit.

Spiritual suicide can be recognised once we know what to look for. On an individual basis, spiritual suicide manifests itself through profound hopelessness. People who are spiritually dead often choose to live on the edge, always pushing the limits of danger, abusing themselves and others, vainly searching for meaning only to be consistently disappointed. Non-recovering addicts of any kind are classic examples of spiritual suicide. On a larger scale, group or societal spiritual suicide can be seen in the way we treat our planet and its resources. Pollution, crime, epidemic drug and alcohol abuse, discrimination, institutional sexual harassment are all examples of a society moving into spiritual suicide. Physical destruction and eventual death is the logical progression following spiritual suicide. People, both individuals and groups, who are no longer connected to their spirit cannot remain functional on this planet. Shame by its nature demands secrecy and diversions.

But shame can be transformed, and a person or group can reconnect and again become spiritually whole. We have to challenge the commonly accepted attitudes regarding the role of shame in creating a "controlled" society. We are on the verge of a new way of experiencing the world. Quantum physics is teaching us that disconnection and the illusion of control are not part of a natural environment, looking at many disciplines including the new science of chaos, psychology, medicine, religion, education and economics to point out the development of a new paradigm in which shame has no function or value.