

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  September / October 2001

Shame and the Experience of Being Human

Shame is hard for us to talk about because it is such a personal emotion. We all feel it but we don't want to admit it. In addition, shame gets "bad press" because it is often the powerful and painful emotion driving addictive behavior and rage attacks, as individuals try to avoid this distressing feeling.

Shame is the feeling of being insufficient and lacking as a person. It occurs when our self-respect is compromised. While guilt is the feeling of having done something wrong, shame is the feeling of being defective or bad. We feel shame when we let ourselves or others down, when we fear making a bad impression, when we have "lost face." Shame is the opposite of pride. Pride involves a wish to express our self and to be seen and admired. Shame leads us to withdraw and to want to hide.

Feelings of shame wax and wane as we interact with others. Experiences of rejection and abandonment by friends and family are especially shame-producing. As a society, we tend to think all shame is bad. Consequently, the person who experiences frequent and intense bouts of shame typically ends up feeling even more shame about the shame, particularly if the individual has trouble managing the feeling.

It is important to make a distinction between healthy shame and unhealthy shame.

Healthy shame is the emotional experience and recognition that we, as humans, make mistakes and are imperfect despite our intrinsic worth. Adam and Eve felt shame "in the Garden" after they disobeyed God and realized they were no longer perfect. The acceptance of healthy shame leads to a sense of humility

about what it means to be human. In other words, as the Biblical writers explain, we are "sinful" but of tremendous value—the former does not negate the latter.

Shame is a helpful emotion in alerting us to the need to change negative behavior and can motivate us to deal with our guilt in appropriate ways. On the other hand, unhealthy amounts of shame can leave us feeling utterly bad and undeserving of relationship with others. Too much shame robs us of the capacity to enjoy who we are and decreases our sense of connection and belonging. It can also make it difficult, if not impossible, to admit guilt and to receive and extend forgiveness. At the other end of the pendulum, too much pride can leave us unable to acknowledge our propensity to err and to do things that are harmful. In the extreme, both pride and shame rob us of our humanity.

If the significant persons in our lives have generally accepted and respected us despite our shortcomings, we will likely integrate both a healthy sense of pride and shame into our self-concept. On the other hand, if we have been treated in disrespectful and dismissive ways, unhealthy shame will be generated. This happens, for example, when children and adults are told they are "no good," or are "put down" in other ways. They "take on shame" that doesn't belong to them.

Child neglect in the form of emotional non-responsiveness is another common way unhealthy shame is fostered. Pride in one's developing self can easily be punctured and shame imposed in the early years. A common example is the child who eagerly bursts in the door to share something he or she has thought of, learned, or created, and the parent is either too busy

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or too uninterested to respond. If this happens repeatedly, the child will eventually quit sharing and believe he or she is not worth the parent's time. Adults, too, are more vulnerable to experiencing shame when exposing or expressing themselves in new ways, particularly with those whose opinions they value. How we are responded to as children is "remembered" inside of us on a conscious and an unconscious level. On a conscious level, we may recall the shaming event(s) and are aware of our feelings. On an unconscious level, our body "remembers" the interactional patterns that caused shame and when events in the present "feel similar," the original intense and painful shame can be felt all over again, often out of proportion for the present event. It is like the body is having an emotional "flashback" of the original traumatic shaming event(s).

The painful emotion of shame is felt in our whole body.

For example, we may look down, blush, slump or feel sick to our stomach. When a person has huge reservoirs of shame from past abuse and/or neglect, the feeling can be felt so intensely in the present that the individual cannot bear to feel it—at least not all at once or all alone. While healthy shame might be experienced as a "slight blush," unhealthy shame might be experienced as emotionally "bleeding out," with the accompanying panic of not being able to stop the flow. In an attempt to preserve the self, the individual may attack the perceived threat, or try to "get away" from the feeling by engaging in some form of behavior (e.g. physical activity, compulsive eating, alcohol/ drugs, etc.). If attempts to manage the shame are unsuccessful, the individual may become overwhelmed with feelings of worthlessness and even consider suicide.

When feeling intense shame and resulting disconnection, people need accepting relationships to help bandage the internal wound and to "call them back into community." Unfortunately, this is generally not what happens, for a couple of reasons: 1) as a society, we seem to have little understanding of this emotion and what people need when feeling it and so we often respond in ways that create more shame rather than "healing" the shame; and 2) it is precisely during times of intense shame that individuals feel most vulnerable and so tend not to ask for help for fear of being wounded further.

Shame, like all emotions, needs appropriate ways to be "contained" (e.g. through "deep breathing") and expressed (e.g. through journaling, art, prayer, talking with someone who understands). In respectful and caring relationships, shame can

be felt, expressed and modulated; internal resources for coping with the feeling can grow; and one can develop a healthier and more accepting view of the self. Over time, individuals are likely to "discover" they are not as bad as they often feared; nor are they as perfect as they may have wished or pretended to be.

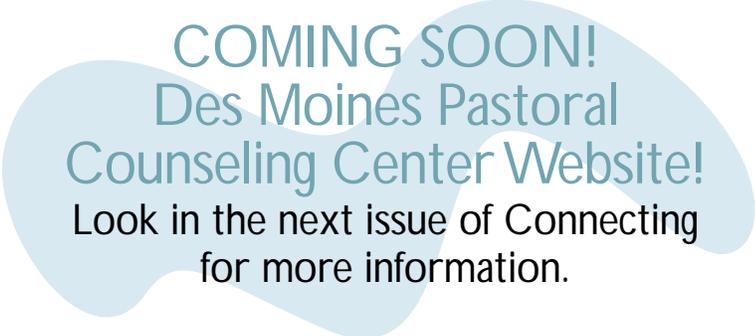
Susan Pierce, M.S., M.S.W.
Licensed Mental Health Counselor

Recommended Reading:

Making Peace With Your Past, Harold Bloomfield

Shame and Pride, Donald Nathanson

Shame and Grace, Lewis Smedes



COMING SOON!
Des Moines Pastoral
Counseling Center Website!
Look in the next issue of *Connecting*
for more information.

C.O.O.L. Corner

C.O.O.L. Corner was written by Grace Percival, Licensed Psychologist at the Center.

"You are so stupid!" "How could you do this to me?"
"You are a naughty, naughty boy!" "I am so disappointed in you!"

The building blocks of the self are the interactions we have with others. For children, the most important messages about who they are and their "worth" come from the significant others in their lives, especially parents. In order to build a strong foundation for a self to grow upon, a child needs messages that say, "You are pure gold inside!" "I am so very proud of you!" "You make me smile!"

Autumn MANifest Events at the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center

MANifest events are offered throughout the year by the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center as an opportunity for men to grow in their understanding of masculinity in general and themselves in particular. In 2001, two MANifest Brunches, two MANifest Workshops, and three MANifest Weekends will be held. For more information on MANifest or to request a brochure, call Lowell Houts or Mike Sears at (515) 274-4006.

September 8, 2001	MANifest Brunch Location: West Des Moines United Methodist
October 12-14, 2001	MANifest Weekend – Limited to 12 participants. Register early. Location: State 4H Camp Near Madrid
December 8, 2001	MANifest Workshop: Our Fathers Location: To Be Announced

Help Us Serve People In Need!

Contributions from people like you help the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center serve people from all walks of life. Please consider making a donation to the Center this fall. Your gift could make a significant difference in the life of a man, woman, child or teenager who needs counseling but is unable to afford it. For more information, contact Stephanie Kuhn (515) 274-4006, or simply mail your contribution to Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, 550 39th Street, Suite 100, Des Moines, IA 50312.

Exploring Options: Retire and Thrive

A map to a creative and fulfilling retirement

Date:	Thursday, October 25, 2001
Time:	6:30-9:00 p.m.
Location:	Plymouth Congregational Church
Presenters:	Joel Wulf and Jerry Beltramo
Cost:	\$20

Whether you are just beginning to plan for your retirement or have already retired, this class offers something for you. Presenters Joel Wulf and Jerry Beltramo will encourage you to consider retirement questions beyond, "When can I retire and how much will it cost?" Wulf and Beltramo will challenge you to consider the following questions. How will you spend your time when you retire – traveling, pursuing hobbies, volunteering, working, or going to school? When it is time for you to retire, will you quit your job entirely, work at your current job part-time or on a contract basis, or switch to a different career? Some people fear the isolation that can accompany retirement; how will you stay connected with people? How will you define yourself after you leave your lifelong career? Wulf and Beltramo believe that retirement, when well-planned, can be an exciting time of life filled with a mix of familiar and new experiences. For more information about this class or to request a brochure, call (515) 274-4006.

Did you know?

You may make a gift to the **Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation** through your estate planning. For more information, please call Stephanie Kuhn at (515) 274-4006.

Lunch 'n' Learn: Proactive Parenting!

The pediatric psychologists of C.O.O.L. will be offering a **PARENTING SERIES this fall!** Classes will meet from 12:00-1:00 p.m. once a week for four weeks. The registration fee for the four-class series is \$100. Attendees will learn how to parent, based on the developmental needs of their children. Grace Percival and Sara Swansen will teach parents proactive behavior management techniques. This process involves knowing what a child will face at different developmental stages and being prepared with parenting strategies that will help the child face the challenges specific to that age. Parents will learn how to create an environment for their child that promotes achievement of "developmental tasks." (A developmental task for a two-year-old might include self-feeding; a developmental task for an eight-year-old might include successful separation from parents for short periods of time; a developmental task for a 15-year-old might be identity exploration.)



Grace Percival, M.A.



Sara Swansen, Ph.D.

Age of Your Child	Class Dates	Instructor
Birth – 4 years	October 16, 23, 30, November 6	Grace Percival, M.A.
5-11 years	October 18, 25, November 1, 8	Grace Percival, M.A.
12-18 years	October 15, 22, 29, November 5	Sara Swansen, Ph.D.

Class size is limited; register early. For more information about this Parenting Series, call the Center at (515) 274-4006.

 <p>is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For more than 28 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to individuals, couples, and families for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in West Des Moines, Altoona, and Ankeny.</p>	<h2 style="color: #0070C0;">Inside this issue: Shame</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shame and the Experience of Being Human page 1 C.O.O.L. Corner page 2 Autumn MANifest Events page 3 Exploring Options: Retire and Thrive page 3 Help Us Serve People In Need page 3 Lunch 'N' Learn: Proactive Parenting page 4
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