Flourish

ADHD Women and Shame



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Introduction to Shame

Shaming is a harmful tool that has been used for centuries to enforce social norms and expectations. It is a way for society to communicate which behaviors and emotions are acceptable and which are not.

We have previously discussed how emotions are influenced in part by messages given to us by society and our families. An example is how parents might shame a child for expressing anger towards them because it goes against the norm of showing " respect". Similarly, women may feel shame if they express anger because it goes against the expectation that women should be nurturing and kind.



Introduction to Shame

Shaming can occur on both individual and societal levels. On an individual level, parents, teachers, peers, or others may use shame to discourage behavior that is considered unacceptable. On a societal level, media, religious institutions, or cultural traditions may use shame to promote certain values or behaviors and discourage others.

Shame is not really tied to a specific action we have done but is a result of others:

- treating us as less than or inadequate
- negatively evaluating us
- disapproving of us

This often makes us feel small, worthless, unworthy. Like we are separate, different, damaged,and powerless.

Shame can also be self-imposed based on internalized societal or cultural standards.

It is both an emotion felt in response to how we believe others perceive us and a reaction to failing to meet our own standards, often shaped by those societal values.



More Facts on Shame

- Research shows that the brain circuitry involved in shame URGES us to hide; perhaps as a protective responses to being rejected socially.

- Sometime shame can be difficult to **name** and **identify** because it isn't necessarily relate to anything we have done.

- Shame can arise from any experience where we **COMPARE** ourselves to NEUROTYPICAL standards, which are often created through our interactions with others.

- It can also arise when **others compare** us to neurotypcial standards,which even in adulthood, happens quite often with loved ones such as partners or parents.



Shame and Neurodivergent Children



Children with ADHD and autism are often shamed as a way to get them to behave "normally."

Some results of that tactic include:

- Shame causes feelings of isolation.
- Shame increases senses of inadequacy and unworthiness.
- Shame interferes with social bonding because it decreases oxytocin.
- Shame decreases the ability to be self-reflective.
- Shame makes it difficult to acknowledge mistakes.
- Shaming reinforces harmful stereotypes and discrimination towards all marginalized groups, including people with mental health conditions, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ + community.

Shame Spiral

Shame itself feels **shameful!**

Even though it can be a powerful force, it often operates outside of our conscious awareness.

This creates a vicious cycle of shame, where we not only **feel ashamed** of the **initial experience** that caused us to feel shame, but we also **feel ashamed** of experiencing the emotion itself.

As a result, we may try to protect ourselves from shame, which only pushes it deeper into our consciousness.

This can further exacerbate the problem and lead to what is commonly referred to as a shame spiral.

In this spiral, the shame becomes more intense and pervasive, and we become increasingly self- critical. This can lead to feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness, and hopelessness. Breaking this cycle can be difficult, and it can have negative effects on our mental health, self - esteem, and relationships with others.

It is important to note that shame is a universal human experience, and very common is women who have ADHD.

Find Your Shame: The Compass of Shame

Because shame hides so well, sometimes you need some clues as to when you are feeling it. One way to detect it is to look at your behavior in response to it.

The Compass of Shame is a model developed by psychologist Donald Nathanson to describe how people respond to shame in four different ways, which he refers to as **"withdrawal ,"** "**attack self**," "**avoidance** ," and " **attack other**."

Withdrawal:

This involves physically or emotionally retreating from the situation or person that is causing shame. For example, a person may avoid social situations or isolate themselves from others.

Attack self:

This involves directing shame towards oneself and engaging in negative self- talk or self-blame. For example, a person may say things like

"I'm so stupid" or "It's all my fault."

Find Your Shame: The Compass of Shame

Avoidance:

This involves denying or minimizing the experience of shame, and trying to distract oneself from the emotions. For example, a person may use drugs or alcohol to numb their feelings of shame.

Attack other:

This involves deflecting or projecting shame onto someone else, blaming them for the situation. For example, a person may say things like

"You made me feel his way" or
"It's all your fault."

Recognizing these responses to shame may help you have an idea if you are experiencing shame.



How do You Respond to Shame?

Understanding how shame affects us is the first step toward healthier responses.

Check the box(es) that most reflect how you tend to respond to feelings of shame. You may find that you use more than one strategy.

☐ **Withdrawal:**

I physically isolate myself when I feel ashamed (e.g., avoid people, retreat to a quiet space).
I feel the need to hide or avoid eye contact.
I disengage from conversations or social interactions.
I experience depression or silence as a way to escape feeling judged.

☐ **Attack Self:**

I engage in self-criticism and blame myself when I feel shame.
I feel that I deserve the negative feelings and internalize them.
I struggle with low self-esteem, self-hatred, or self-destructive thoughts.
I feel like I'm not good enough or worthy.

☐ **Avoidance:**

I distract myself from feelings of shame through activities like overworking, overeating, or using substances.
I find myself denying or minimizing shame to avoid dealing with it.
I strive for perfectionism to avoid feeling inadequate.
I feel like I need to stay busy to avoid facing my emotions.

☐ **Attack Others:**

I become angry or aggressive toward others when I feel ashamed.
I find myself blaming others for my discomfort or mistakes.
I lash out, verbally or physically, when I feel vulnerable or judged.
I sometimes use humor or sarcasm to deflect my own feelings of shame.
Reflective Notes: Use this space to write about your thought about how your respond to shame.

How to Help Yourself with Shame

Shame resilience theory developed by Brene Brown gives us some ideas that can help us build resilience to the shame response. Four elements of shame resilience are:

Learn to notice when you feel shame.

Identify shame triggers.

Recognize what situations, thoughts, or actions tend to trigger feelings of shame for you. Being aware of these triggers can help you better navigate them.

Remember You Didn't Choose to Feel Shame: Understand that shame is often the result of external influences. You were shamed by someone or something, and it's not a reflection of your worth.

Reach Out to Trusted People: Don't isolate yourself. Connect with people you trust who can offer support, validation, and perspective when you feel shame.

Name It and Talk About It: Verbalizing shame can lessen its power. When you give a name to what you're feeling and share it with someone you trust, it can help you process those feelings and reduce their hold on you.

What Shame Feels Like

Detecting Shame in Your Body

When you experience shame, your brain perceives this negative emotion as a threat. This perception triggers the sympathetic nervous system, causing the same physiological responses that would occur in the face of a physical threat, such as an attack or danger.

The activation of the sympathetic nervous system in response to shame results in the release of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, which can bring about physical symptoms. You may got hot, sweat, blush, have reactions in your muscles or even sick to your stomach, or you may need to detect more **subtle responses in your body.**

This can be hard.



What is Shame Like in Your Body

What is shame like in your body?

- [ ] **Tightness in the chest**: A feeling of constriction or pressure in the chest, making it hard to breathe deeply.
- [ ] **Heaviness in the shoulders**: Shoulders may feel weighed down, as if burdened by the emotion.
- [ ] **Sinking sensation**: A feeling of wanting to shrink or disappear, as if the body is retreating inward.
- [ ] **Warmth or heat in the face**: A common experience is blushing or feeling flushed, particularly in the face, neck, and ears.
- [ ] **Stomach discomfort**: Nausea, a pit in the stomach, or general discomfort in the gut area is often reported.
- [ ] **Tense muscles**: The body may feel tense, with muscles tightening, especially in the neck, back, or jaw.
- [ ] **Avoidant posture**: The body might hunch over, shoulders forward, head down, as if trying to make oneself smaller or invisible.
- [ ] **Heart racing**: Increased heart rate can occur, along with a sense of anxiety or restlessness.

Write and Reflect here on Shame in Your Body

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

If you don't know it's okay! You can learn.

Knowing your Shame Triggers

Here's a list of common shame triggers for women with ADHD:

1. Forgetting important dates, events, or appointments.

2. Struggling with organization and time management

3. Difficulty paying attention in boring conversations or meetings, which can lead to misunderstandings or feelings of inadequacy.

4. Impulsive behaviors or decision-making, sometimes resulting in negative consequences or judgments from others.

5. Feeling overwhelmed by everyday tasks or responsibilities, such as managing household chores, work, or childcare.

6. Difficulty in neurotypical relationships or friendships

7.Challenges with emotional regulation.

8.Comparing oneself to others who seem to manage their lives more efficiently or effortlessly.

9.Receiving criticism or negative feedback which can lead to shame.

10.Experiencing rejection or judgment from others because of ADHD-related behaviors or struggles.

11.The stigma surrounding ADHD

Name Your Shame

Feeling heard is essential, and it's equally important to accurately name the emotion as shame rather than confuse it with embarrassment or guilt. When you name the feeling for what it truly is, you begin to take control of it, reducing its ability to undermine your self-worth quietly. These reflections can help you to name it in a less threatening way.

Use the prompts below to help you **name your shame** and make it feel less threatening:

- **If your shame had a name, what would it be?**
  Try something playful or abstract._____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- **What does your shame look like?**
  Does it look like a cartoon character? A shadowy figure? Something strange or silly?
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- **Could your shame be represented as an object or symbol?**
  Maybe it’s a crumpled piece of paper, a heavy chain, or even a balloon that deflates when touched._____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- **Does your shame remind you of a color or shape?**
  Perhaps it's a dark, swirling gray or a sharp, spiky red._____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
- **Can you picture your shame shrinking or transforming?**
  How might it change if you could talk to it kindly or shine a light on it?
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

Shame or RSD?

Shame and rejection sensitivity are closely related. Rejection sensitivity is the fear or expectation of rejection, which can lead to feelings of shame when the fear is realized. For example, someone who is highly sensitive to rejection may feel ashamed when they are not invited to a social event, interpreting this as a sign that they are not liked or accepted by their peers. The shame that arises from this experience can then reinforce the fear of rejection, leading to a cycle of shame and rejection sensitivity. Thus, shame can be both a cause and a consequence of rejection sensitivity.

Here are some examples to illustrate the differences between shame and rejection sensitivity:

Shame: A person is told by their boss that they made a mistake on a project. They feel ashamed and start to believe that they are incompetent and worthless.

Shame or RSD?

Rejection Sensitivity: A person asks their friend to hang out, but the friend declines. The person with rejection sensitivity may start to feel anxious and worry that their friend doesn't like them, that they did something wrong, or that they're not a good enough friend.

Shame: A student gives a presentation in class and stumbles over their words. Afterwards, they feel ashamed and embarrassed, and start to believe that they are stupid and shouldn't have even tried.

Rejection Sensitivity: A person sends a text to someone they're interested in, but doesn' t get a response for a few hours. The person with rejection sensitivity may start to feel anxious and worry that the other person isn't interested in them, that they said something wrong, or that they' re not attractive enough.

In both cases, the initial trigger is a negative experience that causes an emotional response. However, in shame, the focus is on the individual's perceived flaws or deficiencies, while in rejection sensitivity, the focus is on the potential rejection or disapproval of others. Additionally, shame tends to be more long-lasting and pervasive, while rejection sensitivity can be more situation-specific.

Brain Shame

Attributable to Sari Solden:

This is a unique form of shame that neurodivergent women experience.

Women with ADHD may feel shame about their brains due to the inability to meet gender role expectations. This shame is similar to what women feel when they don't meet society's beauty standards, highlighting the challenges associated with their brain- related struggles.

ADHD women frequently compare themselves to the "ideal woman," as they have been conditioned to do so. This is a result of internalized gender expectations that affect the self- esteem of all women, but it manifests differently for women with ADHD. Similar to a woman who feels shame about her body, one may put off things, like socializing or doing trying to get a new job, until they "fix" things about their brain, such as their ability to organize.

However, these standards may be unattainable and unrealistic and say nothing about one's self-worth.

CBT and Shame

Self Advocacy Note on Shame:

CBT doesn't normally help with shame. This therapy tries to change how you think shame is a reaction that happens automatically, without thinking. Evidence shows that **compassion focused therapy** and self compassion are the most impactful for shame.

Guided Imagery Exercise

Let's begin by finding a quiet, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, allowing yourself to relax and let go of any tension or stress.

Now, imagine yourself in a warm and cozy room, surrounded by people who love and care for you deeply.

Maybe these people are the women in our group.

You feel safe and secure in their presence, and you know that you are appreciated just the way you are.

As you look around the room, you see smiling faces and feel a sense of warmth and connection with those around you.

You feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings with these people, knowing they will listen with empathy and understanding.

You feel at ease and peaceful, as if all of your worries and concerns have been lifted away.

Take a moment to focus on each of the following statements, allowing yourself to fully experience the feelings of safety, love, and connectedness that come with each one:

I feel understood.

I feel a sense of warmth with those around me.

I feel comfortable sharing my feelings and thoughts with those around me.

I know that I can count on empathy and understanding from these people when I am unhappy.

I feel peaceful and calm.

I feel like a cherished member of this group.

I can be soothed by these people when I am unhappy.

I feel comfortable turning to these people for help.

I feel a sense of belonging and connectedness.

I know I am cared about.

I feel at ease.

Take a few more deep breaths and allow yourself to soak in the feelings of safety, love, and connection that come with these statements.

When you're ready, slowly open your eyes and take a moment to ground yourself before continuing with your day.

Remember that you can return to this exercise anytime you need to feel a sense of comfort and support.

SELF COMPASSION EXERCISE

Objective:
To build self-compassion and develop shame resilience by identifying the physical sensation of shame and directing comforting, affirming energy towards it.

Take a few deep breaths and relax your body.

Recall a recent experience where you felt shame. As you remember the situation, pay attention to your body and notice any physical sensations associated with the feeling of shame.

Identify the area of your body where the sensation of shame is most present (e.g., your chest, stomach, or shoulders).

Place your hand gently over the area where you feel the sensation of shame, or place it over your heart.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, focusing on the sensation beneath your hand.

Direct comforting, affirming energy towards the area of your body where you feel shame. You can visualize this energy as warm, soothing light or simply focus on the feeling of your hand's warmth and pressure.

As you direct this compassionate energy, silently repeat the following affirmations, or create your own:

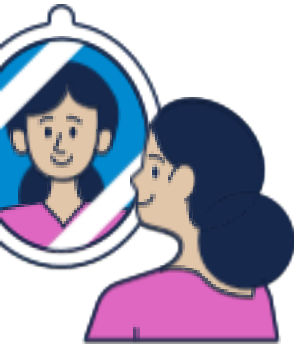
"I am worthy of love and acceptance."
"I am not defined by shame."
"It's okay to feel shame, but I choose to remember where it comes from."
"I didn't earn this shame."
"I am deserving of compassion and understanding."
Any response you notice is fine. Please stop if you feel uncomfortable.

Continue this exercise for a few minutes, or as long as it feels helpful and comforting.

When you're ready, gently remove your hand from your body and take a few deep breaths to return to the present moment.

Reflect with your group on the experience and acknowledge the effort you made in building self-compassion and shame resilience.

Remember that this is an ongoing practice, and be patient with yourself as you continue to develop these skills.



Things to do this week

This week, practice one self-compassion-building exercise:

Locate where the sensation of shame manifests in your body.

Place your hand over that area or over your heart.

Direct comforting, affirming energy to that part of your body.

