

Healing from Shame Associated with Traumatic Events **by Dr. Angie Panos**

Shame is a deep, debilitating emotion, with complex roots. Its cousins are guilt, humiliation, demoralization, degradation and remorse. After experiencing a traumatic event, whether recent or in the distant past, shame can haunt victims in a powerful and often unrecognized manner. Shame impairs the healing and recovery process causing victims of trauma to stay frozen, unable to forgive themselves for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shame leaves victims with feelings of sadness and pain at the core of their being. They are unable to feel the fullness of joy in their lives.

Trauma allows “shame thinking” to blossom from deep roots in culture, religion, family or our childhood past. As children we tend to blame ourselves for things that happen around us, because we are limited in our capacity to think about others being responsible. In a five-year old’s mind if something bad happened, then she or he must have deserved it, therefore the universe makes sense. It is not until around age 12 that we gain the cognitive capacity to see how others’ actions and behaviors are more complex with varying degrees of culpability. However, there are many confusing messages about responsibility in our culture, causing even adult victims of trauma confusion over responsibility for the perpetrator’s actions. For example, the way a woman was dressed being part of the questioning by a police officer investigating a sexual assault.

Shame can dissolve positive self-esteem and leave victims of trauma feeling different and less worthy and in some cases even bad or evil themselves. The trauma and the resulting shame potentiate each other, causing greater intensity in the psychological wounds. The end result is that a traumatized person no longer feels worthy of being loved, accepted, and having good things happen to them in their life.

Releasing Trauma Bound Shame

One of my favorite writers, whose life story exemplifies overcoming trauma and shame is the beautiful and wise, Maya Angelou. She said, *“I can be changed by what happens to me, I refuse to be reduced by it.”*

There are many ways to release the shame that is piggybacked to a traumatic event. Often it takes a combination of approaches as well as the healing factor of time to assist in releasing the burden of shame. Let me share an example of a person we will call Ellen:

At age 22, Ellen was already successful in a management position and working on her Master’s degree in business. After working late she was walking in high heel shoes to her car. She was scolding herself for not bringing her running shoes, because the parking lot was large, and her feet very sore after a long day. Ellen saw a coworker from the large company she worked for. She had seen him a couple of times before and thought he also worked at the junior executive level in the company. He was very friendly to her. He spoke to her, introduced himself, and said his name was Jay. Ellen came over, hesitantly, and keeping her distance

in the dark garage. He said, "Hey, it is kind of spooky down here, isn't it? Do you want me to walk you to your car?"

Ellen agreed because it seemed right at the moment. A little further on he began asking her a lot of questions about herself. They talked for a few minutes and she arrived safe and sound at her car. She drove home without incident. However, a couple of weeks later, the same scenario occurred again. He just happened to pop out of nowhere as Ellen was making her way toward her car. This time Jay did not ask, he just announced that he would walk her. Tonight was different, however, because he asked her if she would go have a quick drink with him before they headed home. Wanting to make new friends and feeling that it was safe enough, she agreed. Once in his car, he became violent, he brandished a knife, attacked her, stole her purse and her jewelry and brutally raped and beat her. Emotionally during the attack he said very belittling remarks to her about who she was, her body, and her appearance. It was humiliating and emotionally devastating to Ellen.

Ellen's bruises went away. The police caught her attacker and he pled guilty to a lesser charge, saving Ellen from the psychological strain of a trial. She took martial arts and bought a large dog that she trained to protect herself. She felt safe again, but the feelings of shame had never left her. The degradation of the horrible words spoken in such a cruel way was something she had not let go of. She had always expected a lot out of herself and forgiveness was not easy.

In therapy Ellen learned to think differently about her shame. She began to understand that as adults we have some choices about how trauma can paralyze our dignity. She did not have to surrender her own opinion of herself to this brutal rapist or anyone else who would have her feel shameful. She began to honor her courage and her ability to survive the attack, and gradually forgive herself. She learned to release the harsh words that would play through her mind. She learned to think of herself as a survivor instead of a victim.

Survivors of any type of traumatic experience, not just sexual assault, can experience shame. Even people who were heroes during a traumatic event, and may have rescued others from certain death, can feel shame. Their thoughts of wishing they could have done even more can fuel shame. Feeling unique or different because of the hero status can even be associated with feelings of shame. On the other hand, some survivors feel badly about the way they acted during a traumatic event and this can add a layer of shame. A military experience, a car accident, or a horrific natural disaster, all can induce feelings of shame, regardless of how diverse these traumas are, shame is one of the common denominators.

Shame is part of our human experience and emotional repertoire. It can keep our pride in check, but it can also run rampant. It is important that shame be acknowledged and expressed, forgiveness, and then released and perhaps even growth, creativity and honor returned. Shame is a debilitating emotion that piggybacks on top of trauma. Shame complicates the healing and recovery process from trauma on many levels including psychologically (victims blame themselves for being vulnerable) and spiritually (changes relationship with higher power).

Recovering from shame is an integral part of healing from any traumatic experience. If you are a survivor of a traumatic event and need help in dealing with

shame from a traumatic event, talk to a licensed professional therapist with experience in treating exposure to trauma. Once you establish a trusting relationship with the therapist you will be able to express some of the feelings you have kept inside. One of the most powerful interventions to assist in healing from the shame is to express those feelings to a qualified professional and receive their guidance and support in your healing process. A very trusted friend can sometimes substitute and offer help, but you need to talk to someone in order to release the shame. You want your listener to be someone that will show you acceptance, support and a non-judgmental attitude. If you have difficulty trusting someone enough to share these feelings, then that is the issue to focus to begin your healing process. Many survivors, who thought they would never feel safe enough to share their feelings, have successfully created a trusting relationship with someone that helped them heal.

Next, decide to experiment on forgiving yourself and letting go of the shame. How long can you go without reminding yourself about the shameful thoughts and feelings? How would life be different or better if you were able to forgive yourself? Ponder these questions, and take a few notes on what you find out. Share the results of your experiment with your therapist or trusted friend. Finally, have hope, no matter how excessive your shame is or has been; it is possible to heal. Remember that you can release the shame, freeing yourself to heal and recover from traumatic events.

For additional reading and resources on dealing with shame after traumatic events:

Bradshaw, John. [Healing the Shame that Binds You.](#)

Brown, Byron. [Soul Without Shame: A Guide to Liberating Yourself from the Judge Within](#)

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