



## Healing the Wounds of Inner Shame Handout

- Shame is a painful emotion that can cause you to have negative thoughts about yourself. These thoughts can come from many sources and cause you to feel that you are flawed or less than. Sometimes shame comes from someone else's perception of what they think of you. This perception may cause harm to your pride and your own thoughts about yourself. Shame can make you believe that who you are is not enough or that you are broken, wrong, or unworthy. Shame can negatively shape how you view yourself.
- Shame and guilt are two different emotions that can be confused with one another. When you experience shame, you are feeling that your whole self is wrong. When you feel guilty, you are recognizing that you have done something wrong. Shame refers to an identity or how you view yourself as a whole person.
- There are many reactions to shame. Feeling shame can cause you to feel envy, anger or rage. You may feel anxious or struggle with depressed feelings. You may have changes in your body such as chest tightness, stomach sickness or a racing heartbeat. You may also feel small or unworthy. Shame causes higher levels of stress and can harm your self-esteem.
- Negative early life events or beliefs from childhood can be a shame trigger. Shame can come from feeling that you are failing to meet expectations that others have of you.
- Shame can impact your coping skills and can result in you forming unhealthy habits. Shame can be the reason that you avoid taking positive steps forward. It can cause you to believe you don't deserve good things to happen. It can also cause you to accept poor treatment from others.
- Feeling shame is a signal that your positive feelings for yourself have been disturbed. It is important to recognize the source of those feelings. The following are warning signs that shame may be taking over:
  - You have a sense of low energy; you feel tension in our body.
  - You feel anxious and tentative.
  - You feel irritable.
  - You are discouraged and sad.
  - You are critical of others to avoid your own feelings of discomfort.

## Tools for Identifying and Understanding Your Shame:

VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274



- **Patience** – The wounds from shame can be deep and long lasting. It takes time to heal from these old wounds. Don't be hard on yourself for not healing fast enough as this can also reinforce you are not good enough.
- **Awareness** – Notice the signals that your body is giving you. You can also listen carefully to your thoughts. Are you thinking negative thoughts about yourself? Are you critical of others? Take notice of your actions. Are you distancing yourself from others?
- **Consider your defenses** – It is common to try and block out shameful feelings. You might do this by developing defenses. You might shut off all feelings or act in ways that ultimately can harm you to avoid feeling shame. You may engage in behaviors like eating or drinking too much to avoid how you feel. You may become critical of others to avoid feeling bad yourself.
- **Identifying the source(s)** – Knowing the source of your shame can help you to create healing strategies. You may even discover that there is more than one source to your shame. How did these negative messages get delivered?
- **Acceptance** – You must accept your shame before you can move towards healing it. It is important to understand that acceptance of your shame does not mean that you like it. Accepting your shame means respecting that it exists.

### **How to Heal Your Shame Through the 3 Elements of Self-Compassion:**

- **Mindfulness** – This is a non-judgmental state of mind. It requires you to observe your thoughts and feelings as they are without trying to deny them or push them away.
- **Gentleness** – It is important to be gentle with yourself as you are healing. Many adults struggle to have compassion for themselves. Try to consider what a child might need or want in a hurtful situation and apply that to yourself.
- **Connectedness** – Shame may cause you to withdraw from others. Shame is best addressed when you communicate with others. This will require you to have courage and take risks. Understand that it is important to find a trustworthy person to share your shame with.

### **Reflecting on Progress towards Healing:**

- It is important to reflect on your progress. Remember that the healing process is not linear. You can expect to experience ups and downs. Ask yourself what you need. Most importantly, be gentle with yourself on this journey.