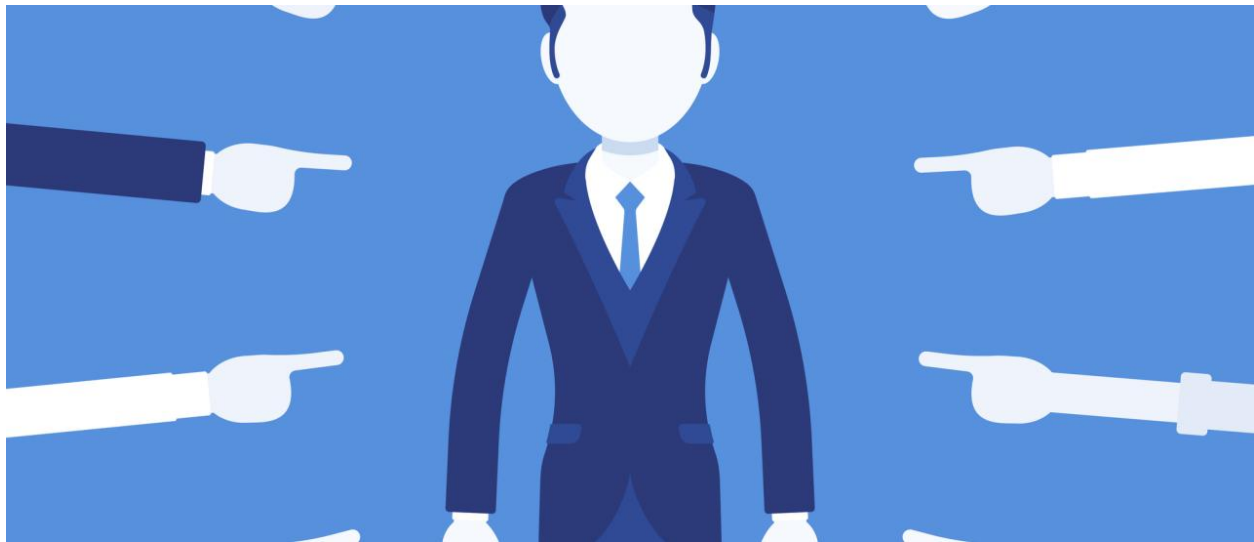

Six Steps to Overcome Shame



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD

As old as time and very much universal, feelings of shame can lead to self-destructive behaviour in even the best of leaders.

Caroline, the head of HR at a large global retail chain, wondered what she could do to help Liam, one of the company's sales directors. He beat himself up every time there was the slightest problem at work. Most recently, he felt so ashamed about some small issues he had experienced during his last client presentation that he wanted to take a leave of absence, even though the firm had ultimately been awarded the contract.

All of us live with a modicum of shame. Because it is somewhat of a subtle and stealthy emotion, it is easily overlooked. But to paraphrase Carl Jung, shame is a soul-eating emotion. In excess, it becomes toxic and can make us feel worthless. The very idea of shame goes as far back as the story of Adam and Eve: Much is made of their shame and the need to cover their nakedness after they're thrown out of paradise.

Shame can hide in many places. It can be concealed behind guilt or anger. It can also manifest itself as despair and depression. Whatever the experience or reaction might be, it is often accompanied by a physical response. For example, flushed cheeks, dizziness, tunnel vision, an inability to focus, a

ringing in the ears, chest tightness and a reluctance to make eye contact can all point to shame.

An imaginary negative audience

As Liam's case illustrates, shame clouds good judgment, skews perception and drives self-destructive behaviour. It can also hover above perfectionism, workaholism and other compulsive acts, including eating disorders.

When ashamed, people like Liam feel powerless and small. They are tormented by an audience that only exists in their imagination for the purpose of confirming that they're no good. The constant inner criticism sucks all their confidence and energy. Being haunted by shame has a profoundly negative effect on a person's psychological and physical well-being.

Shame and guilt are two words often used interchangeably, but they refer to different experiences. Shame arises from a negative evaluation of the self and leads to feelings of inadequacy. In essence, we tell ourselves, "I'm bad". In contrast, guilt comes from a negative evaluation of our behaviour ("I have *done* something bad"). People who feel guilt are more likely to forgive themselves. As shame corrodes our very sense of self, it is that much more difficult to overcome.

From a developmental point of view, shame can be looked at as a complex emotional response learnt during early childhood, when children are dependent on their caregivers. When toddlers are continually subjected to parental disapproval in the form of harsh criticism, punishment or even neglect, they internalise the idea that they are unworthy. As grown-ups, these people may never feel good enough.

Overcoming shame

Fortunately, there are ways of healing from toxic shame. If we are prepared to explore different ways of dealing with life's challenges, we may discover new ways of thinking about ourselves. The challenge is to "reprogramme" our minds. Fortunately, to an extent, **our brains can indeed be rewired**.

1. Acknowledge that there is a problem

Firstly, you must realise that you suffer from toxic shame, which is not necessarily easy given shame's many disguises. Even if you know that your

concerns are objectively baseless, it still will be hard to become aware that you are prone to shame. But only by admitting your problem can you stop it from defining you.

2. Share the problem

Feelings of shame are easier to dispel if you share them with an empathic person. In Liam's case, he opened up to Caroline, who helped him see that he wasn't alone with these feelings. But even though shame is a universal experience, nobody likes to talk about it. This is nevertheless necessary to start the healing process.

3. Look for origins

Try to better understand where your shameful feelings come from. Were there people in your life who told you that you were not good enough? What situations tend to make you think that you're "stupid" or question yourself ("Why have I done this?") in an excessive way? Through deeper discussion, Caroline learned that Liam had grown up in an extremely dysfunctional family where he was always to blame. Despite trying to be the perfect child, he had become convinced that something was very wrong with him.

4. Recognise the signs

When you feel the first pangs of shame, try to understand what's happening before you get locked in a painful loop of negative self-talk. Figure out what negative physical and emotional effects shame is having on you. For example, where in your body do you feel the shame? What kind of emotional reactions do you have?

Another indicator of shame is being highly critical of other people. Quite often, people who are shame-prone see their own faults mirrored in their entourage. If you become attuned to your inner dialogue and expand your capacity for self-observation, you may respond to your feelings of shame in a more constructive manner.

5. Learn to forgive yourself

You must learn to separate what you *do* from *who you are*. If you realise that your whole identity isn't on the line when something you do doesn't work out, you'll be much freer to take risks. You will be able to retain perspective when your inner critic comes to the fore. Eventually you will see self-doubt

as a warning sign that it's time to reframe the situation.

Forgiving also implies cultivating self-compassion and embracing who you are instead of struggling to meet the expectations of others (whether real or imagined). You should treat yourself in the same respectful way in which you treat people you really care about.

6. Find professional help

As mentioned before, overcoming shame means acknowledging it and sharing your feelings with trusted people. This requires a level of vulnerability that can be quite anxiety-inducing. If your wounds are deep enough, you might want to ask a coach or psychotherapist for assistance. People in the helping professions can be very effective in guiding you in such an inward-bound journey.

To feel shame is to be human. Everyone, except psychopaths, experience shame. Yet, it is an emotion, as I have noted above, that most of us don't like to talk about. But as toxic shame derives its power from staying hidden, we can't let it fester in the shadows. To live our most authentic life, we must realise that we are good enough and fully deserving of love and acceptance.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/six-steps-overcome-shame>

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