



Empathische Zeit

News für den sozialen Wandel durch Gewaltfreie Kommunikation

Embracing Shame – Reclaiming Power and Choice

From Liv Larsson

“Never do anything to avoid shame and guilt.”

M. Rosenberg

I remember my surprise when I first heard Rosenberg saying that he looked forward to the next time he would get angry or feel shame or guilt. I thought Marshall was joking, as it seemed completely ridiculous, but I got curious enough to start looking into what he really meant.

As I explored his advice above in depth, I discovered that I was so fast at avoiding shame that I never got the chance to take a deeper look at it. I pushed it away as it was some disease that I didn't want to risk getting contaminated by. But why not? Who wants shame anyway?

Shame can be really uncomfortable. It carries with it the thinking that I'm not wanted. For thousands of years feeling shame was a sign that I had done something that might risk my place in the group, maybe even being expelled, which meant death.

Well, the more I looked at it the more I realized that every time I avoided shame with my automatic and efficient strategies it had a price. I loose connection to my deeper needs and to my sensitivity to my own and other people's needs. An old story that I had read came to my mind. It's a boy that has nightmares about a tiger chasing him. His mother tells him to stop and face the tiger instead of continue running. She suggests that if he stops and the tiger eats him he will even get as strong as the tiger.

As I got aware of how I many times automatically, did things to avoid shame I also began to connect with my sense of choice. I did not want to run away from myself but wanted to be able to face what was going on inside of me. By choosing to pause and feel the shame and connect it to different needs I started to reclaim both power and choice. I started to dare to be vulnerable, more human as I got it that shame was teaching me

about interconnectedness and about my need of belonging, acceptance and respect. When the cultural shame slowly transformed into natural shame I noticed how empathy with others was more abundantly there as I was more sensitive and open.

*A characteristic of people who quickly recover from shame is that they have a great ability to feel empathy for both themselves and others.*⁶

6 . Brown, Brené (2008), I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't) - Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame. Gotham Books.

The Compass of Needs

Writing my book Anger Guilt and shame, Reclaiming Power and Choice I created a model that I call **The Compass of Needs**. It is a tool to recognize our shame patterns and to connect to our needs. Together with the principles of NVC, this tool helps us recognize and befriend our shame and increase our understanding of anger and guilt.

When we aren't aware of the feeling or shame (as we have avoided it, maybe even unconsciously, and thus missed the connection to our needs) we recognize shame by noticing if we have used one of the strategies in the compass. Recognizing this is helpful because it can help us reconnect to what we need. If you realize that you have moved in the compass ask yourself;

- does this has to do with my need for respect, acceptance or belonging? Usually one of these needs ring more true and we get some inner connection and can go further with; "Is there anything more that I need and how do I WANT to act now in order to meet mine and others needs?"

When we act in any of the directions of the compass of needs, we are not fully connected to our needs. These four ways can be combined in many ways. They have different "costs" and they all aim at helping us to escape from shame.

1. We submit, withdraw, become quiet and avoid expressing what we feel, need and want. This can easily lead to depression, despair and apathy.

Thoughts which are signs of submission can be:

Nobody wants me anyway.

I need nothing, I can manage on my own.

I will not show that...

I might as well give up; it will not turn out as I was hoping anyhow.

2. We engage in relationships but criticize ourselves as soon as we get close to something that can stimulate shame. Our inner critic has free reign to attack and judge us. We show that we are victims, losers, not to be counted on, and we apologize and show that we are ashamed that we are so insufficient. Shame often turns to guilt. Self-critical thoughts often sound similar to those below:

If I could just learn to not be so ...

I'm not enough ...

I am such a ...

Why do I always...

3. We rebel against what we perceive as demands or threats to our freedom or lack of respect. In rebellion, we avoid feeling shame by showing that we are independent and free to do as we want. The consequences are that we can easily become cold and mute. We stop giving attention to the needs of others and thus we find it more difficult to satisfy our own needs for care, reciprocity, solidarity and love. Thoughts associated with rebellion could be:

I have come further than that - I do not care...

I have no problems! If nothing happens soon I will leave.

Look at me and I'll show you how things should go!

We are not afraid of anything! More people should be like us and the world would look different.

4. We threaten, attack, condemn, criticize, and blame others. Others are to blame when we are angry because they **should** act differently. We demand, use sarcasm, irony, argument, and justify ourselves. This leads to anger. Thoughts that are a sign that we have moved in this direction of the compass may be:

It is your own fault, you must start taking responsibility.

They are cowards and too weak to be able to do this.

She / he / they / you are too ...

She / he / they / you are not enough...

From Shame to Connection¹

Follow the four steps below to regain connection and inner balance after a shame attack.

1a. Experience the effects that shame has on your body. It can be experienced as warm waves that will make you blush or as a discomfort in the stomach.

1b. Remind yourself that it is valuable to get in touch with your feelings and needs. Do not do anything to avoid or numb the shame. If you act before you have connected with yourself, it is possible that you will do something you will regret later.

2. Realize that you need support and that you will benefit from sharing how you feel with another human being.

3. Get in touch with someone you know who can listen and tell him or her what you are ashamed of. If no one is available, make sure to take the time to listen to yourself with compassion. Shame cannot keep us in its grip when we experience empathic connection.

4. If you did not notice the shame erupt through your body, you can recognize it in how you move in any of the directions or the compass of needs. Use this awareness to connect to your needs.

¹ From the Book Anger, Guilt and Shame, Reclaiming Power and Choice by Liv Larsson.