

Changing Patterns of Shame-Based Behavior A Crucial Step on the Road to Recovery

by Steve Cutler | RELAPSE PREVENTION |

It's easy to see how people recovering from addiction have turned to drugs or alcohol to deaden the pain caused by shame-based thinking — a common trait in addictive people — and why correcting self-destructive thinking and behavior is essential to a successful recovery.

Don Miguel Ruiz wrote in *The Four Agreements*: "We punish ourselves over and over for a mistake we made or some way in which we don't measure up to perfection. No other animal punishes itself over and over again for a single crime."

Addictive people make an art of self-punishment. We ruminate on and beat ourselves up for every mistake we've made, piling more painful memories onto the list every day until our minds are full of instances of our failure and thoughts of judgment, self-recrimination, regret and despair. We convince ourselves we are defective, unacceptable and hopeless.

What is Shame?

It is not guilt. Guilt accompanies the memory of something we feel we have done wrong. Recognizing that our feeling of guilt is a response to that mistake and any damage it might have caused opens the possibility of making amends and reconciling with people involved.

Shame is no help at all. Shame attributes our past mistakes to an intrinsic unalterable flaw in our personality. It defines us as defective and hopeless. Shame is a stigma we impose on ourselves.

It's valuable to know the difference between guilt and shame. A study by two psychologists at the University of British Columbia found that recovering alcoholics who report or exhibit shame when talking about their former drinking are more prone to relapse than those who acknowledge guilt.

"One reason that certain sobriety programs may be effective is because they encourage people to see their behaviors as something they should feel guilty, but not necessarily shameful, about," the researchers said.

Changing Shame-Based Thinking

The first step in changing deep-seated shame-based thinking and behavior is to acknowledge we experience them.

According to John Bradshaw, author of *Healing the Shame That Binds You*, "A shame-based person will guard against exposing his inner self to others, but more significantly, he will guard against exposing himself to himself."

Bradshaw believes shame is inculcated in childhood, the result of a severely dysfunctional, abusive and often addictive home life. He stresses the importance of getting in touch with our vulnerable, victimized "inner child" — to accept, embrace and heal that part of ourselves so we can let go of the shame we carry as adults. Twelve-step programs and family system-based therapy can help with this process.

Most experts on addiction advocate a cognitive-behavioral approach to treating shame-based behavior — that is, observing, evaluating and challenging self-destructive, shame-based thoughts and replacing them with more accurate thoughts. There are a wealth of resources on cognitive therapy, including self-help books such as the best-selling *Feeling Good* by Dr. David Burns, *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman and *How to Change Your Thinking about Shame*, published by Hazelden.

Realizing that our negative thoughts, the mistakes we have made and our past alcohol and substance abuse do not define who we are clears the way for accepting and loving ourselves and others and gives us

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About Steve Cutler

A freelance writer based in New York City and South Florida, Steve Cutler writes extensively on substance abuse, recovery and family systems.

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