



Serene Scene

Transitional Sober Living Magazine

LONG BEACH®

SERENE CENTER

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February, 2010 Issue

12 STEP TREK

Step #5: Admitted to God...

12 Step Worksheet Series

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EDUCATION

BEFORE

PLACEMENT

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Medical Editor, Richard Gracer, M.D.

POINT OF RETURN

MONTHLY STORY

Swinging Between Extremes

Jenni Schaefer

RELATIONSHIPS

AND RECOVERY

Michael G., Author of Hope in the Morning

ASSESSING AND MONITORING YOUR SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

Captain Larry Smith,
Author of The Daily Life Plan Journal

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CENTRAL SPOTLIGHT:

Q&A With Ian Maze

Department of Neuroscience
Mt. Sinai School of Medicine

Robin Jay, Editorial Director,
BehavioralHealthCentral.com

SHAME IN THE FAMILY

Andrew Martin, MBA, CADCI



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The families of the addict, as well as the addict themselves, are partly a product of their environment. The sociological influence of people – on people – is profound. This influence is obvious when looking at the addict who has grown up in a family with an alcoholic Mother or Father, or both. However the sociological influence is not as clear in a family with one addict and the balance of the family members seemingly normal.

Addiction is a disease that does not operate in a vacuum: quite the opposite, it impacts everyone around the addict in very real and substantial ways. Influence can be found in social interactions, communication, perceptions of surroundings, trust, emotional interpretation, health, and on and on. For the purposes of this article the topic of shame in the family will be the focus.

A good place to start is to clarify the difference between shame and guilt. Very often shame and guilt are considered synonymous with one another in a family with addiction. However, shame and guilt are very different as one is emotive and the other is behavioral.

Shame	Guilt
Represents who I am	Represents behavior
"I am a mistake"	"I made a mistake"
Identified by feeling like a bad person	Identified by a feeling of getting caught

When shame and guilt are confused in a family with addiction, the individuals within the family begin to feel that they are bad people when they make a mistake. For example: When John comes home to find his alcoholic wife Jane passed out on the sofa, he gets very angry and throws a glass of water on her face to wake her up; he then tells her that she is a "no good drunk". Later, John feels that his behavior was uncalled for and begins to believe that he is a bad person. Likewise, Jane feels that she is worthless because she was unable to manage her drinking that evening. In both cases, feelings of guilt have been transformed into feelings of shame.

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When the process of converting guilt into shame is advanced, toxic shaming begins to plague the individuals within the family system.

When one is consumed with toxic shame, one's belief system is irrationally altered to affirm that one is less than human, a second class citizen, a loser, a failure, inferior, and unforgivable. One also blames one's self for problems even if the problems are outside of one's influence or control.



It is common for families with addiction to convert guilt feelings into shame feelings until there is no distinction between the two. The belief that a family member should feel unacceptability and shame until they change their behavior becomes the norm, and the shamefulness becomes toxic within the family system.

This form of toxic shame motivates family members to be perfectionists in order to avoid the shame. Unfortunately, believing one has to be perfect is just as irrational as believing one is worthless. The end result of the perfectionist belief system is a shameless belief set.

Like shamefulness, shamelessness can also become toxic when one's belief system is modified to accept only the best performances, the best behaviors, and the most acceptable feelings. When one is consumed with toxic shamelessness, one believes they must win at all costs, can make no mistakes, are entitled, controlling, are critical and judgmental, are more-than-human, are arrogant, condemning of others, and withhold energy and emotion.

Like shamefulness, shamelessness is established in irrational beliefs as well: The irrationality of the two can be viewed as opposite ends of the spectrum.

Shameful Shameless



Whenever there are two opposing belief systems within one's mind, there are bound to be power struggles: not only internally, but with other people as well. Within a family system with addiction, these power struggles are apparent in dramatic arguments and situations in which all parties involved overreact, under react, and react inappropriately as they try to position themselves for more influence. The family system often becomes somewhat similar to a soap opera on television, with small problems becoming magnified while big issues are ignored. Moreover, the same struggles seem to repeat themselves over and over again: with nobody in the family system aware of how to break the cycle. In reality, the only winner in the power struggle between shamefulness and shamelessness is the behavior of the power struggle itself: and often family members come to rely on these power struggles to feel alive, not knowing that this behavior is unhealthy.

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Power struggles can be reduced by following a simple set of guiding principles borrowed from Al-Anon Family Groups;

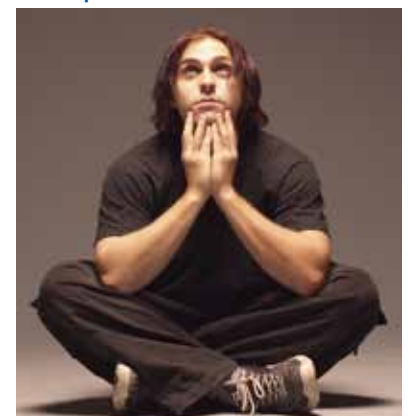
You Didn't Cause It... You Can't Cure It... You Can't Control It...

These principles can be applied in many ways. For example, if the power struggle is focused on the addict's behavior, understand that you didn't cause the behavior, you can't cure the behavior, and you can't control the behavior. Once rational thinking is in place around the addict's behavior, the struggle will be greatly reduced. Perhaps the power struggle is focused on one's inability to pay attention and listen to you, then realize that you can't control the other person's interest, you can't cure their inability to focus, and you can't control what they are going to do with their intention. Again, once rational thinking is in place around the individual's inability to pay attention, the struggle will be greatly reduced.

The Three C's of Al-Anon teach us that we must remain humble, that we are only human, and that we are not that powerful. Most importantly, the Three C's of Al-Anon remind us to get unstuck from traditional behaviors, and to accept one's self as a human being.

Being human means being fallible, with flaws, and acceptable as is. Moreover, being human requires one to be willing to accept help with challenges: and to ask for help too. For many in families with addiction, asking for help from others is one of the most difficult tasks to perform. This is unfortunate, because not only will help come, but asking someone for help is one of the most sacred actions a person can take. Perhaps it is so difficult for many to ask for help because they do not want to recognize that they cannot do it all on their own. Perhaps many people would rather suffer the consequences of a poor quality of life, rather than simply overcome their fear of asking for help. Perhaps, for many in families with addiction, asking for help is simply too much of a threat to their ego. But being human involves being humble enough to know one's own shortcomings and to accept those shortcomings as reality: furthermore, to accept one's self as is – not perfect – but acceptable.

If one is to move away from the shameful extreme on one side, and the shameless extreme on the other side, one will find themselves in the middle of being human. Making mistakes, being responsible, staying open, being vulnerable without pretense, and living with flexibility are all part of being human. Perhaps the most important part of being human is the ability to forgive, and to be forgiven. For so many people in families with addiction, their shame is carried with them into recovery. To be set free from the shame, they must be able to forgive themselves for their past behaviors. Forgiveness can take a long time, and once the individual realizes that their past behaviors are



February, 2010

SereneScene

SHAME IN THE FAMILY

Andrew Martin, MBA, CADC I

no longer a part of their lives, forgiveness can take place.

The reality is that people are who they are today, not yesterday, and not tomorrow. People are who they are in the present. Many people have made terrible mistakes in judgment in the past, and those mistakes have taken them down a path that was not ideal. However, as human beings, those choices do not dictate what present choices can be. People have the ability to choose whatever path they wish: the only thing getting in their way is their shameful and/or shameless selves. If they wish, they can move toward being human and make more healthy choices based on the reality of the present. Everyone, without exception, is empowered to be more human. **SS**



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