

The Many Layers of Shame

Shame on you, shame! Shame is a sense of failure, hurt, or harm; it's the emotion that comes up when we feel that we've done something wrong to others or ourselves. At its core, shame is secretive: We rarely share our shame with others. The burden of shame is the belief that if this secret should ever get out, or if people should ever uncover this ugly piece of your story, then they will think less of you. Shame often looks like I'm bad because I'm ill or I'm ill because I'm bad.

Ever shut down and tune out when it comes to doing something or talking about yourself? You probably have shame to thank for that. When shame makes you shut down and tune out, it creates stress, despair, loneliness, and disconnection, and it's often the emotional driver of the chronically ill. It sets the tone for everything you do regarding decision making for your care, your relationships, and more. For example, I was lying to everyone I met out of shame, and that drove the emotions I allowed myself to feel.

When I hid in the shadows of shame, my denial, depression, and fear about my illness were the catalysts that helped me create a facade. The motorcycle accident that never happened could explain my disabilities rather than admitting to people that I was sick. A motorcycle accident doesn't relapse; a motorcycle accident doesn't get worse with time; a motorcycle accident wouldn't lead people to ask if I was contagious. A motorcycle accident could happen—even to a good person. So I would tell this lie when I applied for a job or when I went out on dates with new women. It was my shield, but it was so strong that it prevented me from getting close to anyone. My lack of vulnerability and the disconnection that my lies created left me lonely, sad, and sick. No one really knew me outside of my immediate family.

The underlying belief about shame is my body doesn't matter; I don't matter. I'm not worthy, and so my body's not worthy for anyone to take the time to make it better. For example, when someone gains weight and the weight won't go away, shame becomes his codependent coping mechanism. until you're able to change your story, the healthiness of your body is an extension of the healthiness of your story.

Social media can be shame's biggest ally. Shame on you, social media! It produces a negative self-image and disconnection. on social media, everyone appears happier than you, richer than you, more beautiful than you. You don't see the mundaneness of life, and it gives us all a warped view of what life is like. When we're not feeling enough to begin with, this has a tendency to make us feel like we have even less. In response, we manufacture a false story of our own happiness, but again, living within a lie leaves you living without any vulnerability.

Social media will also happily hand you the trigger for your shame. one of my favorite ways to get through a sleepless night was stalking my ex-girlfriend's boyfriend on Facebook. I know, I know—that is an obvious no-no. But of course I would find what I was looking for, as all things hold the meaning you give them:

pictures of them together “in love” and “happy” in some awesome location. I’d spiral into inadequacy and not enough-ness around the loss of the relationship, then shame myself for not only the relationship’s ending but also for Facebook stalking them. Now I know better, and I recommend taking regular vacations from social media and treating it like a loaded gun: with caution.

Fear is an emotion associated with shame; it comes along for the ride. There is the fear of losing social standing or being humiliated, and if you’re sick, there may be a real fear of death, maybe for some perceived wrong you did. My old story was that I couldn’t be loved until I got better. I was afraid that someone would discover my inadequacies and think less of me. I was embarrassed about the first impression I presented to new people when they saw me walk. I feared my limitations would never be resolved.

There’s also a cycle of shame and anger: Shame causes anger, and anger causes shame. It doesn’t matter where you are in the cycle, because both emotions can make you feel like a victim, trapping you in your illness and creating a cuckoo, anxious mind. Victims use anger as a wall against vulnerability, leaving them stuck and alone, believing that nothing can be done.

There is another sense of shame that is closely related to guilt. It is the part of shame that is associated with not wanting to be a burden on our family, our friends, and even our doctors and professional caretakers. It manifests when you think, my illness is a burden on someone else. This burden can be especially hard if you have previously been self-sufficient: In that moment when you need people the most, you don’t know how to ask for help. I felt this burden when it became clear that even with their best intentions, my parents were getting tired of taking me from one hospital to another.

Once I was able to let go of the guilt, anger, and shame that had become such a large part of my illness, I could break free from my survival mode and actually allow people to give me support and love. As I let more people into my life and practiced this, I became less fearful and more vulnerable. I was no longer a victim of my illness.

Whoa, I know that is big, confusing, and overwhelming when you think of it as a whole. Is it possible to let go? Wake up and presto, your shame is gone? I’m an optimist, but I will tell you that it takes work, and if you do the work, you can get there. In fact, you’ve already started tossing off your shame. Each chapter of this book builds on itself: recognizing your old, distracting story; changing your beliefs by creating a new, bolder one that is aligned with the truth; and then using tools like meditation and tapping to calm yourself and reprogram your fears, the shame and anger will no longer have a place to camp out in your mind. Trust me on this. Keep doing the work and you will get there, too.

This is exactly how I learned to move on from being stuck in my past stories and create an awesome current story built around what I want for the future.

Stimulati Melvin Britton-Miller was integral in helping me release my old story and its heavy burden of shame. Along with that, I released 40 pounds of weight, which allowed me to be much more comfortable in my own body, both figuratively and literally. I realized I was holding on to the heaviness in my heart that was literally keeping me heavy physically. It was at this same time that my body began to heal. Releasing anger and shame lowers stress in both the body and the mind, and lower stress levels, once again, have been clearly shown to reduce the inflammation that causes pain, weight gain, and low energy.

You, my friend, are no victim! You are ready to start using a superpowered Thought Igniter I learned from a Momentum education class. It's called the Oh, what the fuck, do whatever it takes! reaction. Try saying this phrase out loud five times. now try again, and this time, really mean it. Sing it: Ooooooh, what the fuuuuck, doooo whateeeever it taaaakes!

Oh, what the fuck is letting go of everything that might be holding you back: fear, shame, guilt. Do whatever it takes is part of an unstoppable you. This idea goes beyond an affirmation; it's a declaration. Declare that you will not hold yourself back from getting stronger, better, or bolder. That you will let go of the guilt, shame, and fear and allow yourself to do whatever it takes to heal. Make this declaration at the moment you've convinced yourself not to go to physical therapy or the gym, and push yourself to go. Make this declaration at the moment you find yourself not wanting to be vulnerable or ask for help from the people whom you truly love. Make this declaration when fear creeps up and tells you that you can't do something—because you can.