

TOXIC SHAME? - HEALTHY SHAME?

Toxic shame is the loss of self-hood, the loss of authenticity; it is a condition where one has no inner life. Happiness and peace of mind come from the outside. Good feelings about oneself are mainly determined by what is going on externally in one's life. Rarely, is a sense of one's own value and worth generated from within. How can it be? - when there is such an inadequate sense of self, incapable of generating any feelings of self-worth. Toxic shame cuts us off from our core and continues to feed the illusion that we are flawed and defective, that we are not good enough. These feelings eventually become welded to our belief system and no longer exist as feelings that come and go - they become a part of our human condition. So, as we are poisoned by these beliefs about ourselves, we then strive to conceal our emptiness, our inner torment, and feelings of being unworthy - we begin to live a lie.

Healthy shame is being in touch with our humanness. It reminds us of our limitations and boundaries, it breeds humility. It prevents us from becoming stuck in the 'I know it all' state of being which stops us from benefiting from our experiences and leaves us standing on unstable ground, as we try to maintain the pretence of knowing that which we do not know and being that which we are not. Healthy shame does not limit or entrap us, in fact, it frees us and allows us a state of continued development, ever enthused by the magic and the mystery of life. Healthy shame is an acceptance of our nature, feelings, instincts, drives, needs and sexuality. When we deny our nature and cut off from our primary emotions, we then convert healthy shame into toxic shame. It is this pollution of our real nature that we must address.

When we clearly understand our condition, we realise that not only do we need to embrace our shame, to re-connect with our frightened, untrusting and emotionally deprived child, we also need to allow ourselves to grieve for our lost childhood. The social and cultural structures we conform to largely view grief as a negative and undesirable process, yet we are often unable to understand and accept events until we have truly grieved. It is our unresolved grief that keeps many parts of us 'locked' and 'shut down' and feeds our negative behaviour patterns. Grief is not unhealthy, it enables us to heal, it allows us to feel what is real inside us and in doing so truly address it. We cannot heal what we cannot feel because until we feel it we do not know that it even exists within us, so it is able to masquerade as some other emotion or feeling and continue to wreak havoc. This is why we must make contact with what we really feel so that the healing process can begin.

It is time to relinquish the shackles of the past and the fears and doubts of the future by using what we know, to empower us in the present. We understand how our sense of self-worth is constructed and where much of the dialogue we have inside us originates from. We also have an understanding of how the illusions about ourselves are kept nourished and alive. We recognise why, out of a need to feel we matter, as well as to survive, we have established certain patterns of behaviour and particular roles, which we are now sub-consciously locked into most of the time. We also can see why there is a need to lovingly embrace our own child so that we can be whole again. So, how do we use all these realisations for personal empowerment? This is the next step on the road to becoming whole.