Understanding shame

The feeling that there is something wrong with me, and that others can see it.

Shame is one of the most painful human emotions. It is the sense of being flawed, unacceptable or less than other people, and the fear of being seen that way.

Guilt

- "I did something bad."
- About behaviour
- Leads to wanting to put it right
- Usually useful

Shame

- "I am bad."
- About the whole self
- Leads to hiding, attacking yourself or attacking others
- Rarely useful

Where it comes from

We are social animals, and we need to belong. Shame evolved as an alarm for the threat of rejection. It grows strongest in people who were criticised, humiliated, bullied, abused or neglected, or made to feel different. The fault lies with what was done, yet it is the person on the receiving end who feels the shame.

How it shows

- ☐ Wanting to hide or disappear
- ☐ Blushing, looking down, going quiet
- ☐ Harsh self-criticism
- ☐ Perfectionism, never letting a flaw show
- ☐ People-pleasing
- ☐ Anger and blaming others
- ☐ Keeping secrets, avoiding closeness
- ☐ Numbing with drink, food or work

What helps

- **Naming it.** "This is shame." It is easier to manage once you recognise it.
- **Understanding where it came from.** It is a learned response, not the truth about you.
- **Telling someone safe.** Shame gets worse when it is kept secret and eases when someone responds with acceptance.
- **Self-compassion.** Responding to yourself with understanding in place of attack.
- **Separating who you are from what you did**, or from what was done to you.

In therapy

Shame makes it hard to say certain things out loud. There is no rush. Whatever you bring will be met with respect.

What it would mean to me to carry a little less of this

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Responsibility pie

For guilt and self-blame: share out responsibility among everything that played a part.

Name _____ Date _____

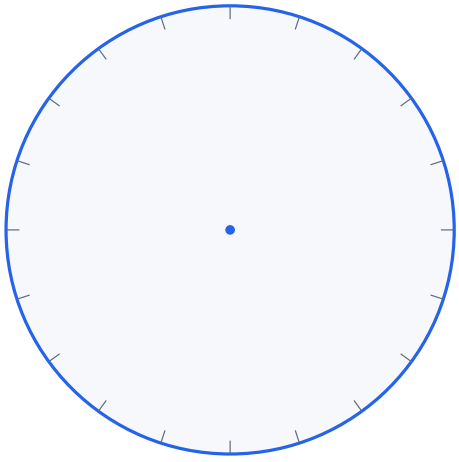
1. Write down what happened.
2. List everyone and everything that played a part. Leave yourself until last.
3. Give each one a share of the pie, as a percentage, and draw the slices.
4. Whatever is left over is your share.

What happened?

Before I start: how responsible do I feel?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Totally



Who or what played a part? (Put myself last)	% share

What do I notice? How does my share compare with how responsible I felt at the start?

Responsibility pies are described by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky in Mind Over Mood.

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Forgiving myself

Taking responsibility without punishing yourself for life.

Name _____ Date _____

Guilt has a job. It tells us we have acted against our own values, and it pushes us to put things right. Once we have listened, it has done its work. Punishing yourself for years does not help the person you hurt, and it does not make you a better person. Forgiving yourself is not letting yourself off. It is taking responsibility, and then allowing yourself to carry on.

What I did, or did not do. In plain words, without excuses and without insults.

What I knew and could do at the time

What I know now that I did not know then

The part that was mine

The parts that were not

Other people, circumstances, chance

Who was affected, and how

What I have done to put it right, and what I could still do: say sorry, repair it, or do some good elsewhere

What I have learned, and what I do differently now

What I would say to a friend who had done the same and felt as I do

A sentence of forgiveness to myself. Write it even if you do not fully believe it yet.

If what happened involved serious harm, or the guilt will not ease, bring it to therapy. Some things are too much to work through alone on a page.

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Forgiveness: what it is and what it is not

What forgiving someone does and does not mean, and why it is your choice.

Being hurt by someone leaves a mark. Anger and resentment are natural, and often they are fair. Forgiveness is one way of loosening the hold the hurt has on you. It is a choice, it takes time, and nobody else gets to decide when or whether you make it.

Forgiveness is...

- Letting go of the wish to make them pay
- Something you do for your own peace
- A process, often with steps backwards
- Possible without ever telling the other person
- Compatible with remembering clearly

Forgiveness is not...

- Saying that what happened was acceptable
- Forgetting, or pretending it did not hurt
- Trusting the person again
- Going back to the relationship
- A duty, or proof that you are a good person

Forgiving and reconciling are different

Forgiveness happens inside you. Reconciling takes two people, and it needs the other person to be safe, honest and willing to change. You can forgive someone and still keep your distance. Where there has been abuse, your safety comes first.

If you are not ready, or do not want to

That is allowed. Being pushed to forgive too early usually just buries the anger. There are other ways forward:

- Accepting that it happened, without forgiving it
- Putting it down for now, and picking it up when you have more strength
- Putting your energy into your own life, so the hurt takes up less of it

If you want to move towards it

1. Say fully what happened and what it cost you. Out loud, on paper or in therapy.
2. Let yourself feel the anger and the sadness. Forgiveness comes after them, not instead of them.
3. See the person as a whole human being who did harm. That explains it. It does not excuse it.
4. Decide what, if anything, you need from them, and what you will do if you never get it.
5. Expect to do it more than once. Old anger comes back. That does not mean you have failed.

What carrying this costs me now

What I would want forgiveness, or acceptance, to give me

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A compassionate letter to myself

Writing to yourself as a wise and caring friend would.

Think of something you are struggling with or criticising yourself for. Now imagine someone who cares about you deeply and sees you clearly: your strengths, your flaws and everything you have been through. Write to yourself from their point of view.

What to include

1. **Acknowledge the difficulty.** "I can see how hard this has been."
2. **Make sense of it.** How do your history and circumstances explain why you feel and react this way?
3. **Remember you are not alone.** Others struggle with this too.
4. **Be warm.** Use the tone you would use with someone you love.
5. **Offer encouragement, not orders.** What would help? What do you need?

Write without stopping to edit. If the critic interrupts, notice it and carry on.

Dear me,

Afterwards

- Read it back slowly, out loud if you can, in a kind tone.
- Notice how it feels to receive it.
- Keep it, and read it again on a hard day.

Compassionate letter writing is used in Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

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