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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