

Understanding Shame

AN INFORMATION GUIDE · PART 1 OF 2

This guide draws substantially on the research of Dr. Brené Brown — a research professor at the University of Houston who has spent over two decades studying shame, vulnerability, courage and connection. Her grounded-theory studies and books, including *I Thought It Was Just Me, Daring Greatly* and *Atlas of the Heart*, form the basis of Shame Resilience Theory, referenced throughout.

Shame is one of the most universal, yet least discussed, human emotions. Understanding what it is, how it differs from guilt, and how it operates can help you recognise it in yourself and respond with greater compassion and resilience.

WHAT IS SHAME?

"Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging and connection."

— Brené Brown, drawing on her grounded-theory research (Brown, 2006; 2021)

SHAME vs GUILT — A KEY DISTINCTION

GUILT

"I did something bad."

Guilt is a focus on *behaviour*. It is uncomfortable, but it is adaptive — it can motivate repair, apology and change, while leaving our sense of self intact.

SHAME

"I am bad."

Shame is a focus on *self*. Brown's research found it is strongly correlated with addiction, depression, aggression, bullying and eating disorders — and rarely motivates positive change.

SHAME RESILIENCE THEORY

1

RECOGNISE SHAME & ITS TRIGGERS

Notice the physical and emotional signs of shame, and identify what tends to trigger it for you personally.

2

PRACTISE CRITICAL AWARENESS

Examine the messages and expectations driving your shame — where they came from, and whether they are realistic or fair.

3

REACH OUT

Shame thrives in secrecy. Sharing your experience with someone who responds with empathy can interrupt its power.

4

SPEAK SHAME

Naming shame — talking about it openly rather than around it — is one of the most effective ways to reduce its intensity.

BROWN'S 12 CATEGORIES OF SHAME

Appearance & body image

Money & work

Motherhood / fatherhood

Family

Parenting

Mental & physical health

Addiction

Sex

Ageing

Religion

Surviving trauma

Being stereotyped or labelled

"If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive."

— BRENE BROWN

Understanding Shame

AN INFORMATION GUIDE · PART 2 OF 2

VULNERABILITY: THE BIRTHPLACE OF CONNECTION

Vulnerability Is Not Weakness

Brown's research reframes vulnerability — emotional risk, exposure and uncertainty — as our most accurate measure of courage, not a flaw to be hidden. She argues that the same vulnerability we associate with fear and shame is also the birthplace of joy, belonging, creativity, authenticity and love. Acknowledging our vulnerabilities, rather than armouring against them, is a foundation of shame resilience.

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change."

HOW SHAME OFTEN SHOWS UP

INTERNAL SIGNS

- A heavy, sinking feeling
- Wanting to disappear or hide
- Harsh self-criticism
- Feeling exposed or "found out"
- A sense of being fundamentally flawed

COMMON RESPONSES

- Moving away — withdrawing, hiding, secrecy
- Moving toward — seeking to appease or please
- Moving against — trying to gain power over others
- Numbing, perfectionism or over-control

GENDERED PATTERNS BROWN OBSERVED

- For many women: pressure to "do it all, do it perfectly, and never let them see you sweat"
- For many men: pressure to never appear weak
- These patterns are cultural tendencies, not universal rules

THE COST OF UNADDRESSED SHAME

- Shame needs secrecy, silence and judgement to grow
- It is strongly correlated with addiction, depression and anxiety
- It can fuel aggression, bullying and blame
- It rarely motivates positive change — unlike guilt, it undermines the sense of self needed to grow
- Left unspoken, it can quietly erode relationships, self-worth and belonging

TOWARD WHOLEHEARTED LIVING

BROWN'S GUIDEPOSTS FOR WHOLEHEARTED LIVING

A selection of the practices Brown identifies as supporting a life of courage, authenticity and connection.

Authenticity over approval

Self-compassion over perfectionism

Resilience over numbing

Gratitude over scarcity

Trust over certainty

Creativity over comparison

Play & rest over exhaustion as status

Calm over anxiety as a lifestyle

Meaningful work over self-doubt

Laughter & connection over "cool"

A MOMENT TO REFLECT

- What are one or two categories where shame tends to show up most for me?
- When shame arises, do I tend to move away, toward, or against others?
- Who is someone I trust enough to "speak shame" with, if I needed to?

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we will ever do."

— BRENÉ BROWN

SOURCES

Brown, B. (2006). Shame resilience theory: A grounded theory study on women and shame. *Families in Society*, 87(1), 43–52.
Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly*. Gotham Books. · Brown, B. (2021). *Atlas of the Heart*. Random House.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology
For educational purposes only.
Not a substitute for professional advice.