

Inside Shame Transformation

with Caryn Scotto d' Luzia, MA, SEP,

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How to Build Resilience in the Face of Shame's Helplessness

Shame is often experienced as a massive, tornado-like swirl of helplessness and hopelessness that keeps tearing through our hearts and minds, through the very core of our being. Its redundant looping can become stuck on any number of thoughts of inadequacy: *I am such a terrible failure; there is no way anyone could ever love me; I shouldn't even bother trying, there's no way I'm gonna measure; I don't want anyone to see me; No one could ever understand what I am going through.*

It's as if these voices trap people inside the black hole of shame's universe, with seemingly no way out.

Some of the biggest pitfalls of working with clients in this state is to try to shift their thinking. It's important to realize that when dealing with intense shame our pre-frontal cortex has already been hijacked by the brain stem and limbic system—we're no longer consciously in charge, rather our automated, patterned historical experiences are in control. These shame-filled thoughts and voices feel reasonable and accurate in this instance and to contradict them is like telling someone who's hyperventilating that they're fine. A response like this is far from safe to a person billowing in and out of a paper bag.

In my practice, I always start by saying, "I understand you feel that way. Of course you would."

But I don't leave it at that. I hone in on what is driving these feelings, and I seek to normalize them because the truth is it is normal to feel overwhelmed and helplessness.

So I help point out, "of course you would feel that way given this is the anniversary of your father's death. Everything you've explained around that relationship was overwhelming and made you feel inadequate."

You want to meet them where they're stuck in their black hole of looping helplessness, not sound like an outsider who doesn't get what the inside of a black hole looks like and feels like.

I recently worked with a woman whose shame was tied up with money. She is a highly successful real estate agent who has done very well financially despite the ups and downs of the market over the years. In general, she has a successful life with a strong and supportive partner and wonderful grown children who she felt close to and proud of. But she had very rough developmental years and her father used his financial might to control, blame and shame her and her siblings. She was in the middle of a large real estate deal when her father contacted her in a manipulative way around money. That's when she contacted me.

"I don't want his money, not a penny, but if I had it for this deal everything would fall into place!!" She began to cry over Skype.

I knew enough about the relationship to know she would never take her father's money, still she was in a tailspin.

"Meanwhile I've got to call this guy back at the bank." She buckled onto the couch and bowed with her head in her knees. "I can't believe I did this! Why am I such a screw up?"

"Janice, this is a shame spiral isn't it? Caused by overwhelm but mostly by the trigger of your father trying to manipulate control over your situation. Kinda like when you were young?"

She didn't look up but she nodded at me from knee level.

"Can you let yourself breathe while you notice the trigger and how that little kid was helpless and left with no options?"

She nodded and breathed.

"Now you have \$500,000 in the bank. I know you need \$900,000 for this deal but that's no helpless kid that's made that bundle over the years."

"And I did it without his help. I did it on my own terms!" She popped her head up from her lap. "See I know the bank will give me that money based on what I gave them. It just takes time and then, as always, my dad pounces."

"When you were in the process of achieving something you mean? He would swoop in or try to grab the credit?"

"To prey on me. Make me feel even weaker."

"Your body is not looking very weak right now. It did a moment ago when your head was buried in your lap but now..."

"I feel strong but in the pit of my stomach I feel this icy pit, and I just want to hide."

"Well, go ahead. Where would you like to go?"

"But I don't have time. I need to make this deal go or!" She held her head in her hands.

"Can you let your little kid hide for a couple minutes while your adult waits for her and then together you carry on with the deal. Just five minutes."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Let your little kid hide while she knows you'll keep things safe on the outside for her until she feels ready to work again."

"I'm not hiding if I'm looking at you."

"Feel free to turn your back and let me bring you support through the back of your heart if that is okay?"

She turned around and reported it felt great.

"What are you noticing?" I asked.

"Since I hide, I don't feel an ounce of helplessness anymore."

"Ah ha!" I nodded.

"My kid stopped hiding and started picking some flowers."

"That sounds nice."

I noticed she had gone from two extremes: the helplessness and shame to empowered individualism.

"I'm wondering if there is some middle ground between the helplessness and empowerment?" I asked.

She started to cry, but unlike before, now there's grief.

"It's easier to go into a tailspin over this stuff than to notice my dad is never gonna be who I wanted him to be and have him show up for me in a clear, good way."

She felt the grief for another few minutes with my support, then looked quite serene. I asked her what was happening and she said she felt more settled, the pit in her stomach had melted. She felt solid again.

I didn't chase her around in her tailspin; instead, I remained a calm center while I helped guide her away from the pull of the conditioned tailspin of self-loathing to the higher ground of a safer experience. That led to what was underneath all the learned helplessness and allowed the grief to clear. We went on to do more shame and attachment work for a few more months while she continued to build resilience when this swirly tornado was triggered. This resilience building allowed new neural networks to form that challenged the old ones and gave her a sense of options for how to react when the old shame triggers showed up. She experienced herself becoming more embodied around these incidents, and said she felt empowered from the inside out.

Caryn Scotto d' Luzia is an innovative somatic facilitator, educator and trainer. She is developer of AST Model of Holistic Shame Resolution®, a neurobiologically-principled, attachment based approach that specializes in chronic shame relief, building shame and inner critic resilience, healing shame-based early trauma, facilitating shame-based attachment re-patterning, and supporting life-affirming authentic self-expression and empowerment.

She is the author of the following ebooks and articles, *Alchemy of Shame Transformation for Therapists and Healing Professionals (AST)*, *The 5 Step Journey to Healing Social Phobia*, *The Yin/Yang of Abandonment Recovery*, and *Wound & Essence: A Call and Response Approach to Transformation*. She is leading a shame-free living movement and training therapists, healers, and community leaders how to facilitate shame resolution and cultivate acceptance, connection, belonging, worth and well-being.

Caryn works face-to-face with people around the world on Skype, and in-person in the California's Bay Area and New York City where she sees adult clients. She offers phone case consults to therapists, healers, and coaches as well as teaches neurobiological principles through webinars online. On a wider scale, she collaborates with UN affiliated NGOs and Governments to heal collective trauma and post conflict PTSD. She is a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner and SETI adjunct faculty member, a member of the UN NGO Committee on Mental Health, USABP presenter, and speaker at the United Nations on the issue of resolving shame in women and girls around the world.

