

Overcoming Shame and Loving your Authentic Self

Have you ever felt shameful for something you said or have done? Maybe you have felt ashamed about an aspect of yourself. Well, you are not alone. This brochure was developed to help you understand shame and its effects on your life. The information and exercises in this brochure are based on Welford's book Compassion Focused Therapy for Dummies and aims to help you identify shame, understand its origins and develop ways to love your authentic self.

What is shame?

Shame is a complex and self-conscious emotion that many humans experience at some point in their lives. Shame is isolating because when we feel shame, we feel bad about ourselves and fear that others judge us as inadequate, inferior or incompetent. Due to its isolating nature, shame is considered a block to our overall wellbeing. Shame can be broken down into *internal shame* and *external shame*. Internal shame results from what we feel about ourselves and external shame relates to what we think others feel about us.

Shame vs. Guilt

It is important to distinguish the difference between two commonly mistaken terms. **Shame** refers to a global negative feeling about oneself in response to a perceived misdeed or shortcoming, whereas **guilt** is a negative feeling we experience when we feel we have done something wrong and need to make amends. To understand this more clearly, please consider the following example:

Example 1:

Sam forgot to attend an important meeting at work

If Sam feels shame, he may think: I am such a loser, I can never get anything right

If Sam feels guilt, he may think: I feel badly for what I've done, I have caused my colleagues an inconvenience

As you can see from the example, Sam felt shame after missing the meeting because he thought this reflected his perceived inadequacies. When Sam felt guilt, he did not perceive his mistake to be a reflection of his inadequacies, rather he felt he inconvenienced his colleagues which caused him to feel a sense of responsibility for his actions. In summary, shame makes us think we *are* bad, whereas guilt suggests we *did* something bad.

Why do we feel shame?

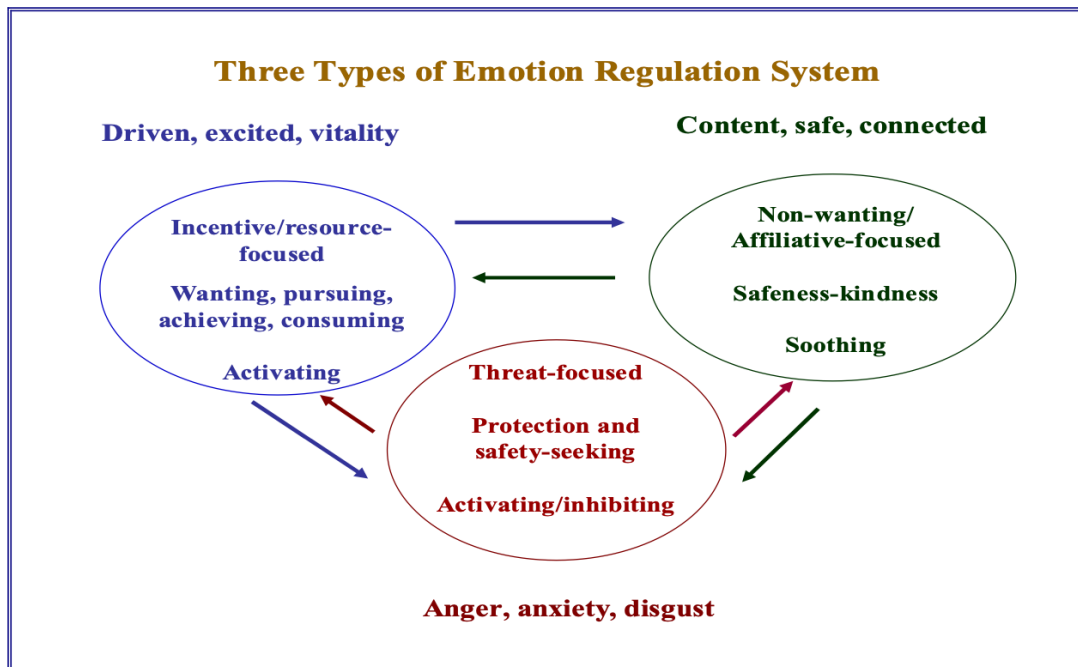
Welford explains that all humans have a tricky brain that is designed to keep us safe rather than feel 100% happy all the time. Our tricky brains may be understood as being made up of three parts shown in Figure 1:

Threat System focused

Drive System

Soothing System

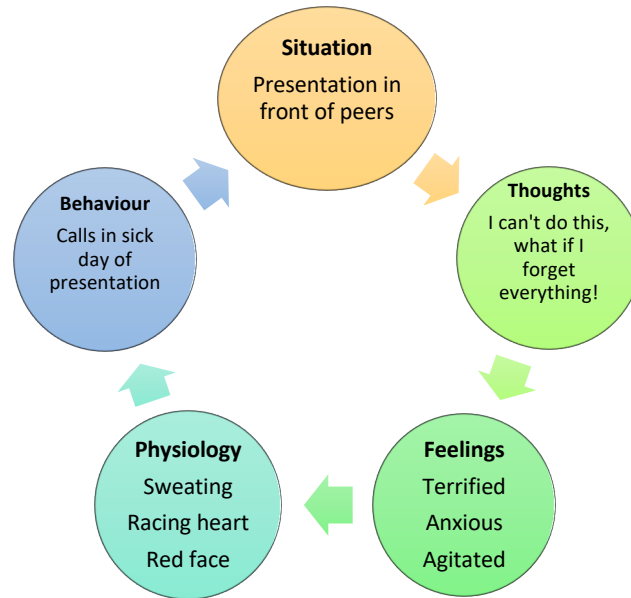
Figure 1. Emotion Regulation System



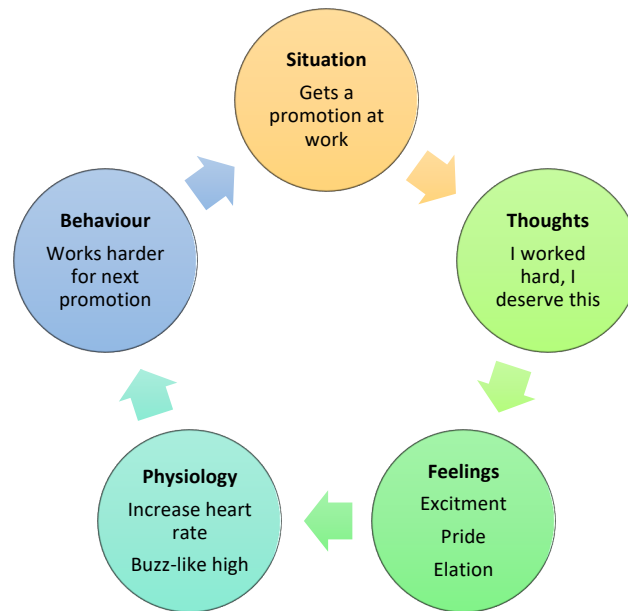
The threat and drive systems will be explored in this section, and the soothing system will be discussed later on. Reasons for feeling shame may be understood through an evolutionary perspective focused on our threat system, drive-system and social cooperation. Bear in mind that feeling shame is complex, and there are many interactive factors that occur when we feel shame. The following provides a simplified overview of how shame developed.

- First, it is important to understand the **threat system** which refers to networks in our brain that quickly detect threats and coordinate a response. When the threat system is triggered, we're likely to experience changes in our emotional state such as anxiety, anger and disgust. We may also experience changes in our physiology, such as rapid heartbeats, tight chests and increased sweating. Our threat system is so advanced, that we don't even need to experience an event to trigger this response, we can simply *imagine* it! Ironically, the system that has been set up to ensure our survival is also the system that causes us the most distress. When we feel shame, this system is likely to be triggered which is why shame is associated with a variety of anxious feelings. Please refer to Figure 2 to see what the threat system might look like in a practical example.

Figure 2: Threat system triggered



- In addition to the threat system, we also have a **drive system** that is focused on goal-directed behaviour. When we achieve a goal, we feel a buzz of pleasure that encourages us to continue achieving our goals. However, this system causes some problems when you may feel unable to achieve your goals or you set unrealistic ones. You may feel reliant on the positive responses of others to feel self-worth, therefore criticism from others may result in you feeling a sense of insecurity or shame if you feel you do not meet expectations.



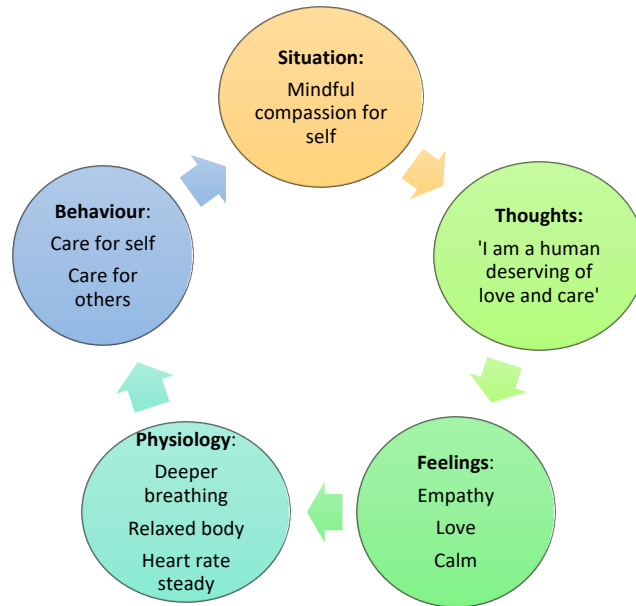
Finally, our brains evolved to be socially aware in order to survive. Our ancestors' environments were scarce, therefore they relied upon each other to search for food, build shelter and fend off attackers. Because our brains evolved in these scarce environments, group living, and social cooperation were seen as vitally important for survival. Consequently, our threat-system became attuned to *social threats*. Welford explains that social threats involve concerns that we are being negatively evaluated by others. This makes sense as humans spend a lot of time monitoring and reacting to potential social threats from others. When we gain approval, we experience a buzz within our drive system and seek further approval. When we don't get this, we may experience this as a threat and negatively evaluate ourselves to find other ways to seek approval.

Welford explains that shame begins in how you feel you live in the mind of another. Our brains have evolved to need protection, kindness and caring of others. We desire to feel valued, accepted and wanted by those around us in order to feel safe. When these desires are not fulfilled, we may feel shame for who we are and criticise aspects of ourselves for not living up to the perceived standards of those around us.

Examples of times you might feel shame (Welford, 2016):

- **Criticised:** When your boss criticises you in a hostile manner. You may feel anxious about losing your job, angry that your boss doesn't appreciate your effort and shame that you don't feel good enough
- **Sexuality:** When you feel attracted to someone, but you are already in a relationship. Maybe this person isn't the gender you're usually attracted to or not generally your type. This may elicit feelings of confusion and/or shame.
- **Depression:** When you feel depressed, but you don't know why. Maybe your friends and family do not understand, and they tell you to 'get over it'. This may make you feel ashamed of your emotions.
- **OCD:** Perhaps you have a compulsion to wash your hands many times a day to avoid something bad from happening. Rationally, you may know this may not prevent bad things from happening, but emotionally it feels real. Therefore, you may feel ashamed of this behaviour.

Luckily, it's not all doom and gloom! Our brains are also *neuroplastic*, which means they can make adaptive changes at any age! In addition to the threat and drive systems, our brains also developed a **soothing system** which mediates the effects of the opposing systems, providing us with feelings of peaceful wellbeing and contentment. Similar to how distressing images evoke negative feelings in our bodies, compassionate and peaceful images evoke a sense of calm and peace in our bodies. This sense of peace occurs when we activate our soothing system through compassionate imagery exercises.



The following section will explain how to overcome shame through activating the soothing system and provides a brief introduction on ways to develop these new pathways in your brain. This will help you develop healthier perspectives and lead you down the path of loving your authentic self.

Compassion

Welford defined compassion as a sensitivity to our own, and other people's distress, plus a motivation to prevent or alleviate distress. Welford explains that a compassionate mind comes with a set of attributes and skills that are useful to cultivate and improve our wellbeing, relationships and communities. Such attributes include but are not limited to empathy, non-judgement and distress tolerance. A compassionate self is the embodiment of a compassionate mind, which moves and interacts with the world. Welford explains that overcoming shame begins with developing self-compassion through inner stability. To develop inner stability, compassion focused work relies on mindfulness meditation which has been scientifically proven to activate the soothing system in our brains. By becoming more compassionate towards yourself, you will more effectively learn from your mistakes in order to grow and be able to handle the difficult emotions of others. Below are some ways in which a 'compassionate self' may help you overcome the shameful feelings listed above:

Compassionate self 're-evaluations':

- **Criticised:** I am really hurt by my bosses' criticism of me today because it reminded me of being criticised by my parents as a child. I wonder if he was stressed by something today which made him more angry and critical of me. I know we are both doing our best to get by, so I will make sure to do something nice for myself to help with the difficult emotions I am experiencing.
- **Sexuality:** I may feel confused by the attraction I am experiencing, but I know that I am a human and feeling attracted to others is not necessarily black and white. In fact, it is very normal and natural to feel attracted to the opposite gender you are normally attracted to, that's part of being human!
- **Depression:** My threat-system is triggered, and it is trying to protect me from something. Although these are unpleasant feelings, my emotions have adapted through evolution to protect me, and it is not my fault that I feel this way.
- **OCD:** My threat system is hard wired with a 'better safe than sorry' mechanism that is trying to protect me from the worst-case scenario. I am experiencing anxiety as a way to protect myself, so I know these feelings are not my fault even though they may feel distressing

As evidenced above, compassion for ourselves allows us to realise that we are hard-wired with tricky brains that have evolved mechanisms to protect us. Therefore, uncomfortable thoughts, emotions and desires are not your fault, in fact they were designed to protect you in some way or another!

Compassion for Depression:

If you are experiencing depression, compassion may help you to realise that your emotions are not your fault, no matter how challenging they may feel to you. Compassion for yourself allows you to feel what you are feeling without judgement or criticism. When you are relieved of self-criticism, you may feel more able to seek help

Compassion for Anxiety:

Compassion for your anxiety will help you to realise the evolutionary reasons for your distressing emotions. Your body is trying to keep you safe from a threat! When you feel compassion for yourself while experiencing anxiety, it may be easier to identify what you are threatened by and why. When you compassionately understand the origins of your anxiety, you may feel that it is easier to review perceived threats.

To begin developing inner stability and compassion, let's begin with compassion-focused exercise designed by Welford to activate your soothing system.

Exercise 1: Compassionate Mind Training:

1. Sit in a chair with your back upright and your feet flat against the floor
2. Gently close your eyes or allow your gaze to become unfocused
3. Refocus your attention to your breathing – slow down and deepen your breathing
 - a. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds and exhale for 6 seconds

4. Engage with this cycle for a few minutes
5. Bring awareness to the weight of your body on the chair and the floor beneath you
6. When your mind wanders, gently note the distraction and refocus your attention on your breath
7. Now consider qualities and attributes of a compassionate person (e.g., warmth, kindness, empathy, patience, etc.)
8. Explore each attribute one by one and notice how each attribute feels in our body as you reflect
9. Next, explore a sense of inner strength. You can do this by feeling strength in your spine, a rise in your chin and relaxed shoulders. This may be strength to bear your own or a loved one's pain, or strength to set boundaries and intervene when compassionate action is required
10. As you embody your inner strength, feel a sense of courage and commitment to be helpful
11. Become aware of the physicality of your compassionate self. Perhaps allow a gentle smile or warm expression to appear on your face
12. Consider what tone of voice you would use if your compassionate self was to speak. How would you walk, talk and interact with others?
13. Gently play with this image for a moment or two, exploring the various emotions that arise from your compassionate self
14. Now gradually bring your attention back to the room, the sounds or smells in the space around you, and the weight of your body pressing down in your chair.
15. Whenever you're ready, you may open your eyes

How did that feel? Did you notice a change in the tone of your compassionate self? What did your sense of inner strength feel like? Hopefully you felt a sense of stability, and at the very least a sense of peace and calm. But don't worry if you're not there yet! Compassion starts with allowing ourselves to be where we are in our busy lives. If you are just beginning your journey in overcoming shame and developing compassion, maybe you would like to start with small sections of this meditation and build on it over time. If you dedicate a few minutes each day to cultivating compassion through mindfulness, you may begin to notice subtle and positive changes in the way you perceive yourself and those around you. In nurturing compassion for ourselves and others, we begin a wonderful journey to loving our authentic selves and appreciating those around us.

Summary:

We've established that our minds are tricky things stuck in both the past and the future. As a result of our tricky minds, we often feel negatively about ourselves if we feel we do not meet certain standards in our society. However, we may overcome our negative emotions through developing compassion for ourselves and others in the present moment. You were introduced to a mindfulness technique that invited you to begin activating your soothing system as you considered how it felt to cultivate inner strength and various attributes of compassion. Remember, this is only the beginning of a lifelong journey, so it is important to acknowledge where you are today without criticism or judgement. If you found this information helpful,

hopefully you begin to develop a sense of compassion for yourself, remembering that you and the others who engage with this brochure share a common human experience. We are all trying to get by as best we can and deserve to feel valued, cared for and safe. The more we dedicate ourselves to compassionate practices, the closer we are to living healthy, peaceful and fulfilled lives.