

# **Recent developments in Therapeutic Conversation**

Part 4: Deconstructing Shame and Guilt

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# Tangles of Shame and Guilt

- Two major sources
  - External (mostly shame)
    - Specific shaming actions by others
    - Judgmental cultural beliefs/values
  - Internal (mostly guilt)
    - One's own 'wrong' or harmful actions
    - One's own acts of omission

# Deconstructing Shame

- Identifying and acknowledging shame
- Recognizing the injustice of shaming
- Identifying acts of resistance against shaming
- Honoring the self for resisting
- Mobilizing outrage towards the injustice
- Openly disclosing the injustice
- Holding offenders accountable
- Contributing to conditions for apology
- Considering circumscribed forgiveness
- Acknowledging and accepting past injustices

## **IDENTIFYING AND ACKNOWLEDGING SHAME**

- Are there times when you feel really awful and bad about yourself? ... when you have a strong impulse to hide? ... when you just don't want to be seen?
- To what extent would you say that you experience yourself struggling with feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and shame?
- What past events or life experiences seem to be connected to such feelings of shame?

## RECOGNIZING THE INJUSTICE OF SHAMING

- Where do you think the humiliation and shame comes from?
- In what way were you injured and hurt by something that happened to you?
- To what extent do you feel that what happened was unfair? How was it unfair?
- Have others criticized and shamed you for this in some way? Are some cultural expectations that you have internalized creating the shame?
- What proportion of the negative feelings seem to come from you having done wrong to others as opposed to what proportion comes from having been wronged by others?
- Is it fair that you are the one feeling so much shame when it was someone else that carried out the actions that hurt you?
- Is it fair that you have to continue carrying such a burden of unrealistic expectation that comes from the culture?

## IDENTIFYING ACTS OF RESISTANCE AGAINST SHAMING

- In what ways did you try to protest the unfairness of what happened?
- Have you struggled against being shamed?
- In retrospect, what did you say or do that others could have recognized as indicating that you felt what was happening was not right?
- Were you too afraid to protest outwardly? Can you see that any efforts to disqualify your protests, or to silence you, as reflections of further unfairness?
- Can you see how remaining silent, tuning out, and/or dissociating can be a form of inner protest?
- To what extent are you able to see the moralistic reactions of others as a reflection of their own difficulties with such situations, and reject those reactions as a reflection of you?

## HONORING THE SELF FOR RESISTING

- Even if you didn't succeed in resisting, how do you feel about yourself having taken some steps to protest such injustice and shaming?
- In what ways did your protest reflect how you were respecting and honoring yourself as a person?
- Can you see how, in dissociating, you were protecting your inner soul from the assault, even when you could not protect your body?
- What does that tell you about yourself that you can appreciate?
- Who would appreciate you for what you tried to do, in resisting the unfairness?
- Who else might want to honor and respect you, if they actually knew how you had resisted?

## **MOBILIZING OUTRAGE TOWARD THE INJUSTICE**

- Is it reasonable to feel some anger about being treated so unfairly? To what extent have you allowed yourself to express your frustration and anger because of such unfair treatment?
- If someone else were to treat you in a similar manner now, would you feel entitled to protest? In what ways would your frustration and anger help in mounting a protest?
- What do you see as the difference between rage and outrage?
- Do you feel that it is legitimate to become outraged about being treated in that manner?
- If you were to seek retribution, or even extract some revenge, what might it look like?
- Imagine that you were a judge and you could pass judgment on the person who hurt you, what sentence might you bring down?



## **OPENLY DISCLOSING INJUSTICES**

- How could naming and describing the injustice help stop it?
- If others were aware of what happened, would they support you in your position against the unfairness?
- Who needs to become aware of the injustice for action to be taken to interrupt the unfairness?
- How does remaining silent and maintaining privacy create conditions for the injustices to continue?
- How ready are you to break the silence and mobilize some legitimate support?

## **HOLDING OFFENDERS ACCOUNTABLE**

- What exactly was done that was unfair and wrong? Which behaviors hurt you the most? Does the offender know that you were deeply hurt?
- To what extent are the persons who engaged in hurtful behaviors already aware of themselves having done wrong? Why do they need to become aware?
- Would you like to let them know yourself or would you prefer to have someone else tell them?
- Who might be a good person to give them feedback about the effects of what they were doing? Who do you imagine they might listen to and respect enough to hear about your experiences?
- Could your resentment be useful in holding the offender accountable?
- To what extent would the pressure to “forgive and forget” risk capitulation to unfair practices and contribute to conditions for further offences by the offender?

## **CONTRIBUTING TO CONDITIONS FOR APOLOGY**

- Can you imagine that the offender may have had some positive intentions behind his/her actions that resulted in your injuries?
- To what extent can the offender recognize the difference between their intentions and the effects that they have had on you and others?
- To what extent would the offender have to become even more aware of your experience in order to feel regret and remorse for having had such hurtful effects?
- Who would understand your experience enough that they could convey to the offender, the degree to which you have been traumatized by what has happened?
- Would it be reasonable for the offender to still honor their good intentions while apologizing for the negative effects that their actions had on you?

## CONSIDERING CIRCUMSCRIBED FORGIVENESS

- In what way is continuing resentment and anger about the injustice a burden you?
- Can you imagine how you might become freer to interact spontaneously if you could forgive the offender for what he did?
- Would it be easier to consider forgiveness if you could separate the offence from the offender as a person?
- To what extent can you accept the human limitations of the offender and consider relinquishing the right to retaliate?
- Does the possibility of “forgiving but remembering” appeal to you?
- How could remembering help prevent future reenactments of injustice?
- Could you imagine yourself ever making similar kinds of painful mistakes?

## **ACKNOWLEDGING AND ACCEPTING THE PAST**

- What significant learnings have come out of that experience for you, that could be carried forward into the future in a positive way?
- How have you been able to develop as a person as a result of facing and addressing these issues?
- To what extent do you feel others could benefit from hearing about and learning from your experiences and your responses to them?
- What would it take for you to accept what happened as part of what happens in life and let go of it, so you could have more energy to focus on other things in your life?

# Deconstructing Guilt

- Identifying and naming guilt feelings
- Connecting guilt to specific actions
- Separating good intentions from bad effects
- Acknowledging responsibility for hurtful actions
- Acknowledging regret and remorse
- Extending a full apology
- Building behavioral competence
- Taking restorative action
- Sharing one's learning with others

## **IDENTIFYING AND NAMING GUILT FEELINGS**

- Do you feel some guilt or struggle with guilt feelings?
- Are you deeply disappointed in yourself for something that happened?
- Do you have the feeling that that you may have done something wrong?
- Are you afraid that you will be judged or could be culpable for something?
- Is there a risk that you actually could be condemned and punished for something you did?
- Do the guilt feelings make it hard for you to think clearly about what you are responsible for and what you are not responsible for?

## **CONNECTING GUILT TO SPECIFIC ACTIONS**

- What did you actually do that resulted in someone else getting hurt?
- In retrospect, are there some things that you wished you hadn't done?
- What specific things did you do, which you wish you hadn't?
- Are there some things that you could have done to avoid hurting others but didn't? What specific things do you wish you had done?
- Do you feel that you have made some significant mistakes? What exactly were they?



## **SEPARATING GOOD INTENTIONS FROM BAD EFFECTS**

- What were your intentions in doing what you did? What were you hoping for in taking that course of action?
- Did you have some other good intentions behind those intentions?
- In what way is the actual outcome quite different from your intention?
- Can you see the contradictions between the unintended effects of your behavior and what you had intended?
- Is it clear to you now that trying to realize your intentions in that way was a mistake?
- How do you feel about having made a serious mistake which resulted in someone getting hurt?
- Does it seem reasonable to still feel good about one's good intentions while feeling badly about the actual effects of one's actions?

# **ACKNOWLEDGING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HURTFUL ACTIONS**

- Do you take responsibility for acting in the way you did?
- To what extent do you attribute responsibility to others for not acting or acting in ways that you wish that you hadn't?
- Which aspects of your actions do you accept as your own full responsibility?
- To what extent have you been able to acknowledge with others that you were responsible for specific actions that were hurtful?
- Do you feel less guilt when you can acknowledge to yourself that you have made some mistakes?
- What are some of the real effects that arose through the mistakes you have made? Who might be a useful resource to make inquiries about other consequences that you might not yet be aware of?
- Who might benefit from recognizing that you are acknowledging having made mistakes?

## **ACKNOWLEDGING REGRET AND REMORSE**

- If you could choose between feeling regretful or guilty, which would you prefer?
- In what way could feelings of regret potentially be helpful?
- Do you already feel some regret and remorse for what you did?
- Would you like the person you have hurt to be aware that you feel some remorse?
- How would you like them to become aware?
- Would you like to tell them yourself or to first hear from someone else?
- If you did tell them yourself, how would you like to go about doing so?

## **EXTENDING AN APOLOGY**

- How ready are you to openly acknowledge your mistakes and offer an apology?
- Would simply saying “I’m sorry” be enough?
- Would they be more convinced of your regret if you could convey some awareness of how they have been hurt?
- What steps could you take to become more aware of how your actions effected them so that you could deepen your apology?
- How important would it be to be clear that you know that what you did was wrong and they deserved to be treated better?
- Are you willing to make a commitment to not engage in such behaviour again?

## **BUILDING BEHAVIORAL COMPETENCE**

- Is it clear to you what new behaviors you need to develop to avoid slipping back into hurtful behaviors again?
- If you were not sure, how could you find out?
- What might qualify as clear cut counter-practices to the old behaviors?
- Would you like to come to be seen by the other person as more reliable and trustworthy than you were before?
- What might it mean for you to “live above suspicion” with respect to the old patterns of behavior?
- How could you build some endurance into your new commitments?
- Who might help to support you in the commitment to develop new practices and hold you accountable for your activities in this area?

## **TAKING RESTORATIVE ACTION**

- Would you like to make up in some way for what you did?
- Even though it is impossible to undo what has been done in the past, could you do something now or in the future that might clearly reflect a desire to make amends? If you could, would you like to take some kind of restorative action?
- What kind of actions or initiatives might be reasonable and legitimate?
- Who could help you decide what might be appreciated and be reasonable to try?
- How prepared are you to extend yourself to actually do something to make restitution?

## SHARING ONE'S LEARNING WITH OTHERS

- What are the main learnings that have come out of this experience which you would like to carry forward into the future?
- Who else might learn something and benefit from what you have learned? How ready are you to share your experience to help them learn and possibly avoid making the same mistakes you have made?
- Could you talk about what you have done with humility such that the possible negative reactions of others would have more to do with their moralistic judgments than your own current attitudes?
- Could you appreciate yourself and feel some circumscribed pride in being able to share your experiences openly and honestly so others can learn from your them?

A generic healing pattern in relationships  
and in communities:

