

Borderline Dysphoria - Shame At Its Core

***An examination of the role that shame plays in borderline dysphoria.
Some suggestions as to how to deal with shame.***

In his book, "Life At The Border", Dr. Leland M. Heller, M.D., describes dysphoria as one effect of stress that is experienced by people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. He defines dysphoria as: "...*primarily a combination of depression, rage, anxiety, and despair. It may also include shame, humiliation, embarrassment, excitement, terror, jealousy, self-hate, and virtually any other unpleasant emotion.*" (pg 24) On page 196 in the same book Dr. Heller describes dysphoria as: "[an] *extremely unpleasant emotional state, especially characterized by anxiety, restlessness and depression.*"

It is often from the mixed soup of unpleasant and often very painful emotions that borderlines can become destructive generally or self-destructive in desperate attempts to get out of this emotional state. While "*depression, rage, anxiety, and despair*" are central to what is felt in a dysphoric borderline state I believe much of this is driven by feelings (past or present) of being shamed and or humiliated or feeling shamed and humiliated. Often "toxic" shame is at the core of most of these others unpleasant emotions named.

There is a difference between "healthy shame" and "toxic shame". A certain measure of "healthy shame" is a healthy response to having done something "wrong" and is required to encourage moral behavior. The sense that someone has seen you do something wrong and the resulting shame is healthy. It is natural and healthy to feel shame when we do something "wrong".

Shame is toxic when one is inhibited from expressing what one actually feels. Shame is toxic when one experiences negativity and or controlling unempathetic response to his/her pain. Messages received then include:

- **that it is not okay to hurt**
- **that his/her feelings are not real**
- **that his/her feelings are not important**
- **that feeling is weak and unwanted**
- **that one is not entitled to feel what one feels**
- **that feeling what one feels will kill you**
- **that if you felt your pain it would annihilate you**
- **that pain is bad**
- **that you are crazy for responding to your experiences**

In his book, *Creating Love*, John Bradshaw identifies what he refers to as "Stages of Mystification". He says that, "Mystification, [which he defines as 'the state of frozen unresolved hurt'] begins with what has been referred to as **shame binds**."

Bradshaw goes on to say that, "A child is born self-connected and has an organismic sense of wholeness with relation to each of its powers, drives, and needs. Once a power, drive or need is shamed, it becomes disconnected. As the shaming continues and intensifies, the process of self-splitting and alienation takes place. We feel less at home in ourselves." This speaks to the fact that in the development of Borderline Personality Disorder, (often) it is this shaming that results in the kind of disconnection for self that inhibits or utterly blocks one's ability to develop a healthy personality.

Stage three of Bradshaw's Mystification is "Governing Scenes". He states, "The more severe and shaming the original scene, the more powerfully it is imprinted." Gershan Kaufman, is the psychologist who pioneered the study of shame. In Bradshaw's Book, "Creating Love", he writes, "*Affect [feeling] imprints scenes, and the presence of the identical affect in two different scenes increases the likelihood of the scenes being interconnected, directly fused together. This process of psychological magnification results in the emergence of families of scenes.*"

Bradshaw continues, "*They become governing scenes. These governing scenes form higher-order clusters of shame. Kaufman distinguishes **body shame, competence shame, and relationship shame**. My experience of toxic shame is that all the early experiences of shaming ultimately come together and form reservoirs of shame so deep that **all of me** feels shame. **Shame has no boundaries; it pervades my whole being.**" "The feeling shame binds are maintained in our bodies. Whenever we feel the shamed feelings, we feel shame. **Shame has been called the master emotion.** This is the reason."*

When we reach out to our parents or our care-takers as children if we are met with negative shaming reactions time and time again that are invalidating it will tremendously impact us [shame] and we effect our ability to establish any balanced dependency in adult life. One of the most profound things about BPD is that (most) borderlines having been shamed, shunned, invalidated, abused and or emotionally abandoned, have little if any sense of how to meet their own needs. This creates a dependency that plays itself out in an often raging and narcissistic way when the borderline feels dysphoric.

Shame and feeling humiliated, unvalued, and unworthy perpetuate the borderline's emotions until they reach a fever pitch. Borderline dysphoria is often triggered by what seem to others to be insignificant actions or words. It takes one negative feeling or thought to trigger a landslide of negative feelings and thoughts. Unable to cope with the quickly escalating pain borderlines often act out, rage, or if they experience a great amount of anxiety they may be demanding, needy, and clinging.

Since shame is born from frozen unresolved hurt when a borderline in the throes of dysphoria is flooded with a very profound sense of shame it is one of the most intense emotionally painful experiences one can ever have to feel.

When a borderline feels (or is) embarrassed and or humiliated he/she often tries to escape the resulting dysphoria through over-compensating which can result in the escalation of grandiosity and gives further rise and influence to one's "false self". This rise in one's sense of false self creates the illusion that one must quickly escape the pain of dysphoria by any means possible. This is where many borderlines become extremely impulsive using any or all defense mechanisms to escape the pain. All-too-often, acting from a sense of "false self" dissociated from any sense of "authentic self" the borderline blames others and or projects his/her pain onto others. Borderlines in this state also project out their own shame. Their need to be punished in an effort to ease the guilt and shame of the humiliating and distressing pain of dysphoria leads the borderline to punish those who are closest to them. Having no sense of "real self" many borderlines must thrust these feelings and

conflicts out onto others while other borderlines will punish themselves equally or exclusively through self-harm or suicide attempts.

What can a borderline do about the shame they feel?

One must heal the shame that binds them. To do this one must first be able to both recognize and hold some awareness of the shame that can often be at the core of all of the presenting emotions that make up borderline dysphoria.

Since the shame has its roots in frozen hurt and unresolved conflict much of the healing of it requires feeling and holding what Bradshaw refers to as "original pain". Once the pain is felt and accepted into conscious awareness it must be expressed. When one takes responsibility for it -- owns it and does not seek to just dump it on the person nearest them or to make it someone else's problem then and only then is it possible to feel the pain that is motivating the shame. This pain must be felt and expressed in order to break the cycle of shame and the subsequent borderline dysphoria.

Healthy expression of such pain must include grieving it. Weeping is the most freeing expression that there is. One can also journal about the pain. It is also helpful to have a therapist to talk it all out with. Some people find it very helpful to draw or to paint. Music is also another source that can aid in the expression of very painful and sad feelings that have been pent-up inside for years. Movies can also be a catalyst for the expression of very deep pain.

It is at this point that one must come to terms with the losses that he/she has incurred in life. Often the list is long and the scars are very deep. Each pain felt seems to trigger one back to even more pain. In order to deal constructively with this expression of all of the emotions that arise in dysphoric states it is vital to have support, and to feel safe. Each person must go at his/her own pace.

Working on your self-awareness is also very vital. When you can become more aware of why you feel what you feel when you experience dysphoria you can take better steps to cope with it in healthier and healthier ways. Though it hurts like hell at times, working your way through it and learning to make healthier choices through it is possible.

It is possible to learn to handle the pain in such a way that you can feel more in control of it as opposed to "it" controlling you.

In order to heal the shame that binds you by perpetuating many of the feelings that make up borderline dysphoria it is necessary for you to unwind all of the defense mechanisms which are the root cause of the behavior that by definition adds up to Borderline Personality Disorder. A borderline is trying to relate to the world, in the now, from yesterday, and from a place of having to defend him/herself in order to survive. Peeling back the layers of these defense mechanisms is the only way to learn how to relate in healthier ways. When one learns how to relate in healthier ways one naturally experiences a tremendous decrease in shame and dysphoria. Healthier relating means being in touch with one's pain, weakness' and vulnerability as well as one's strengths. Acquiring the cognitive capacity to hold the "big picture", (through cognitive retraining) the good and the bad simultaneously is the way to soothe and end (heal) the shame-generated dysphoria of most borderlines.