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## Free Yourself from Shame at Work

by Jenny Taitz

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**Summary.** We've all had situations that have caused us to feel shame at work. Maybe you got a bad review from your boss, or you dropped the ball on a project, or you got laid off. Feelings of shame can send us into a spiral of despair, creating a sense of unworthiness. But shame isn't entirely bad. Emotions like guilt and shame

Shame: It's the bully of emotions. We all experience situations at work where shame can creep in. For example, when you've engaged in a faux pas at the office, or got some negative feedback from your boss, or have been laid off, it can leave you feeling self-conscious to the point where you want to disappear. That can be a living nightmare and, worse, it can lead to a life less lived. Shame

can bring you into a spiral that descends into an enduring sense of unworthiness. It is, arguably, a more painful emotion than guilt, which tends to occur when you experience regret about an *action*. Shame, on the other hand, involves negative feelings about *yourself*.

Of course, shame isn't entirely bad. Emotions like guilt and shame can inspire you to change for the better, like when you've caused someone pain and feel remorse. It's human nature to crave connection, and shame can motivate you to act in ways that link you more closely to your community.

However, constantly believing that others are judging you, or always perceiving yourself as falling short, can be miserable. Whether you struggle with a broad sense of feeling "less than," or if you sink into shame about certain aspects of yourself, it's worth considering the consequences of this emotion.

One side effect of shame can be a tendency to shrink, rather than to take steps to receive support from professionals and people in our personal lives. When we feel ashamed, we often want to hide, and the combination of self-isolation and feeling badly can lead to a range of emotional problems, including social anxiety, substance abuse, self-harm, and a lessened ability to generate solutions.

As a clinical psychologist specializing in helping people manage intense emotions, I love teaching my clients ways to untangle from shame to expand their lives. Here are the tools I use and prescribe to deal with shame more effectively:

### **Step 1: Decide when shame is working for you.**

It's important to recognize when you can *do* something about your shame versus when you can't. For example, you *can* work on better managing your tone in a tough meeting, but you *can't* change certain aspects of your identity, like your past, as June Tangney, a professor and shame researcher at George Mason University, told me in an interview. "It's important to take a hard look at yourself — not on a daily basis, but a few times in a lifetime," Tangney recommends. In other words, rather than ruminate, use shame to invigorate you to pursue new courses of action — to consider what kind of person you want to be in the world.

Suffering with shame when there is little threat of others ostracizing you is referred to as unjustified shame, a term coined by Marsha Linehan, a professor emeritus at the University of

Washington. An example of this could be when you have been let go due to a reorganization, as so many people are currently experiencing, even though you performed your role with integrity.

To start letting go of your shame, consider that people understand that human beings make mistakes, said Chris Wilson, author of *The Master Plan*. Wilson himself learned to let go of shame that was keeping him down: Incarcerated at age 17 for killing a man in self-defense, he transformed himself to the point that a judge overturned his life sentence 16 years later. “I decided that I wanted to prove to myself and others that I’m not a monster,” he said.

Yet he was also haunted by shameful feelings after he turned his life around, wondering, “How will I explain what I’ve been up to?” When he noticed his shame shift from justified (which motivated him to change) to shame that no longer served him (which is the case with most chronic shame), he decided to open up about his criminal past on a local storytelling podcast, where he told a more compassionate narrative.

“One act doesn’t define the type of person you are,” Wilson said.

And the same certainly holds true when it comes to professional blunders, real or perceived.

## **Step 2: Track your shame.**

Many of my clients observe how shame can feel both vague and familiar, making it hard to pinpoint. Often people are “shame phobic,” Tangney said. Shame is awkward, and it’s tempting to try to dodge painful experiences.

Shireen Rizvi, a professor of psychology at Rutgers, told me that “shame keeps people from bringing things up, but while distracting yourself from it can ‘work’ in the short term, helping us to avoid feeling shame, ultimately, we never learn to cope with the experience that led to shame in the first place.”

To begin to reduce shame, consider exactly when you find yourself feeling self-conscious and prone to self-criticism. I even suggest that my clients generate a list of shame triggers, like not getting promoted or receiving harsh feedback in a team meeting. Then I have them rank how much shame each item stirs up, on a scale of 0 to 5. Finally, I ask them to consider whether that shame is justified.

If all of this seems masochistic, know that paying attention to situations, thoughts, feelings in your body, and your actions is ultimately key to managing your emotions.

“Once you start to analyze the cues that elicit shame, you can begin to problem solve,” according to Rizvi. The act of labeling and tracking shame is a solution in itself, since once you put words on your feelings, your brain enlists more of its areas of reason, rather than focusing on the emotional areas. Recognizing that you can feel remorse without feeling badly about yourself can alleviate extra suffering.

### **Step 3: Find your people and add more loving-kindness to your life.**

One of the core perpetuating characteristics of shame is feeling badly and alone. So if you notice that shame arises after interactions with people who judge you, or you realize that shame makes you avoid connecting with others, try to find a more empathic community while creating a kinder relationship with yourself.

If you need encouragement in branching out, consider “loving-kindness meditation,” in which you wish good things for yourself and others. Studies confirm that this practice, popularized by Sharon Salzberg, author of *Real Love*, increases well-being and your feelings of connection.

Opening up to others makes it easier to appreciate your common humanity. You are not alone, and the feelings and struggles you experience are shared by others. If you isolate yourself in a shame vortex, it’s tough to get a broader perspective.

If you’re experiencing shame over a specific event, try this approach: When you reflect back on a mistake or humiliation and feel alone, make a U-turn and think about the experience in a self-compassionate way, considering others who have struggled similarly. Then treat yourself like you would treat a friend in a similar situation. This exercise will help you to strike a balance between assuming responsibility for what you did while feeling less negatively about it, according to a study spearheaded by Mark Leary, a professor emeritus of psychology and neuroscience at Duke.

### **Step 4: Prioritize your ultimate goal.**

Shame tends to lurk when you focus on how you appear to others, rather than on what you want. Some examples: habitually worrying about seeming smart, rather than asking questions to

educate yourself; acting easy-going rather than getting clarity in a relationship; going with the flow in a group rather than speaking up for what you stand for. When clients tell me they avoid group fitness classes that seem fun for fear of not looking the part, it truly pains me. But when they work to zoom in on the value of being healthier, they can circumvent falling into the shame trap.

Also, keep in mind that while you can't control what others think, you can have a say in your values, and you can set goals that let you swap out shame for empowerment. If you've recently been laid off, rather than hiding, consider cheering yourself on, putting yourself out there, and asking for help.

### **Step 5: Chase shame exposures.**

Remember that list you created around your shame triggers? If items on your list fall into the unjustified shame category, imagine how you would act if you didn't experience shame. Acting counter to what shame pulls you toward — for example, going to that office lunch instead of skipping it after a disappointing review — can reduce the negative emotion.

Knowing your shame is unjustified is one thing, but to actually live with more freedom, you need to wholeheartedly face new situations, like Chris Wilson did when he grabbed a microphone and shared details about his traumatic and criminal past.

To actually make this kind of compassionate and strategic risk-taking work for you, practice maintaining a non-judgmental attitude and fully participate in the activities you feel tempted to avoid due to unjustified shame. If you berate yourself or look away while trying something difficult and meaningful, you won't feel very motivated to continue. It is daunting to approach new situations, yet approaching what you irrationally fear and trying a new behavior opens up possibilities for joy.

Plus, unlike what our minds tell us about how we must behave to reduce shame, superiority isn't as endearing as someone who makes mistakes. Charisma hinges on attending to others with warmth — quite the opposite of isolating in self-judgment. Approaching both large and small sources of shame that no longer serve you will increase your likability and well-being.

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While shame pulls people to retreat and feel badly, deliberately planning specific ways to increase your openness improves your mood and sense of connection. In one study, acting more

[extraverted](#) by warmly introducing themselves or speaking up in a meeting improved participants' happiness, even when the behaviors felt forced. After all this time being isolated during the pandemic and with our heightened levels of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), we all deserve to strategize ways to live more expansively — and that starts with letting go of shame's grip.



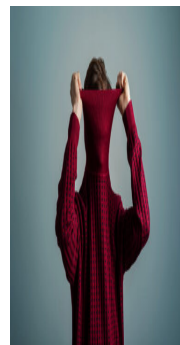
**Jenny Taitz** is a [clinical psychologist](#), board certified in cognitive behavioral and dialectical behavioral therapies, and an assistant clinical professor in psychiatry at UCLA. She is the author of a forthcoming book on stress, "[How to be Single and Happy](#)" and "[End Emotional Eating](#)."



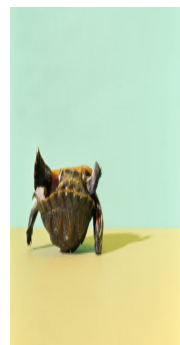
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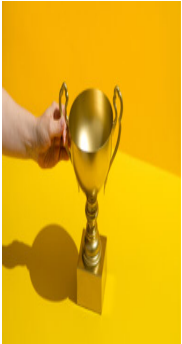


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