



Understanding Shame in the Workplace

Shame is an emotion experienced when we feel that we are inadequate. It is the opposite of pride. Shame is very similar to guilt, in that both involve negative self-judgment. Guilt occurs when we feel badly about what we have (or have not) done, whereas shame occurs when we feel badly about ourselves as a person. Embarrassment and shyness are mild forms of shame. On a more intense level, we might feel disgusted with ourselves. When we feel ashamed, we feel we have lost face and lost esteem.

Thoughts that occur when we're feeling ashamed might include things like *"Everyone probably thinks I'm a fool,"* or *"I'm such an idiot!"* We might also have mental images or past memories of a group of people laughing at the way we talk, or of our parents furrowing their eyebrows over our misdeeds. The most common bodily symptoms of shame are blushing and flushed skin. Sometimes sweating, increased heart rate, and rapid breathing can also occur. The symptoms are similar to those associated with anxiety. Often, feelings of shame kick in when we are embarrassed or humiliated in front of other people (e.g., during a presentation). They can also happen when no one else is around (e.g., when we realize that we've made a mistake). It's the internal realization or perception that we are somehow inadequate, incapable or incompetent that drives these feelings. When others are present, however, the feelings are likely harder to bear.

When we feel ashamed, it is natural to want to hide our face and withdraw. Associated body language tends to involve looking downward, lowering the head, looking away or maintaining a crouched posture. We might lose focus on what we are doing and speak less coherently. Imagine what you would see when a shy worker (or other shy person) has to make a speech. You may see them shake, blush and stumble over words. Our natural response to shame is to attempt to escape the feelings by running away and hiding. We might even have an urge to cover our eyes or face.

The table below contains examples of situations in which experiences of shame can affect the way we think of ourselves and the way we act. Notice how actions could or would be different if the thoughts were different.

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Situation	Shame-Provoking Thoughts	Shame-Driven Actions	Shame-Moderating Thoughts
During a meeting, a worker of less seniority answers a question that the manager couldn't answer.	<i>"She totally upstaged me. I look like an idiot."</i>	Try to redeem the situation by acting like the answer was clear all along. Try to be more vocal during the rest of the meeting.	<i>"No one I've ever met always knows the answer to everything. No reasonable person is going to expect me to always know."</i>
A manager starts to stammer at a very difficult meeting with fellow managers and workers.	<i>"They've probably lost respect for me. I look like a fool."</i>	Stay quiet throughout the rest of the meeting to avoid drawing attention.	<i>"I probably came across as nervous and upset – which is exactly how I felt. I've never myself seen someone stammer and thought they must be a fool."</i>
The annual sales report just came out and a manager's departmental results are the lowest in the company.	Mental image of an old boss or teacher frowning at a failure. <i>"I'm a terrible manager. I better spend extra effort, time, or whatever it takes to boost sales so I don't lose face again."</i>	Do not tell others about poor performance. Work overtime, sacrifice personal resources to recruit customers.	<i>"I do need to dedicate more attention to increasing sales next quarter. Someone had to come in last, and it feels terrible for it to be me, but I will get through this. The best I can do is try harder."</i>

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A manager thoughtlessly utters what he sees could be perceived as an insensitive comment. People in the room become silent and stare at the manager.	Mental image of a parent or teacher shaking her head in disapproval. <i>"Oh no, now everyone is going to think I'm just an insensitive jerk. Maybe I am. I'm so flawed. I cannot bear to be stared at any longer."</i>	Apologize profusely. Try to explain that it's a misunderstanding. Avoid eye contact.	<i>"I had no intention to be inappropriate. People know me and know that I don't usually make questionable comments."</i>
There is a team meeting about progress on a project. Most workers have worked overtime to finish their contributions. The manager reports that she has not gotten around to starting her component.	<i>"I'm a bad leader. I'm irresponsible and lazy."</i>	Talk defensively, make excuses.	<i>"I haven't started my part but I know what my responsibility is and I will get it done, just as I usually do."</i>

Understanding the different contributors to shame can help us identify the feeling when we experience it. This allows us to do something to help lessen these uncomfortable feelings in the heat of the moment. It is also important to note that shame, like other negative emotions, is not necessarily useless. As evident in the examples, we can sometimes be driven to improve by fears of shame and loss of face. We might become more competitive, put extra time and effort into our work, or strive to project a professional image. Although shameful experiences may lead to greater productivity, they also set a negative tone for our day-to-day feelings and drain our energy. It is helpful to be aware of what underlies our feelings of shame. What sort of negative self-judgment do we make, or what is it about ourselves we are disapproving of? Knowing these things can make us more mindful of the ways we act.