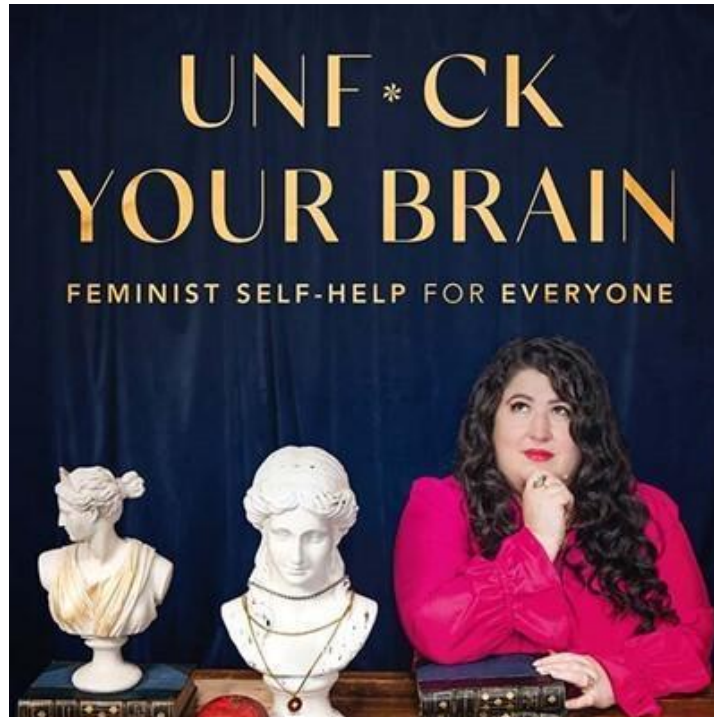


Ep #19: Shame



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello, my flock. So today, we are talking about a feeling that I doubt that chickens have, but that humans definitely have a lot. In fact, it's been called the most human emotion. And that is shame.

So shame is one of the emotions that we feel the most often but we understand the least. At the same time, it's an emotion that shapes and drives so much of our behavior, both when we are feeling it and when we are resisting feeling it. When we are feeling ashamed, we blame ourselves and we withdraw. But we're also so averse to feeling shame that we will often turn it into anger and lash out at other people to try to avoid lashing out at ourselves; which, of course, doesn't work.

So shame creates a lot of conflict and distress, both with ourselves and with other people. I was looking up the word shame, the origin, which is something I like to do when I'm writing about an emotion for the first time or for the podcast. And the word shame is thought to come from an older proto-Indo-European word. So there's a theorized language that was the proto-Indo-European language, spelled PIE, that is sort of thought to be the potential linguistic precursor to all of the European languages; or most of the European languages.

So there's a word in that language, they think, that the word shame came from and that word means to cover. I think this is so perfect because shame thrives in darkness and in secrecy. And when we feel ashamed, we don't want to be seen. It's impossible to feel shame about something that everyone knows about and doesn't care about because shame is caused

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by your predictions about the judgment of others. And of course, those are really your judgments of yourself that you are projecting.

So what that means is that shame is not caused by any particular action that you have taken or any experience you have had. Shame is caused by your thoughts about yourself. And generally, these are thoughts about your own unworthiness, weakness or inadequacy. Humans are so averse to shame because it has a powerful role in social cohesion. Human evolution may have selective for shame.

When humans lived in primitive tribes, adherence to social norms was essential for survival, and those norms required cooperation. If you were just out for yourself, you weren't serving the group and everyone suffered. So it's hypothesized that those primitive humans that felt shame when they didn't live up to the group's rules or expectations were more likely to try hard to work for the group's benefit.

The theory is that shame motivated you to repair your relationships and try to make other people like you after you had screwed up or harmed them. The problem is that shame has metastasized from this purpose and for a lot of us, it affects every area of our lives. And meanwhile, whether everyone in the tribe likes you no longer impacts your daily survival.

So when it was a tradeoff between feeling shame and being left behind to die, shame might have been a useful choice, but now it's not serving you; at all. What remains is that we tend to feel shame when we have thoughts about not adhering to social norms. And for women, it's almost impossible to not feel shame if we don't manage our minds because we're basically taught that being a woman is inherently shameful in one way or another.

Our bodies are shameful, our emotions are shameful. And we're taught so many sets of conflicting social norms. We're taught, be sexy, but not too sexy. Be confident, but not too confident; all of these kind of contradictions

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and paradoxes. So it's just inevitable that we will fail to live up to our mental standards for ourselves and then we'll feel shame.

If you are taught that you should be driven in your career but also care about your kids more than anything else, you're going to feel a lot of shame every time you prioritize one for the other. You get caught in a Catch 22.

Fundamentally, shame is a problem of self-worth and self-acceptance. It's very closely related to perfectionism, for obvious reasons. When you hold yourself to unrealistic standards, you feel a lot of shame. When you accept yourself and all your imperfections – all your “flaws” – you don't feel ashamed. But when you believe you are unworthy, you do.

Shame is not an objective indication that you have done something wrong. I've had clients who are ashamed that they got divorced and I've had clients who are ashamed if they stay married. I've had clients who are ashamed of their failures and I've had clients who are ashamed of their successes if they thought that they didn't deserve them. It has nothing to do with what you actually did or didn't do.

Shame is entirely caused by your thoughts about yourself. And some of you feel ashamed just for being yourself; just for being who you are. You believe you are unworthy just for existing the way you do. And then some of you feel shame about specific actions you've taken or not taken.

But either way, the route is the same; a belief that you're unworthy and unacceptable for taking that action. Let's be really clear, it's not a belief that the action you took or didn't take was a mistake or a problem. That's actually not what causes shame. Believing that something is a mistake or a problem does not cause shame.

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It's the belief that you are unworthy or unacceptable for that action or that mistake. You can believe you made a mistake without feeling shame at all. I'm going to say that again because I know a lot of you are making a face right now like I'm crazy. You can make an epic mistake – you can screw up royally – you can completely fuck it up and you can feel zero shame because shame comes from a thought about yourself. It comes from believing that you are weak or pitiful or unworthy. Shame comes from a judgment about yourself. It doesn't have anything to do with what actions you've taken or not taken or what has happened to you or not happened to you. It comes from a negative thought about yourself and your worth.

Remember when I said that the evolutionary theory of shame is partly that humans are sensitive to it because of the tribal dynamic. And because information got out that devalued you in other people's eyes it could impact your survival and how much everyone else cared about you. That is why you can think of shame as a status-based emotion. It has to do with your perception of your status compared to other people and social norms. Negative thoughts about your status, your worth or your value are what produce the feeling of shame.

A lot of you think that shame is motivating, just like you think anxiety is motivating, but it's really not. Shame makes you want to hide. It makes you want to disappear. Think of that old word origin, to cover; you want to cover yourself when you feel ashamed. You don't want to meet other people's eyes. You want to hide. That does not motivate you to take action, to fix any mistakes, to do anything positive for anyone else. Shame just makes you want to hide and comfort yourself. It doesn't produce productive action.

And the truth is, shame is just a sensation in your body, like any emotion. For most people, shame feels very hot, especially in the face. A flushed face does not sound so bad; that's just basically like a sunburn. But most of us find shame completely intolerable and we will do anything to get out of it.

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And that's why shame can sometimes manifest as lashing out at other people.

When we feel shame and it feels intolerable, we want to blame someone else. We subconsciously think that if someone else takes the blame or takes the responsibility, we will be able to stop thinking we're at fault – and then we'll feel better. So for instance, if you've ever been called out on a mistake and you were desperate to blame someone else for the mistake as quickly as possible, that's because you were desperate not to feel shame.

You had a thought about having doesn't something wrong that produced shame. And you thought that if you could believe someone else had done something wrong or convince a third party that it wasn't you, you'd feel better.

But of course, even when you lash out, even if you successfully deflect blame from yourself, you don't feel better because you're still thinking the same thought about yourself that causes shame. The antidotes to shame are compassion and exposure.

Compassion first – when you have compassion for yourself, you don't feel ashamed. When you fully accept yourself and love yourself, no matter what, when you have your own back, you don't feel ashamed because you choose never to think that you're unworthy; no matter what you do or don't do or what happens or doesn't happen.

And then the second antidote is exposure. So shame really thrives in secrecy and in darkness; again, to cover is the word. It thrives being covered. When we believe our own thoughts about why we should be ashamed, we hide. We project our own beliefs onto other people and we fear their judgment.

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When we show up and tell the truth about what we've done and not done and about our thoughts and feelings, our inner experience, we don't feel as much shame because we hear and see that other people have had the same experience. And most importantly, we are sort of owning the authenticity of our own experience and just being honest about what's happening in our brains and in our bodies.

We experience solidarity instead of isolation. And we often experience acceptance instead of the judgment that we fear. When you keep your shame to yourself, you perpetuate the cycle. When you share your shame with other people, you're sending a message to your own brain – which is what matters – that you won't be held hostage and you don't have anything of which to be ashamed.

Exposing shame to the sunlight neutralizes it. So the next time you feel ashamed and you're worried what other people think of you, I want you to ask yourself what you are thinking of you. What are the ways you are finding yourself unworthy? What are the ways you are judging yourself? And how is that shame really serving you? What could you do to cultivate some compassion to practice some exposure and to release some of that shame?

Now, shame and self-confidence are actually fairly related because self-confidence is also based on self-acceptance. It's very difficult to feel ashamed and self-confident at the same time. Self-confidence is based on self-acceptance, and self-acceptance is the antidote to shame.

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