

Untangling Shame

A companion guide for when shame feels like the truth about you

THE FOUR WAYS SHAME SHOWS UP

1

Withdrawal

Pulling inward, going quiet, disappearing from view.

2

Attack Self

Turning the criticism inward, before anyone else can.

3

Avoidance

Staying busy, staying distracted, changing the subject.

4

Attack Other

Turning the discomfort outward, before it can land.

None of these are the truth about you. They are what shame teaches the body to do to survive it.

A word about the title

This guide does not treat shame as something shameful to feel, or something to eliminate entirely. It is about learning to recognise shame when it arrives, understand what it is trying to protect, and build a steadier relationship with yourself around it.

Welcome

This is a companion to *From Feeling to Need*. That guide treats feelings as information worth listening to. Shame asks something extra of us — because unlike most feelings, shame does not just comment on what happened. It makes a claim about who you are.

Almost everyone carries shame somewhere. It can show up after a mistake, a rejection, a comparison, an old memory that resurfaces without warning, or simply the sense of having been truly seen and found wanting. Shame is one of our most universal emotional experiences — and one of the least talked about, because talking about it can itself feel exposing.

This guide will not tell you to stop feeling shame. It will help you notice it earlier, understand what it is doing, and find a steadier place to stand while it passes through.

This is not weakness

Shame is a normal human emotion with a biological basis, not a sign of fragility or a character flaw.

This is not permanent

Shame can be intense in the moment and still be temporary. It is a state, not a verdict.

This is not something to fix alone

Shame often loosens its grip fastest in safe, understanding company — not in isolation.

This is practice, not persuasion

Understanding shame intellectually is different from feeling less gripped by it. Both matter, and the second takes repetition.

How it links with From Feeling to Need

When shame is activated, the feelings-and-needs process still applies — notice, pause, listen, name the need, ask. This guide adds one extra question worth holding alongside it: "Is this feeling telling me something happened, or is it telling me something about who I am?"

The Pattern — Shame Is Not Guilt

Shame and guilt are often used interchangeably, but psychological research treats them as distinct experiences with very different effects. Guilt is a judgement about a specific behaviour: "I did something bad." Shame is a judgement about the whole self: "I am bad." That single shift — from behaviour to identity — changes everything about how the feeling behaves next.

Guilt	Shame
"I did something wrong."	"I am something wrong."
Focused on a specific action, at a specific time.	Focused on the self as a whole — global and stable.
Tends to motivate repair, apology, and reconnection.	Tends to motivate hiding, withdrawal, and disconnection.
Fades once amends are made.	Can persist long after the triggering moment has passed.

The distinction matters

Guilt says: something I did needs putting right. Shame says: something about me needs hiding. One points toward other people. The other points away from them — often at exactly the moment connection would help most.

A useful reframe

"What I did may need repair. Who I am does not need to be hidden for that to happen."

STEP 1

Notice Shame Arriving

Shame often announces itself in the body before it reaches words.

Shame activates a threat response — the same system that responds to physical danger, only triggered by a social or self-evaluative threat instead. That's why it can feel so physical: heat in the face, a drop in the stomach, an urge to look away or disappear. The nervous system is treating exposure as if it were danger.

Common signs

- Heat or flushing in the face, neck, or chest
- A sudden urge to look away, go quiet, or leave the room
- Replaying the moment afterwards, searching for what it says about you
- A voice that generalises fast — "typical", "of course", "there it is again"
- Feeling smaller, exposed, or as though something true about you has been seen

Notice without accusation

Try: "My threat system has switched on." This names what is happening in the body without agreeing to the story shame is about to tell you.

Find Your Default Response

Everyone has a default way of coping with shame — usually learned early, and usually automatic.

Research on shame-coping identifies four common patterns. None is "wrong" — each developed for a reason, usually to manage an overwhelming feeling as best as could be managed at the time.

Response	What it looks like	What it's protecting
Withdrawal	Going quiet, retreating, minimising your presence	Safety through invisibility
Attack self	Harsh self-criticism, pre-empting others' judgement with your own	A sense of control, and continued belonging through appeasement
Avoidance	Busyness, distraction, changing the subject, humour	Distance from the feeling itself
Attack other	Irritability, blame, turning discomfort outward	A sense of power in place of exposure

Questions for gentle exploration

- "Which of these is most familiar to me — the one I reach for before I've even decided to?"
- "What did this response once protect me from?"
- "Is it still needed here, in this relationship, at this age?"

No single origin is required

These patterns can form through family dynamics, school experiences, culture, faith, past relationships, or repeated experiences of being judged. You don't need to trace it to one moment to begin noticing it now.

STEP 3

Separate the Feeling from the Verdict

Shame delivers a verdict fast. It's worth slowing down enough to check its working.

SIGNAL

"I feel ashamed." A real, physical experience.



STORY

"I am fundamentally flawed." One interpretation — not a fact.



CHECK

"Whose standard is this? What's actually true here?"



STEP

One kind, grounded response — to yourself or the situation.

A short practice

"I notice shame arriving. It is telling me a story about who I am, in the voice of a verdict. What actually happened, in a sentence a camera could confirm? What is one thing that is still true and good about me, even while I feel this?"

Shame is not evidence

Feeling ashamed after a mistake does not prove you are a bad person — it proves the moment mattered to you. The intensity of a feeling is not proof of the accuracy of the story attached to it.

STEP 4

Build the Soothing System

Shame recruits the threat system. Recovery means deliberately engaging a different one.

Alongside the threat system, we also carry a soothing system — the one activated by warmth, safeness, and care, whether it comes from another person or from ourselves. In people who experience shame often or intensely, this system can be underused, so it needs active practice rather than waiting to switch on by itself.

A KINDER RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF

Self-kindness

Treating yourself the way you'd treat someone you cared about, especially when things go wrong.

Common humanity

Remembering that struggle, failure, and imperfection are part of being human — not evidence you're uniquely flawed.

Building
the soothing
system

Mindful awareness

Noticing the feeling clearly, without either pushing it away or being swallowed by it.

Component	A question to try
Self-kindness	"What would I say to a friend who told me this?"
Common humanity	"Who else, out of everyone alive, might feel this exact way today?"
Mindful awareness	"Can I feel this without either fighting it or disappearing into it?"

STEP 5

Practise Speaking It

Shame tends to lose intensity when it's spoken aloud to someone who responds with understanding rather than judgement.

NOTICE

The urge to hide this or shrink from view.



PAUSE

One breath.
This is a feeling passing through, not a fact about you.



CHOOSE

Someone safe — trusted, and unlikely to judge or use this against you.



SPEAK

Name it plainly, without over-explaining or minimising.



REFLECT

What happened when it was met with understanding rather than judgement?

Experiments to choose from

- Say one true, ordinary sentence about a mistake — without a joke to soften it or an apology to pre-empt judgement.
- Tell someone safe about a moment you've been carrying quietly, and notice what it feels like to be met rather than corrected.
- Write the shame-thought down exactly as it arrives, then read it back as though someone else had written it.

Consent and safety matter

Speak shame only to people who have shown they can hold it with care. Sharing it with someone unsafe, dismissive, or likely to use it against you can deepen the pattern rather than ease it. Choose carefully, and bring the rest to counselling.

STEP 6

Make Repair Possible, Not Punishment

Where something genuinely needs putting right, that's guilt's job, not shame's.

- 1 **Ask what actually needs repair.** Is there a specific action to acknowledge or amend — or is this shame generalising a moment into a verdict?
- 2 **Separate the person from the act.** "I got that wrong" is repairable. "I am wrong" is not — because it isn't actually true.
- 3 **Make the repair proportionate.** A specific apology or amend, not an extended campaign of self-punishment.
- 4 **Let it be enough.** Once a genuine repair is made, continuing to punish yourself doesn't add sincerity — it just prolongs the threat response.
- 5 **Notice the difference in how it feels.** Guilt easing after repair feels like relief. Shame rarely eases through self-punishment alone — that's often a sign it needs a different response.

A distinction to carry

"I can take responsibility for what I did without treating it as proof of who I am."

Practice Page — When Shame Arrives

Use this after a moment of shame, self-criticism, or the urge to hide.

What happened? What was the simple, observable situation?

What did I feel in my body?

What did shame say about me, as a person — not just this moment?

Whose voice or standard does this resemble?

What is actually true here — the version a camera or a fair witness would confirm?

What is one kind, grounded response — to myself or the situation?

What would I bring to counselling?

A Week of Practice — Small Repetitions, Not a Test

Choose one practice only. Repetition builds a felt sense of safety faster than insight alone.

Day	A small experiment	What to notice
Day 1	Catch one shame-moment and name it: "My threat system has switched on."	The body sensation before the story arrives.
Day 2	Notice your default response (withdraw, attack self, avoid, attack other).	Whether you can name it without judging yourself for having it.
Day 3	Ask "what would I say to a friend?" about one self-critical thought.	The gap between how you'd speak to a friend and to yourself.
Day 4	Speak one small true thing to someone safe.	What it feels like to be met, rather than corrected.
Day 5	Separate guilt from shame in one recent situation.	Whether repair — not self-punishment — is what's actually needed.
Day 6	Write down one piece of evidence that complicates a shame-story.	How it feels to hold "I feel this" alongside "and it isn't the whole truth."
Day 7	Review with compassion — what was hard, what shifted, even slightly.	Progress may look like noticing shame sooner, not feeling it less.

Quick Reference — Five Questions for a Moment of Shame

Keep this close for the moment shame arrives fast.

1. WHAT IS HERE?	What am I feeling, and where in my body?
2. GUILT OR SHAME?	Is this about something I did, or a verdict on who I am?
3. WHAT'S TRUE?	What would a fair witness actually confirm happened?
4. WHAT'S NEEDED?	Repair, self-kindness, connection, or simply time?
5. WHAT'S ONE KIND STEP?	A pause, a true sentence spoken to someone safe, or bringing it to session.

Remember

Shame can feel like the truth about you. It rarely is. It is a feeling doing its best to protect you from exposure — not a verdict handed down by anyone qualified to give one.

Evidence & Notes — What Informed This Companion Guide

The language here is deliberately practical and non-diagnostic. It supports counselling; it does not replace individual formulation or clinical judgement.

Key learning from the research

Shame and guilt are empirically distinguishable: shame involves a global, stable judgement of the self, while guilt involves a specific judgement of behaviour — a distinction with real consequences for how each feeling motivates us to act.

Shame-coping tends to cluster into recognisable patterns — withdrawal, self-attack, avoidance, and attacking others — each representing a different strategy for managing an overwhelming feeling.

Compassion-focused approaches understand shame as activating a threat-based emotion regulation system, and work by deliberately building a separate soothing system through self-kindness and safeness.

Speaking shame aloud within an empathic, understanding relationship is consistently identified as one of the most effective routes through it — more so than working with shame in isolation.

Important limits

Shame is not always irrational or disproportionate — sometimes it points to a genuine value or a need for repair. This guide is about examining the feeling with curiosity, not dismissing it automatically.

This pattern does not prove a particular history, diagnosis, or personality trait. Explore its origins tentatively and collaboratively.

If shame is connected to abuse, coercion, or an unsafe relationship, safety comes first — the practices here are not a substitute for that.

Sources — Further Reading

Selected research and professional sources used to shape this guide.

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Using this alongside From Feeling to Need

When shame arrives, let this guide help you ask whether the feeling is describing what happened, or delivering a verdict on who you are. Bring the answer — especially the uncertain parts — to counselling.