ANGER, GUILT & SHAME
Reclaiming Power and Choice

Liv Larsson
Anger, Guilt & Shame

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Liv Larsson
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Also by Liv Larsson in English
Anger Guilt and Shame - Reclaiming Power and Choice
Liv Larsson
Preface by the Author

My partner and I sometimes tease each other about situations where either he or I have been really angry with each other. When we are asked what the conflict was about, retrospectively we surprisingly seldom remember what it was that triggered the anger. We remember some of the expressions we used and the less flattering actions we acted out. Although the cause of the conflict in the moment when it occurred seems to be the most important thing in the world, after a while we do not even remember how the fight started. During the worst raging of the storm, our respective positions seem extremely important. In order to be the one who is right, we are ready to use language and actions that are violent in one way or another. Later, when we searched for the core of our conflicts, we found often that they were about autonomy, care and respect. And that it is these values or needs that are important.

Slowly, step by step, I have began to understand that when I blame my feelings on others, I miss an opportunity to develop and learn something about myself. It has helped me to use the energy that I previously wasted on criticizing others, to change the things I want to change.

If we - instead of blaming others when we are angry - take responsibility for what is going on within us, we can find constructive ways to express ourselves. To connect what we feel to what we need will open doors to dialogue and make it easier to meet everyone’s needs. If no one has to give up their needs in a conflict, it will benefit all our relationships.

It took me several years after my first training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to understand the meaning of what Marshall Rosenberg, who developed NVC, meant when he said, “Never do anything to avoid shame and guilt.” As I explored this advice in depth, I discovered that my understanding of communication between people deepened. I also saw how shame, guilt and anger are potent keys to connect to my heart.

Working on this book, I discovered that often hidden behind anger and guilt, is shame and a desire to experience respect. To get in touch with our needs, we also need to get in touch with shame as we explore
anger and guilt. If we get to know shame it makes a big difference in our ability to deal with anger and guilt, so I have chosen to search for a deeper understanding of the concept of shame.

When I immersed myself in the concept of shame and began to use the compass of needs that I describe in chapter five, it deepened my sense of freedom in life. It has been a great investment of time and energy, to connect with and to make friends with anger, guilt and shame.

I have also had the privilege to learn from other people’s experiences - including people taking part in my trainings on the subject - of using the compass of needs.

With the help of this book, I hope you will be pleasantly surprised that it actually is not that difficult to create the life you are longing for. You will see that in every moment it is possible to connect deeper to the life within you, and that guilt, shame and anger can become new friends in this exploration.

I also hope I have managed to show how shame, guilt and anger intimately intermingle and that they are based on a mind-set that we have learned over the past eight thousand years. Although this book is largely about how you as an individual can deal with anger, shame and guilt in more efficient ways, I see these emotions primarily as a result of the domination systems we have been socialized into. Only when we can change this system from its core, will I have the confidence that we can really change our way of life. Our humanity and our social structures, will then, bit by bit, change to become more in the service of life.

My vision is that a person born today will be amazed if she or he is reading this book in about 30 years. She or he will ponder what on earth we were doing, and marvel at why we really needed all these tools to manage something that for them seems so simple.

Liv Larsson
Chapter 1
Shame, Guilt and Anger
Shame, Guilt and Anger

“We cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.”
Albert Einstein

My interest in anger, guilt and shame began when I discovered that the reason why it is often challenging to deal with these emotions has to do with how they are connected to a certain way of thinking. This way of thinking is a part of most contemporary cultures and can be seen as “a culture within a culture”. Behind this thinking there are feelings and needs that we sometimes forget, because we focus more on who is right and who is wrong than on what we need. By becoming aware of what we need we can discover new ways of thinking and relating.

The assumptions this book is based on are:

- Shame, guilt and anger are life-serving signals.
- We have misinterpreted these signals.
- We need to reinterpret them if we want to be able to manage them in ways that work for us.

As long as we are looking for someone we can blame our emotions on, we will miss the important messages in them. We need to realize that we have misinterpreted shame, guilt and anger and make new interpretations of what they want to tell us. When we listen for what needs are behind them, they are no longer as challenging to handle. The moment we connect with the needs behind these feelings they are transformed and this makes it easier for us to connect with others and ourselves.

What makes the exploration of anger, guilt and shame interesting is that they are so intimately associated with learned ideas about what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, abnormal and normal. One can see these emotions as “residuals” from a way of life that is not adapted to the way life works. At the core of these residuals are natural feelings and needs.

Because we have been trained in a way of thinking that is not in

1 http://www.compostera.org 091125
harmony with life itself, anger, shame and guilt inevitably become such residuals. They are all useful signals to us in living and it is important to become aware of them, because they help us to become aware of the systems that have created them. In this way they also show us when, and in what way, we are affected by these systems.

We may think it is up to each individual to learn how to deal with these emotional states. Or maybe we blame these emotional states on “the system”. What I am most interested in is that they can give us information on how we can make changes and start living in ways that do not have these “residuals” in the form we see them now. How can we build an internal climate, and extend this to our families, schools and other social structures that serve life fully? A first step is to develop a language that focuses on people’s inner processes, rather than on what somebody is doing rightly or wrongly. This will make it easier for us to live in a way that takes everyone’s needs into account.

Our Way of Thinking Creates Problems

“Anger can be valuable if we use it as an alarm clock to wake us up—to realize we have a need that isn’t being met and that we are thinking in a way that makes it unlikely to be met”.

Marshall Rosenberg²

Many times we see anger, shame and guilt as a problem, or something we want to get away from. Imagine a person who has the habit of smoking in bed. Since he cannot stand the noise from the smoke alarm every time his bed catches fire, he moves from house to house.³ We act in the same way when we see anger, shame and guilt as something that we at all costs want to get away from. Instead of focusing on trying to get rid of them, we can relate to them as an internal alarm system that tells us “there is a fire” somewhere. They signal us that we need to be extra alert, not to get rid of the feelings, but rather to listen to what they want to tell us.

³ From the article Anger and Domination Systems, by Marshall Rosenberg. www.cnvc.org
Anger, shame and guilt are signaling us that we have needs that are not being met. The thinking that stimulates these emotions rarely helps us in meeting the needs the alarm is signaling us about. It rather distracts us, as we begin to look for who has done wrong, rather than to focus on what we need.

Shame and guilt are stimulated by the idea that there is something wrong with us, or we have done wrong and ought to have behaved differently. When we get tired of feeling guilt or shame, we change the focus to finding faults in other people and then we get angry. Adrenaline starts to flow in our body and we might feel vibrant and alive. It can make us believe that we are in deep connection with life, although we are not even connected with our needs. Because we are missing out on what we need, there is a great risk that we will act in ways that will not only not serve others, but in the long run are also detrimental to ourselves.

When we’ve been angry for a while, we often switch back to guilt or shame, especially if we have learned that there is something wrong with being angry. If we have been threatening, demanding, and in other ways showing what we think is wrong with another person, many of us will start being ashamed and start blaming ourselves. We judge ourselves for behaving inappropriately, immaturely, carelessly, or tell ourselves that we are stupid and selfish.

When we have “turned on ourselves,” long enough and become exhausted by thinking that we are bad, the pendulum swings back again, and we direct ourselves outwards with our judgments and demands. It becomes a vicious circle that is difficult to get out of.
A United Minds survey of shame shows that we often feel a lot of shame after having been angry.\(^4\) Especially when the anger has been directed at our children. The author Alfie Kohn captures this parental wavering when he quotes a parent who says, “first I am so permissive that I hate my children. Then I become so punitive that I hate myself”.\(^5\)

Most people would be surprised if they began to examine exactly in what way anger ignites violence between people. They would discover that the anger, despite its explosiveness - and contrary to what they might have thought - is not what most often leads to violence. Behind people’s acts of violence, there is always an experience of humiliation and that some of our common human needs, often of respect or acceptance, have not been met. Nobody explodes into violence without having experienced being “disrespected” in one way or another. We do not know how to endure the shame and humiliation, with the result that violence seems to be a good option. War is not the expression of explosive angry outbursts but most often a strategically played game. Officers who act impulsively and in strong anger are usually demoted or punished. Men who beat the women they live with often plan when and how to do it. Research on domestic violence shows that rarely is this violence the result of a sudden outburst of anger.\(^6\)

### Natural Versus Cultural

Young children are innately vulnerable. This innate natural vulnerability can be seen as a thermostat for our interdependence with our environment, that reminds us of the vital needs of mutual respect, integrity and community. Our vulnerability makes us aware of both internal and external factors and helps us learn to live in harmony with other people. We can see this innate vulnerability as a kind of fine-tuned shame.

When we feel shame, muscles in the neck and shoulders weaken. This leads to the head and eyes turning down and away, the neck and

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shoulders sagging. Shame can also lead to heat flashes in our face and all over the body - as well as redness in the face. With strong shame our stomach tightens. We can respond in many ways to these effects on our system. Sometimes we laugh nervously, and sometimes our mouths get stuck in a nervous smile. At other times it is hard to find words and our mouths dry out.

When shame switches to anger, the bodily reactions change. We get tense jaws, tense facial muscles, an even redder face, a higher voice capacity and tense, restrained lips. The physical reactions depend partly on how much anger is held back and how much of it is expressed.

In contrast to anger and shame there are no common physical reactions when we say that we feel guilt. The psychologist Silvan Tomkins has conducted research on human emotional expressions and did not find anything specific that happens in the body when we feel guilt.7

The word guilt is used to describe a variety of emotions that have different effects on our bodies. When we feel guilty, there are many commonalities in our way of thinking. We think that we should do something other than what we are doing and that if we do not change our behavior, we deserve to be ashamed. Since the word should often leads to guilt, we can use it as an eye opener to realize that we are carrying guilt at a certain moment. It is when our natural vulnerability is merged with our culturally influenced way of thinking that shame becomes uncomfortable. Maybe it’s time for us to recapture the core of interdependence that exists in shame, guilt and anger, instead of letting them lie in the way of our connection with each other and ourselves!

Shame chokes us, so we say nothing when we need to.
Guilt scares us, and we do not do what needs to be done.
Anger blinds us so that we do things that we later regret.

7. Tomkins used to call guilt, moral shame. He made the assumption that guilt had its source in shame. Nathanson, Donald L (1992), Shame and Pride. W.W. Norton&CO.
An Approach for Change

In this book, I use an approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to get closer to understanding shame, guilt and anger. This means that I use the assumption that behind every human action there is an attempt to meet a need. Even when people blame, threaten or use violence, we can see them as attempts, albeit tragic ones, to meet needs.¹

We can use NVC to transform shame, guilt and anger into emotions that will more easily help us to get in touch with what we need. Instead of trying to avoid these feelings, we can connect them to our needs and thereby get in touch with what is going on within us at a deeper level. When we do so we find more ways to deal with shame, anger and guilt than to shy away from relationships or to blame ourselves or someone else. Neither do we need to try to get rid of the feelings by rebelling against them.

There are many ways to approach shame, guilt and anger, and NVC is what has so far given me the most hope. What makes me hopeful, is that with NVC, I can find the natural driving forces behind the anger, shame and guilt, and do not get stuck in talking about right or wrong. To do that, we need to be willing to explore our view of human nature. Chapter three therefore describes how the different elements of NVC can be used in this exciting exploration.

The following poem speaks to the vulnerability that arises when we are making new choices, such as the ones I suggest in this book. I also enjoy the reminder of how embracing shame gives me the power and possibility to be real!

¹. Isdal, Per (2001) *Meningen med våld*. Gothia förlag. Isdals definition of violence: “Violence is any action that is directed towards another person, which hurts, scares, violates or abuses another”
You shall thank your gods,
if they force you to go
where you have no footprints
to trust to.

You shall thank your gods,
if all shame on you they pin.
You must seek refuge
a little further in.

What the whole world condemns
sometimes manages quite well.
Outlaws were many
who gained their own soul.

He who is forced to wild wood
looks on all with new sight,
and he tastes with gratitude
life’s bread and salt.

You shall thank your gods,
when your shell they break.
Reality and kernel
the sole choice you can make.
- Karin Boye²

² http://www.karinboye.se/verk/dikter/dikter-mcduff/you-shall-thank.shtml
Chapter 2
The Myth of Domination
in Our Everyday Life
Education for Peace

For many years I used to argue against opinions such as, “We are violent and you cannot change human nature.” I did everything to prove I was “right” and expressed my arguments with force and intensity. My whole focus was to convince the other person that we humans are really not born violent. It was very counterproductive, as the way I did it became a confirmation of our potential violence and our commitment to competition, even if my words said otherwise. Afterwards I was often ashamed and frustrated with myself.

That human beings have the potential to be violent is evident as soon as we see a newscast or read a newspaper. But we can also see that we have the potential to be caring, warm and loving. If we want to contribute to lasting peace, it is important that we nurture our ability to cooperate and to care about each other.

At a conference I attended, the lecturer got a question about whether we can “educate for peace”. The lecturer, who had worked on education issues in Israel for a long time, responded in a way that I have often thought about later. Simplified, she said that if we nurture the longing for peace in our children and young people, without at the same time changing the old ways of thinking about good and evil, we risk seeing even more violence. She explained further that in most Palestinian and Israeli schools the subject of peace was addressed by having the children write essays about peace, paint peace doves and sing peace songs. In this way, the desire for peace was nurtured and maintained. Meanwhile, the students (as in most other school systems) were being trained in a thinking based on moral judgments such as right and wrong and good and bad. Students around the world are learning that one way to act is bad and another good and to follow the standards that those in charge have set up. When people trained in this approach see war going on around them, they ask themselves who is responsible for the war? Whose fault is it? If we have a strong enemy image of another group, we quickly find the answer outside of ourselves and outside of the group we belong to. We have nurtured a strong passion for peace - and simultaneously created a breeding ground for more violence.
To find the root of where violence is coming from, we first need to become aware of how much our view of human beings affects us. In addition to awakening a longing for peace, we need to change the old system of thought which no longer leads us there. All around and within us is proof that this way of thinking is a myth, but something we have learned to believe in as if it were true.

Our Myths Shape Our World...

About eight thousand years ago large parts of humanity turned from seeing themselves as part of the universe to position themselves at the center of the world.¹ I enjoy how Hartmann summarized what has happened with human beings over the millenniums. There are many reasons for this development and I will try to give a very simplified picture of it. We benefit from having at least a superficial understanding of this if we want to explore anger, shame and guilt.

During the last few millennia, most of the existing languages changed from describing processes to becoming more static. We developed a language of diagnosis, labels and analyses. Using this static language we can easily categorize and compare ourselves with others, which makes it easier to understand who should be rewarded and who should be punished. The language was developed to serve those who were highly ranked (regardless of whether it was a king, an emperor or a priest), not to serve life.²

At that time we went from seeing ourselves as part of creation, to placing our planet in the center of the universe with man at the top of it. Creation was made for man, we were the crown of creation and were therefore entitled to exploit and control other life forms. Men received the right to rule over women, adults over children and some groups received the right to rule over other groups.

We also began to assert ownership over land and animals and to believe in the myths of how the earth was created by “evil forces” that destroyed the good. And that man, who was sprung from the earth, therefore, was fundamentally bad, sinful or evil. But also that there

¹ Hartmann, Thom (2001), The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight. Hodder and Stoughton
were some that were a little better than others, and therefore they had the right to rule. As it became a “truth” that our true nature was so sinful, evil and selfish, we needed someone to control us in order to guarantee that no one would be harmed.

At one point we realized, through help from Copernicus and others, that we could not assert that the earth was the universe’s physical center. After prolonged resistance (when we, among other things, killed those who brought forward proof that the Earth actually spun around the sun and not vice versa) we shifted our focus to a world view that was slightly different. Now instead, we regarded the earth and humanity as the spiritual center of the universe.

The static language that we have held on to, creates a definitive and static picture of the world and makes it appear as if we can define the way things are. From this limited horizon it gives us the ability to quickly divide people into normal or abnormal, good or evil and to have opinions on how things should be.

“... it began long ago with the myths of man’s true nature being evil and selfish - and that the good life came only as the heroic forces crushed the evil forces. We have lived a long time with this destructive mythology that comes complete with a language that dehumanizes people and turns them into objects.”

Marshall Rosenberg

If we could have the opportunity to question a person who worshiped Thor and the other gods, in what is called the Nordic mythology more than a thousand years ago, we might have this conversation:

- Could you tell me about the myth of how Thor and his hammer creates thunder?

- Myth, what do you mean!?!?

Each system needs its myth, or a story that explains why the world looks the way it does and why what happens, happens. A story that is told enough times and that is confirmed in everyday life ceases to

be a tale or a myth. We start taking it for reality. When this happens, people seem to accept the story, even if it is destroying their lives.

I have often asked myself which is the myth that we are blind to in our time. What would cause us to respond in a similar way as the person above, answering the question about Thor? What are the beliefs we now have that in a few thousand years will be called old myths? What is it that we today take for granted as self-evident and true? Beliefs that people in a thousand years will marvel about - that we possibly could have believed in?

Wink, Quinn, Hartmann, Clark and many other authors have described a modern myth, which we act on daily. Wink⁵ calls it “the myth of redemptive violence”.

This myth seduces us into believing that conflicts can be resolved with violence. It seems logical because, after enough violence a kind of harmony often occurs, at least for a short while. What one forgets is that after a while violence tends to flare up again, now with an enlarged force.

The more I study violence, the more Winks’ words below, capture the essence of what is at its core.

“The myth of redemptive violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational and primitive image of evil the world has ever known. Furthermore, its orientation towards evil is one into which virtually all modern children (boys especially) are socialized in the process of maturation.”⁶

Maybe it’s just because this myth is so simple and yet so exciting that has allowed it to have such a huge impact worldwide. It penetrates all other stories - like a code programmed into an existing computer program. It appears in children programs, sports, and in all parts of the adult entertainment world. It infiltrates films, fairy tales, poetry, music and games.

In his book, The Lost Symbol, Dan Browns protagonist Robert Langdon, symbol researcher, reflects this:

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5. Riane Eisler calls it the myth of domination in The Chalice and the Blade, Our History Our Future. In his trilogy on The Powers, Wink use the term “The Myth of Redemptive Violence”.
“When Langdon taught his students about archetypal hybrids, he used the example of fairy tales, which were recounted across generations and exaggerated over time, borrowing so heavily from one another, that they have evolved into homogenized morality tales with the same iconic elements: virginal damsels, handsome princes, impenetrable fortresses, and powerful wizards. By way of fairy tales, this primeval battle of “good vs. evil” is ingrained into us as children through our stories: Merlin vs. Morgan le Fay, Saint George vs. Dragon, David vs. Goliath, Snow White vs. the Witch, and even Luke Skywalker battling Darth Vader.”

I see this myth lived out over and over again. I hear it in the way we communicate and relate to each other, but also in the way we consume and relate to other living beings and to the planet. I hear it in the way we deal with conflict. This myth leads us to believe that we can solve personal conflicts in a satisfactory way by using violence in various forms.

Many of us threaten our children with punishment or loss of rewards if they do not do what we ask of them. In this way we forward to our children the idea that conflicts can be solved with violence.

We blame our partners, colleagues and others who do not do what we want, using judgments and demands. This way of communicating violently is turned outwardly, but also inwardly towards ourselves. Many of us judge and blame ourselves even harder than we judge others.

We have learned to think, “people need to be punished in order to understand that they have done something wrong,” “some do not learn unless it hurts” and “sometimes it is actually only violence that works.”

It is clear that retaliation and revenge are based on this myth, but perhaps not as obvious as that both our education and our legal systems are also governed in many cases by these ideas. If we are really interested in finding other ways than coercion, rewards or punishments to affect our environment, we will benefit from realizing that violence never or seldom leads to harmony. Only when we realize the limitations of this myth, of this way of thinking, can we avoid the many pitfalls it has created. Most of us are extremely well trained in this way of thinking,

but just as a person with ancient beliefs cannot see his view of life as only a myth, we can’t see our own view of the nature of human beings as a myth. It’s easy to lose hope when you see how a lethal combination of high technology and domination thinking right now controls large parts of the world. Especially when it is obvious that it would serve us all to give more support to children and young people and those working with them, instead of spending so much of our resources on weapons.¹⁸

A UNICEF report shows that the cost of a nuclear-armed submarine could provide 48 million people in the so called third world, with water and sewage systems. The cost of 11 bombers could fund four years of primary education for 135 million children. A single ballistic missile’s price tag would be enough to provide food for 50 million children in the Third World over a year. ¹⁹ It’s not a question of whether resources exist or not. It’s a question of how they are used, and perhaps most importantly why they are used in this way.

Shame on You!

“If you have a plant and it isn’t growing the way you would like, do you punish it?”

Marshall Rosenberg.¹⁰

In any culture or system people are trained to think in a way that supports that particular culture or system. Our way of thinking characterizes the way we communicate. In every system there is also a view of life and of human beings, which affects what and how we do things.

In history, kings were given the right to decide who was good and who was evil, so that it would be easy to find out who should be punished and who should be rewarded. In other times, countries,

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¹⁸. In Sweden, a plumber earns (on average) about 375 000 SEK per year and a preschool teacher about 260 000 SEK. We seem to be willing to spend more on those who fix our plumbing than on those who work with our children. The prevailing gender power structure of course contributes to these differences but also on what we value.


regions or cultures, the czar, emperor, priest, judge or politicians have been given that right. But the most important thing is not what you call the person at the top; the importance is in having a system whose aim is to control people.

The purpose of punishment is to get people to change. To help people, so that they can behave “properly”, one must make them ashamed and realize what small unimportant “creeps” they are. This is rooted in the notion and belief that if people are suffering and hate themselves, they will learn from this.

To accomplish this, it is of great use if the language contains words of judgment such as good, bad, right, wrong, irrational and
incompetent. Also, the word “forgive” is one of the first things a child in this system must learn to say properly. It will show that they repent and understand that they have done wrong.

Does anybody really believe that a child who has been forced to say “I’m sorry” will begin to care more about others? I think it’s pretty obvious that there is no magical healing that will happen simply by the words in themselves. When we force a child to say that they are sorry, we have not only forced the child to say “sorry”, we have also taught them that it’s okay to say it even if he or she does not mean it - that is, we have taught them to lie. The whole concept of punishment and rewards is so deeply ingrained in us that we find it hard to imagine other options.

To mourn and to feel disappointment when we have done something that has not met needs, neither ours nor others, is, however, as
I see it, very natural, even innate. We can grieve, without criticizing ourselves, and in this way, learn new ways to act.

On the Scene of a Domination Culture

In order to clarify how we can make use of the understanding of the “domination system” in a concrete way, imagine yourself in Anna’s situation in the story on the next page. The story is looked at from different perspectives in several places in this book, and the more you can put yourself into her situation, the more you will learn about anger, shame and guilt. Perhaps it will even remind you of a situation in your own life.

For years Anna and her friends have dreamed of starting a “culture café” together. They talked and fantasized for hours about all the fun that could happen at this café. They dreamed of creating a meeting place for people who wanted to do something meaningful with their time. The place would, amongst other things, offer music, performances, workshops, body treatments, seminars and an opportunity to just meet and talk over a cup of coffee.

Anna has been one of the most committed to this idea and she has often impatiently asked if it is not time to at last get started with this project. When she has heard about a vacant property, she has immediately gone to inspect it, and afterward called her friends to talk about the pros and cons of this particular place. The more they talked about their idea, the stronger Anna has experienced a connection with her friends and the thought of getting to do something meaningful with them has grown stronger and stronger as well.

Then, through her current job, Anna is offered to immediately go abroad to work for six months and she accepts the challenge. After four months of work there, she gets a visit from an acquaintance from her hometown. He says that her friends have just started a café back home. And yet, Anna has not heard anything about this from her friends!
If we think that her friends have done wrong to Anna (or to us) and that they should have acted differently, we feel angry and might think: “They deserve to be punished in one way or another. They must at least know that they have done wrong and that they should be ashamed of themselves.”

When we put the blame on others, because we feel upset about how they behave, anger arises in us and, because we have been taught the concept of deserving, we might have thoughts of revenge - to give someone what they deserve. Anger can be viewed as a signal that we both have some important needs that have not been met, and have become distracted from this by our judgmental and punishing thoughts. Thoughts like “they should have thought about how I would feel” or “they are selfish bastards”, makes it hard for us to take responsibility for our own reactions and make it a challenge for us to act effectively in order to actually meet our own needs.
Domination Cultures Versus Partnership Cultures

To clarify some differences between how various systems affect our ability to manage anger, shame and guilt, I have made some comparisons below. Becoming aware of these differences may contribute to greater acceptance when we are experiencing anger, shame or guilt. What we put our attention on makes it easier or harder to deal with these feelings.

Anger

Shame and guilt can be seen as signals that we have shifted our attention from the feelings within us that directly serve life, to a system based on competition, rank and domination. When we learn to recognize these signals, we gain access to valuable information about what we are currently focusing on - what we are judging as right and wrong.

Attention! Doing this division can get us caught up in ideas of right and wrong. If we do that, it will negate the purpose of doing it, so focus on the difference, rather than on trying to figure out if one is good and the other one bad.

Shame

Shame in partnership cultures

We have an innate sensitivity for others and their needs. Shame is interpreted as a sign that it might be valuable to become more aware of the other person's needs as well as our own.

Shame in domination cultures

Shame is interpreted as a sign that we are not good enough, that we are bad, disgusting, abnormal or that we have done something wrong and are not worthy of love. Inducing shame is used to try to create change.
Anger

Anger in partnership cultures
Anger is a sign that someone has needs that have not been met. Anger gives us strength to set limits to protect what we value. Anger is not taken personally or as if there is something wrong with anyone, but as a cry for help.

Anger in domination cultures
Anger means that someone has done something wrong and should have acted differently. They should “know better” and they now deserve to be punished. Criticism expressed with anger is directed at another person or is easily perceived as a personal attack.

Guilt

Guilt in partnership cultures
Instead of finding a scapegoat or deciding who is to blame, we try to consider everyone’s needs, our own and others. We explore whether there is something we want to do differently in order to meet the needs of others without giving up our own needs.

Guilt in domination cultures
Guilt is interpreted as a sign that we should have acted differently and therefore we deserve to be punished. We blame others or ourselves in the hope that it will lead to positive changes.

To Apologize

To apologize in partnership cultures
We listen with empathy to another’s pain about their needs having not been met. When we realize that we have not considered the needs of others, we act to repair it.

To apologize in domination cultures
If others are not happy, we blame ourselves, feel shame and ask others to forgive us. The focus is on the person who has acted in a way we do not think was right, normal, appropriate or acceptable.
Violence Between the Words

Part of what keeps the domination system in place, is that we learn that there’s something wrong with feeling anger, shame or guilt.\(^1\) When we learn to focus on what is wrong with us, we are easily oppressed. The language we have learned easily turns us into obedient slaves. If we want to change that, we need to learn a language that empowers us to live our lives in the way we dream of.

Most of us grew up in domination systems - a system in which power is used as power “over” others, rather than power with others. It is a system where we look at people, including ourselves, as bad, evil or irrelevant. For such a culture of domination to be created and maintained, we need to continue to:

1. Use moral judgments and static language.

2. Deny human beings the ability to choose how to act.

3. Use the concept of “deserving”.

If we have these ideas and a language based on them, we are easy to control. In fact, not much external control is needed, because we have learned to voluntarily limit our freedom and ourselves.

We can use the three points above, to transform our thinking to a more life-serving way to think. The first step is that we learn to recognize when we use language derived from dominance thinking. The next step is to realize that we can use these very thoughts to understand more about what we feel and need. We may even find that it can be a shortcut to getting in touch with our needs.

The distinction of thoughts that lead to anger is that they are based on one or more of the above three points. If you got angry when you read about Anna or imagined yourself in a similar situation, you’re probably thinking along similar lines as Anna:

“Cowards! Selfish idiots! They are thinking only of themselves. They are

\(^{11}\) Eisler, Riane. In, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Eisler describes a model she calls the partnership model and compares it with the domination system.
such cowards that they could not even stand up for what they have done. If they did not want me to be a part of the project they should have been honest enough to say it directly to me. I deserve to be treated better than this, but I’ll show them!”

These thoughts contain a few basic concepts: they include static language and ideas about what is “right and wrong”, the thinking that we have a “limited freedom of choice” and of course the crucial “concept of deserving”. With a few thoughts that contain all three points, we have brought the thinking within the dominance system one step further.

1. Anna makes moral judgments and uses static languages: “Cowards! Selfish idiots…” ... are expressions of moral judgments based on right and wrong.

When we judge people in the form of static labels, it is easy to forget to treat them with care and respect. To turn our anger against them is close at hand.

2. Anna denies that they have choice, and thinks they should behave in a certain way: “If they did not want me to be a part of the project, they should have been honest enough to say it directly to me.”

We think that people ought to behave in a certain way. They do not really have the right to do what they do. They deserve punishment and this second point is linked together with the third, the concept of deserve.

3. Anna uses the concept of “deserve”: “I deserve to be treated in a better way so I’ll show them!”

The concept of “deserve” is the foundation of any punishment and reward. When people act in a way that we think is wrong, we threaten them with punishment. We have a belief that if someone we think has done “wrong” gets what he or she deserves, it will restore the balance.

The idea is that the more they hate themselves and learn that they
have done wrong, the greater the chance will be that they will learn to act differently next time.

If we are aware that we think this way, we become freer to act in a way that can lead us to where we want to go. Before we go deeper into that, let’s continue to experiment with how our habitual ways of thinking can appear in the way we act when we feel guilt and shame.

Now use the same three concepts of thinking to understand how these ways of thinking lead to shame or guilt.

1. **Static language - for example moral judgments.**
2. **Denial of choice.**
3. **The concept of deserve.**

Anna might not get angry when she hears about the café, but instead feel shame or guilt. If she does she is probably thinking something like this: “That’s what I suspected. They never wanted me and that’s not so strange, I’m always so complicated and I do not know how to keep agreements. I should not have expected anything else ... Nobody wants to be with me when it really comes down to it, I’m just not enough!”

1. **Anna uses moral judgments by making diagnoses and analyzing herself.**
   “... I’m always so complicated and I not know how to keep agreements ... I’m just not interesting enough to work with.”

When we think of ourselves in the form of static labels and analysis, we often give up on what we want and need. Static language can easily lead to violence, whether it is directed inwards or outwards. It is based on moral judgments of ourselves, leads to self-criticism and self-fulfilling prophecies that pacify us.

2. **Anna restricts her own freedom of choice and tries to suppress or ignore her reaction to what has happened**
   “I should not have expected anything else so this is how it usually goes ... when will I ever learn to stop dreaming ...”

   According to the norms, there are certain things that are appropriate
or normal. We have learned that if you do not follow these norms you may suffer for it.

3. **The concept of “deserve” turned inwardly.**

   “I **should** not have expected anything else. I’m not interesting enough. I get what I **deserve and there is nothing I can do about it.”**

We deserve to be included or rewarded by being perfect, and/or normal, and if we are not we do not deserve to have others care about us. Both punishments and rewards keep us in place.

As I see it, a natural part of being human is to mourn a missed opportunity to help someone else. It is an entirely different process than that based on the idea that if we feel badly enough about ourselves, we will learn not to act the same way again. Hating yourself does not usually lead to the change we want to see.
DOMINATION MARINADE

1 LITER OF RIGHT - AND WRONG THINKING
1 BUNCH OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS
1 DOSE OF LIMITED CHOICE
1 KG DENIAL OF SELF-WORTH
1 PACKAGE OF DESERVE MENTALITY

Make sure everything is covered with the marinade to ensure high levels of passivity. To obtain really intense obedience by all parts, be sure they are marinated for a long time and make sure all parts are soaked.
PARTNERSHIP MARINADE
1 LITER OF NEEDS THINKING
1 BUNCH OF HONEST EXPRESSIONS
1 DOSE OF EMPATHY
1 KG FREEDOM OF CHOICE
1 PACKAGE OF MUTUALITY

Make sure to balance the desire for freedom with caring for others. Experiment freely with the ingredients to achieve the desired results.
Chapter 3
Anger, Guilt, Shame and Our Way of Communicating
Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

“Breathing is to life what communication is to relationships.”
Virginia Satir

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) has been immensely useful as I have explored anger, guilt and shame. NVC is a combination of ways to communicate, to think and to use our own power. It’s aim is to create a quality of connection between us humans, where our inherent willingness to listen to and try to meet everyone’s needs are stimulated. It is an approach where we see everyone’s needs as important. Mutual respect and free will are important concepts as they are valuable when we want to cooperate with someone, to build a close relationship and also when we want to be able to handle conflict.

We humans are built for connection. Human beings are mutually dependent on other people and on nature around us. A certain degree of vulnerability helps us to continuously connect with others and with ourselves. In this chapter I will describe four basic components (observations, feelings, needs and requests), two key elements (honesty and empathy), and some key concepts and principles of NVC. They can all be used to enhance our ability to manage anger, shame and guilt.

Looking Forward to the Next Time You Feel Shame, Guilt or Anger

“Now you’ll hear my secret. It is very simple: it is only with the heart that one can see properly. What is important is invisible to the eyes.”
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC opened my eyes to the role that anger, guilt and shame play in our lives. I realized that it is possible to see anger, guilt and shame as signals that, if we pay attention to them, can help us live a richer life. Instead of seeing them as something we want to avoid, we can transform them and get a deeper connection with our needs.

I remember my surprise when I first heard Marshall Rosenberg saying that he looked forward to the next time he would get angry or feel shame or guilt. At first it seemed completely ridiculous, but I was curious enough to start looking into what he really meant.

Since then I have spent a long time exploring shame, guilt and anger. I have seen that they are signs that tell us when we have failed to pay attention to some of our life-serving needs. They are a strong signal that we have something more to learn about life. If we use them to become more aware of what goes on inside of us, instead of trying to avoid these feelings, they will inevitably enrich our lives.

An Approach That Leads to Connection

“NVC is an awareness process masquerading as a communication tool”

Kit Miller

Many of the basic mechanisms underlying human communication become clearer when we look at them through the experiences of anger, shame and guilt. The principles, taken from NVC, which run like a thread throughout this book, can help us both build and preserve a culture of partnership and cooperation. Some of the basic principles are:

1. Feelings and needs can help us become more aware of how we want to live

When we believe that every person’s inner life (feelings and needs) can enrich us, it makes us more interested in understanding what is going on in another person who, for example, is angry. If we are able to connect what anyone feels to what they need, we become more willing to listen to them.

2. By connecting our feelings to our needs, wants and dreams, we have more power to make important choices

When we take responsibility for our feelings by linking them to what we need, we reduce the risk that others hear us as if we are trying
to blame them. Similarly, it is easier for us to listen to others, if we
do not hear that we are the cause of their feelings. Our energy is not
wasted in responding to criticism, when we connect what others feel
to what they need.

3. **It is easier to connect if we assume that behind everything we
humans do, there is an intention to try to meet needs**

   If we shift from thinking that other people do things against us, to
believing that what they do, they do in an attempt to meet their needs,
we can more easily connect with them. Compassion is stimulated when
we believe that whatever people do, originates in their desire to meet
needs. We recognize ourselves in others and realize that they, just as
we, have needs of community, freedom, love, meaning, respect and
care. When our anger is stimulated by what someone else does, we
can guess which of their needs they are trying to meet. It may help
us to understand them, without necessarily accepting their actions.

4. **We want to contribute to others when we experience it as voluntary**

   When we feel that it is optional to help others and not a demand,
we feel more motivated to contribute. Demands, threats and language
based on what people “should” or “must” do, makes it harder to cooper-
ate. When our language does not limit anyone’s freedom of choice,
anger and shame diminish, as these feelings arise when we consider
that there are some things we must, or at least should do.

   Let me describe four components that are valuable if we want to
communicate in a way that will not stimulate anger, guilt and shame,
or when we want to handle them if they have already been stimulated.

1. **Observations**

   When we communicate what we’ve seen someone do or heard some-
one say, with the objectivity of a video camera, we have expressed an
observation. It serves as a common platform for our communication
with others. A video camera can film what happens, but it cannot
judge or moralize about whether the subject being recorded is normal, abnormal, good, bad, or that someone has ignored and manipulated someone else. Shame, guilt or anger are never far away when we confuse observations with interpretations. An interpretation often includes an idea of what intention the other person had with their actions. The interpretation may make us think that others are the cause of what is going on within us.

Enemy images of people and groups of people are created in every culture that are based on the idea of “right”. When we relate to people through static images of them, it is difficult for us to see the humanity in their behavior. We think we have the right to be angry and to scold them. Once we have learned to see the world through our interpretations they are almost impossible to ignore. As we also have learned that it’s not nice to judge others and to put labels on them, we further judge ourselves for judging them. If we have learned that we should not judge ourselves, we become ashamed and may judge ourselves even harder. It goes round and round in an eternal spinning carousel and we are in danger of going further and further away from being able to observe what is actually happening. If we communicate with someone on the basis of observations of what actually happened, instead of communicating our interpretations, it will sound very different and it will be easier to establish a connection with them.

Let’s consider Anna from the cafe story in chapter two and try to distinguish her interpretations from what actually happened. If she makes an interpretation based on what is right and wrong with her friends, she may call them “self-centered egoists”. If she, instead of interpreting, makes an observation of what has happened she could say:

“We have talked about starting a café together for the past five years. Now I hear that they have started a café without telling me anything about it.”
2. Feelings

Some of us may think that it is impossible to stick to observations when they we angry (even if we like the idea), because we get so upset. However, most of us agree that it is valuable to be able to express one’s feelings in the moments when one is upset - and with practice this can be learned.

When I use the word “feelings” I am referring to what can be experienced as sensations in the body. Being able to describe how it feels in our body makes it easier to get information about what we need and to describe it to others. When others get in touch with what we feel, it becomes easier for them to gain an understanding of our reality, because they can recognize themselves in it, as feelings are something we humans have in common.

Sometimes it feels as if our feelings “are taking over,” but the fact is that emotions change rapidly and that they only remain a few seconds, if they are not stimulated again. If we openly take responsibility for our feelings by linking them to our needs, it reduces the risk that others perceive our expressed emotions as criticism or blame. Similarly, our ability to connect the feelings of others to what they need, rather than to what we have done “wrong”, protects us from feeling guilt or shame.

All our emotions tell us about something we need. When you feel thirsty, you need to drink. If you are experiencing loneliness, it is probably a need for fellowship, support or love that is stimulated. The feeling of boredom helps you take your need for meaning or inspiration seriously. When we do not listen to what we feel, we miss vital signs that can help us meet our needs. It is in these situations that anger, shame and guilt gets stimulated. They serve as a kind of extra signal system so that we will not miss what is important to us.

In his best-seller, Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman makes it clear how valuable it is to be in touch with what we feel when it comes to making constructive decisions and to relate to others.

We all have an inner experience and understanding of emotions, but sometimes it might be a challenge to find a way to express what we feel in a way that it clear to others. Connection with our feelings is of great importance for our wellbeing. Feelings will make themselves

felt even if we try to ignore them, because they exist as support in serving life. They often become even stronger and even more difficult to handle when we try to push them away, or when we do not want to recognize them.

Emotions have long served us as guides, but with the thinking that we have been marinated in over the past eight thousand years, it has become harder for us to make use of their wisdom. We have learned to think that some feelings are good, appropriate and normal while others are bad, inappropriate and a sign that we are abnormal. This makes it harder to accept certain feelings and then we often push them away and miss their message.

Although emotions sometimes seem to live their own lives, they are intimately linked with our thoughts and our body. In order to efficiently deal with anger, shame and guilt, it is useful to distinguish between what we feel and what we think about what we feel. If we can distinguish between thoughts and feelings, we reduce the risk that we shame or blame ourselves or others.

Other people’s emotions affect us even when not expressed in words. Just imagine how you feel when someone at work or in your close family is experiencing strong emotions. It shows in their body

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<tr>
<th>Feelings when needs are fullfilled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>relaxed</td>
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<tr>
<td>satisfied</td>
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<td>energized</td>
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<tr>
<td>fascinated</td>
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<td>excited</td>
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<td>surprised</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings when needs are not fullfilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disappointed</td>
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<tr>
<td>scared</td>
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<td>shamed</td>
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<td>helpless</td>
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<td>fearful</td>
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language, facial expressions and gestures. If they are asked about what is going on within them, they say, “nothing special”. When it is unclear what a person feels, the attention of others (often unconsciously) is focused on trying to understand what is going on within him or her.

I have often asked people to think about situations where they have felt shame or guilt in relation to another person. When I have asked what they think the other person felt and the needs in these situations, they rarely know how to respond. Or they say that the person is angry or disappointed in them. They tell me that they feel shame when the other person looks at them with a certain glance, speaks with a certain tone, or uses body language that they are unsure of how to interpret. They read accusations in what they see and hear. When the other person’s feelings are clear to them the shame and guilt lessens.

If I think that others are responsible for what I feel, I express myself differently than I do if I take full responsibility for my feelings. As long as emotions are “positive”, many think it is fine to be “blamed” for being the cause of them. It may be flattering and even encouraging to hear: “I’m glad because you ...”, or “You make me happy”.

When we connect feelings that are not so positive to what someone else has done, many lash out and no longer want to see themselves as the cause of our feelings. It can become challenging to keep listening if someone tells you “I feel disappointed because you ...” or, “You make me sad when you do not ...”

People often say that they think we should talk more about feelings. And I have wondered why it seems to be emotionally charged to do so. One explanation I’ve found is that when we express what we feel, we often add responsibility for our feelings to others. I have much more confidence that others will be able to hear what we feel when we simultaneously connect our feelings to what we need.

“I feel sad because you’re never there for me”, can be replaced with, “I feel sad because I want to experience more support in my life than I have right now”. “I’m afraid. You just think about yourself” with, “I’m afraid because I have a need for care and support?”

Mixing emotions with what we think others do or have the intention to do, can also lead to guilt, shame or anger. This happens, for example, when we use words such as “manipulated”, “attacked” or “insulted”. If I express that “I feel manipulated” it is easy for others to
hear it as “you manipulate me.” They often resist or blame themselves and the connection with them is effected.

3. Needs

I refer sometimes to needs as the “common denominator” among human beings. Through them we can recognize ourselves in each other, which nurtures natural compassion. It increases our ability to understand what is behind someone’s actions. We all have the same basic needs, so we can recognize each other’s driving force, even though we sometimes would choose other ways to act ourselves.

Needs can thus be described as driving forces that are universally human, they are shared by all people, regardless of gender, culture, age or religious or political background. It is valuable to differentiate needs from the specific strategies used to meet them.

Here, the term needs is used to describe resources that life needs to sustain itself. Our physical well-being depends on our need for air, water, rest and nutrition being met. Our psychological and spiritual well-being is strengthened when our needs for understanding, support, companionship, honesty and meaning are met.

Unfortunately, there are only a few people who have learned from childhood how to clearly express needs. Instead, we have learned to criticize, demand and threaten in order to get our needs met and most of the time this has a very poor result as it only creates distance between us.

A basic assumption behind NVC is that behind anger, shame and guilt there are needs that are not being met. The problem in these situations is that we are not in contact with our needs. Instead, we focus our attention on what is wrong with ourselves and others.

Something that can help us to increase our awareness is to regard all thoughts based on right and wrong as signals that we do not have a connection to our needs. When we are in touch with our needs, we are not angry or ashamed anymore because anger has been transformed into feelings that are closer to our basic needs. This makes it impossible to hold on to shame or anger.
## Some of our common human needs

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<tr>
<th>Basic Needs</th>
<th>Psychological Needs</th>
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<td>Food</td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
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<td>Air</td>
<td>Fun</td>
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<td>Water</td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
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<td>Safety</td>
<td>To contribute</td>
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<td>Movement</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy - to choose my own dreams and how I want to reach them</td>
<td>Respect</td>
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<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Support</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
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<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Community</td>
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<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Care</td>
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<td>Peace, Harmony</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
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<td>Balance</td>
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<td>Beauty</td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>Warmth</td>
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<td>Understanding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To be seen and heard</td>
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“What They Did Was Wrong”

Let’s see how feelings and needs can be applied to the story of Anna in chapter two. If you were Anna, what do you think you would feel in her situation?

Different people feel different things depending on what they think in the moment, and what they value and need. Let us assume that the first feeling you feel is disappointment. Disappointment because you were so keen to be part of this project. Maybe you also feel worry or confusion because you want to understand more about why your friends have chosen not to tell you that they have started a café. Or maybe you’re sad because you had hoped to be part of something that would be really meaningful and that would give you hope. The needs behind your feelings could thus be inclusion, understanding, meaning or hope. These needs will be easier to get in touch with if you have any contact with what you feel. The feelings give us clues to find out what we need. Possibly you feel happy because you have confidence that you will be involved in the project when you get home - even if you, do not know for sure, because nobody has told you anything. Even if
you have the ability to rejoice, you might feel a certain sadness at not having been involved in the exciting start of the cafe.

Continuing with the story of Anna, you might think:

“Disappointed and sad, no I would get ANGRY!” She has to tell them that they have done wrong, you simply do not behave like that!”

This thinking behind anger leads us to a dead end. Let’s listen to how a dialogue might sound, when we have decided to focus on what others have done **wrong**.

Anna calls Eve, one of the friends who have started the café.

Anna: (Fast, hard and irritated.)

- How could you do this to me? How terribly selfish. You should at least have informed me, but you didn’t even dare to do this! Cowards, you should be ashamed of yourselves!

Eve: (Feeling attacked, answers irritatingly in a firm voice.)

- We are free to make our own decisions! You were not at home and
besides it has always be so difficult to count on you, as you always change your mind. (Now she is showing her “true self”. I’m happy that we did not involve her!)

Anna: (With an even sharper voice.)
- I should have guessed that you would blame me, but you just don’t act like this towards a friend. I will never forgive you for this and I will let everyone know that you have stolen my idea!

(Hangs up.)

This was not what Anna had hoped for when she made the call. Many of us probably can recognize what can happen when we act according to right and wrong thinking, and when the internal pressure becomes so great that we boil over.

Anger and Needs

“Anger is a result of life-alienating thinking that is disconnected from needs. It indicates that we have moved up to our head to analyze and judge somebody rather than focus on which of our needs are not getting met.”

Marshall Rosenberg³

Many people feel that they are alive when they are angry. The physical sensation is very intense because of the adrenaline and other hormones flowing in their body. But I believe that we are not “fully alive” because we are not in touch with the needs that keep us alive.

Our communication becomes ineffective in this mode. When we get angry, we tend to focus almost exclusively on what we do not like and what is wrong with others, instead of focusing on what we want and how it could be possible for others to contribute to us. When we are angry we often ask others to stop doing something. If we do not clearly ask for exactly what we want them to do, or do differently, a change in their behavior might be equally as irritating to us.

When we are in touch with our human needs, we can no longer be angry. If we connect with the needs behind the anger, we will transform anger into feelings with the same intensity, and at the same time more clearly connect ourselves with life serving needs.

**Shame and Needs**

Shame is sometimes described as the price we pay for being part of a social context. However, I see that there are other ways to become aware that others’ needs are not being met than to feel shame. If we have continuous connection with our own and others’ needs, we do not need shame as an “alarm signal”. Connection with needs helps us to react before we are overwhelmed by shame.

**Guilt and Needs**

A response often heard when I ask people what they need, is that they do not know. And if they know they are usually still having trouble finding words to express it. Many people have learned to feel guilty when they express that they need something, especially if it seems to run counter to what others need. It tends to be a relief for them to realize that all people share the same needs.

Guilt is a sign that we are torn between meeting seemingly conflicting needs. It appears because we do not really know how to act so that all needs are met. We might have submitted to the idea that since the needs are in conflict with each other, however we act, someone will lose.
“It’s My Fault”

Anna may, like many others, feel guilty because she has become angry. She now “attacks” herself and blames herself for being irresponsible and tells herself she is to blame for the outcome of things.

_That’s what I suspected. They took the chance while I was away as they never wanted me to be involved anyway. And that is not surprising because I am always so complicated and, as Eve said, really bad at keeping agreements. I should not have expected anything else ... I’m not interesting enough!_

Another few months pass without any of her friends contacting her about the café and it’s now time for Anna to return home. When she gets home, Peter - one of those who started the café – is one of the first people she happens to meet.

Anna hopes that he will say something about what has happened, although she only talks about her time abroad, but thoughts about the café are constantly turning in her head. She tells herself that she should say something about the café, about what she thinks about her friends after what they’ve done and how this has been for her. But she cannot get herself to do it and in the end no one mentions the café at all.

When Peter meets Anna he is ashamed of himself, as he feels he should have contacted her about the café. But he smiles and pretends everything is fine. He says very little and lets Anna talk. After a while he calms down because the subject that worries him does not come up. Perhaps this café was not important to Anna he thinks when they part.

The Difference Between Needs and the Strategies We Use to Meet Them

In order to deal with guilt, shame and anger, it is useful to distinguish needs from the strategies we use to meet needs. One way to do this is to realize that we do not need any specific person to do a certain thing, at a certain time.

On one occasion when I was teaching NVC in a group at an inter-
national university in Austria, it became clear that needs - in this case, respect or dignity – are shared by us all, but the ways - strategies - to meet that need varies a lot. The group consisted of people from 28 different nations and the discussion became hot when we got into the topic of respect. It led to a meaningful exchange, when we focused on expressing what we wanted someone else to do if we started to cry in the group.

Two women from Scandinavia said they would find it respectful if someone would stop doing what they did and instead gave the crying person their full attention and support. Some men from West Africa then exclaimed that this particular behavior certainly would not satisfy their need for respect. If they, an impossibility they felt, would start to cry in front of the group, they would like that the others would just pretend like nothing was happening and that they would not be noticed or tended to. It would be the way that they thought would most meet their need for respect. There were besides these two opposite opinions, all kinds of variations of how people wanted to be treated if they should start to cry. Opinions also differed between individuals from the same country, the same sex and of the same religion.

When we saw that there was a difference between the actual experience of respect and the way we wanted to be treated, we could more easily describe our common denominator: the inner experience of dignity. It contributed to closeness in the group to connect with the understanding that we all shared the same need for respect. Many also expressed that it contributed to a sense of freedom to see that there are so many different ways to meet the same needs.

When we can distinguish between needs and strategies, we deal with guilt and shame in a more efficient manner. We do not blame anyone else for what is going on within us, or blame ourselves for what is going on in others. Instead we clarify our needs and tell others what they could do to help us to meet them.

A strength in realizing that needs can be met in different ways is that we become freer to choose how we want to act to meet needs. We are no longer at the mercy of someone who must act only in a certain way if our need for respect is going to get met. If we want to experience respect, we can even get that by responding to the other person in a way that we think is respectful. When we want to experience empathy, our need can sometimes to be met by listening to others with empathy.
4. Requests

When we want to propose a strategy or ask for something, we want to be as specific as possible. This makes it easier for others to understand what we are asking from them. In addition, we want to be sure that what we are asking for is really doable and that it is possible to say “yes” or “no” to in the present.

To ensure that our requests are clear and to minimize the risk that others perceive them as demands, we can use the help of these two questions:

- What do I want someone to do? To do differently?
- What do I want their intention to be when they do it?

When we do not make requests, but demand something from others, we can ask ourselves if we are prepared to pay the price for that type of communication. When someone does something we ask for, not because they want to but because they are afraid, or want to avoid shame, guilt, or to be punished, it will damage our relationship. It can take a lot of energy to repair the connection if this type of communication has been going on for a long time. Others might have lost the joy of contributing to us if they have experienced coercion.

If we do not express any requests at all, express our requests vaguely, or have just expressed our request through an expression of feelings, it is easy for others to misunderstand what we are asking of them. Perhaps we think we are clear and do not understand why others do not understand us or how they can feel guilty by merely listening to our requests.

For instance we might say, “I feel lonely” and think that we have a desire for companionship. But it is not at all certain that it is clear to another person what we are asking for. Some people will understand it and act to meet the need, but for others it is not at all clear, and nothing happens. When we express what we feel (loneliness), what we need (companionship) and what we want from the other person (would you come over for a coffee?) It maximizes our odds of getting the support we want without others needing to be mind readers.

We can divide our request into “contact-oriented” and “action-
oriented” requests. The latter means asking someone to perform a specific action, “I want you to move your bike to the other side of the street, okay?”

A contact-oriented request is based on questions about what the other person is feeling and needing. Asking about how someone feels could sound like this:

- Would you like to tell me how you feel when you hear that I’m frustrated seeing your bike parked in front of the door?

Checking if you made yourself clear second could sound like this:

- I’m not sure I was clear about why parking the bike elsewhere is important to me, so I wonder if you would like to tell me what you heard me say?

Guilt-inducing Communication

Shame and guilt-inducing communication is a powerful weapon as it threatens people’s self-respect and their place in a group. Both guilt and shame can make us fall silent and either shy away from or agree to things we do not really want to do.

A friend told me about a situation that had lasted for a couple of years at the hospital where he works. Every morning the night staff would report what had happened that night to the day staff. It was therefore important that the day staff arrived on time in the morning, so that the night staff would be able to get home to rest. One person from the day group, Donald, would storm into the room five minutes after starting time and then begin to explain why he was late. The other members of the staff used to sit there waiting restlessly for him to finish and send knowing looks at each other, sometimes staring irritably at him. Both managers and employees had brought Donald’s tardiness up with him several times and each time they had communicated in a shame inducing way. As many times as they had talked, he had always promised not to be late again. And it had worked! For about three days. Then he started to arrive late again. And each time, his explanations were even longer because he was even more ashamed. The situation
worsened rather than being solved by them talking to him.

This is a typical result when we are trying to motivate someone to change their behavior by shame or blame. When we say something and other people hear it as criticism, they have not heard what our needs are. If we want to see something change permanently, shame or guilt is the last things we want people to experience. When people feel guilt or shame, the change will usually not come from them connecting to an internal motivation and therefore will seldom last.

When I say something that I think could be heard as criticism or blame, I end up saying this:

- *If you hear something of what I have said as criticism, I would like to hear it, because then I guess I have not been clear with what I want to say.*

If others hear what we need, they cannot hear what we say as criticism or that it’s their fault. They hear that we are asking for help and it might increase their willingness to contribute, but it will also help them to feel free to say no to what we are asking of them.

Another way to prevent people getting the idea that I want them to feel responsible for my feelings, is to ask them to reflect back what they have heard me say. That way I know which version of what I have said is within them and I can decide if I want to try to clarify what I have said.

Remember that in the end it is always up to the listener whether they choose to hear what we say as guilt or shame inducing. However, we have the opportunity to make it easier for them not to, and thus strengthen our connection with them.
Communication That Often Leads to Shame and Guilt

Expressing what I feel without requesting something of the other;

*I feel so lonely.*

Connecting what I feel with what someone else has done:

*I feel sorry because you ...*

Suggesting that someone should do something without requesting it:

*Nobody cares anyway.*

Expressing what I feel, need and want through sighs, facial expressions and gestures.

Mixing what I think is somebody’s intention with what I feel:

*I feel run over, neglected, abandoned, manipulated.*

Never Do Anything to Avoid Shame and Guilt

When we do something out of the joy of contributing, and not to avoid shame or guilt, it enriches our relationships. It is safe to take a pause and feel the shame and guilt - they will be transformed if we take the time needed to get in touch with our needs before we act.

I was at a party where a couple, got into an argument. He wanted to dance and she wanted to talk and just hang out with him. Since I’ve learned that shame and guilt can show the way if we just stop and listen inwardly, I asked the man, whom I knew best of the couple, if he wanted to talk with me. He told me about how he wrestled with lots of thoughts about what he should do. The strongest idea was that he should be at his partner’s side although he would prefer to dance and socialize with others.
He realized that he was desperately trying to avoid feeling guilty. It helped him become aware that he was torn between meeting his need for freedom and his need to contribute. Trying to avoid the guilt he had became more and more confused. When it became clear to him how important it was to both feel free and to contribute to his partner, he could make more aware choices to meet his needs. He chose to spend part of the evening with her and a part of it introducing her to his friends. What led to the shift was that his realization that he had a choice how he wanted to spend the evening, and that he did not have to do what his “should-thoughts” told him to.

**Humor or Empathy**

Humor is one of the most common ways to deal with shame. Jokes used by stand-up comedians are based almost entirely on things that bring shame. And the more that people are ashamed the funnier the show gets. When you can laugh at yourself and about what makes you ashamed it tends to be easier to deal with the shame. Sometimes it takes a lot of strength and a certain self-distance in order to do so.

Humor can really be a big help when we feel shame, but we cannot all be comedians. It is much easier to train our ability to respond to and deal with shame with empathy. Listening to someone with empathy is a powerful tool in helping a person to deal with anger, shame and guilt.

**Empathy**

“*The biggest deficit in the world today is the deficit of empathy. We need people who can walk in others’ shoes and see the world through their eyes.*”

Barack Obama⁴

In NVC, the term “empathy” or to “listen with empathy,” are used to describe a specific approach to connect with someone. Listening with

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⁴ Obama, Barack (2008), *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* Faber & Faber.
empathy can be described as our ability to perceive another person’s perspective in a given situation. We try, as Obama mentions in the quote above, to “see the world through the eyes of others”. Empathy researcher Teresa Wiseman has summarized the ability to empathize.  
1. Being able to see the world through the eyes of others.

2. Understanding another person’s feelings and needs.

3. Being able to communicate our understanding of others’ feelings.

There are ways to show understanding of what others feel, other than to agree with them or to feel sorry for them. We can focus on being present with how someone feels, without considering whether it is good or bad. Empathy occurs when we no longer focus on judging people or what they have done but instead really listen with an open heart to what they feel and need. We focus on what is going on in the other person rather than on what we think they are or should be.

Empathy is more than words, but our words are a way to confirm that we are really trying to understand what is going on within the person. Focusing on people’s feelings and needs tends to stimulate our compassion. We therefore try to hear what people need, what they dream of, long for and want to see more of in their lives, and what they want to help create, rather than on their weaknesses or on what they do not have.

**Empathy Versus Sympathy**

- *She could really understand me!*
- *He was there with me!*

These are some common reactions from people after they have been heard with empathy, but also when someone has been heard with sympathy. The difference between empathy and sympathy is that when I listen with sympathy, I either agree with him or her, feel sorry for him.

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or her or share some similar experiences of mine to show them that I understand what they are going through. When I listen with empathy, I try to connect with how someone is feeling and what they need and how the process he or she is going through is affecting him or her.

When we feel shame or guilt and are treated with sympathy, it is likely that we will still feel either feel lonely and not understood, or that we start feeling sorry for ourselves. If we are angry and others respond to us with sympathy, we can become less angry for a while, but often the anger comes back, with increased force towards the person that we are judging and are angry at.

Sometimes sympathy can be perceived as “talking behind someone’s back”. It can also be seen as an attempt (often unsuccessful) to provide support to someone you care about. It may feel good to get sympathy because it gives you proof that someone is “on your team”. In long run, things usually get worse with sympathy because of the risk of further locking positions in a relationship.

It is often much more supportive to listen to someone with empathy than with sympathy, especially when it comes to anger, shame and guilt. However, there is a pitfall here too. If we listen to someone with empathy, without afterwards telling something about what we feel and want in this situation, it is common for them to think that we agree with them. They may believe that you also think that your “common friend is a traitor” or that “all men are like this or like that”.

**To Be Met with Sympathy**

Anna sank down onto a couch at a friend’s place after she had accidentally run into Peter (page 52) without having said anything about how painful and frustrating the experience with the café has been for her.

**Anna: (Exclaims firmly.)**

*I am so disappointed in myself! I didn’t even dare to mention what I thought. What a coward I am, no wonder they ran all over me... (Then sadly.) ... I let myself be treated like shit, as a damned doormat.*
Friend:
Don’t think like that. It’s not your fault. You haven’t done anything wrong.

Anna:
Maybe... But it was me who came up with the idea to start that café and it’s the only thing that really feels fun to me. (With sadness in her voice.) Why do I always have such bad luck.

Friend:
What bad luck ... I think it’s fortunate that you are not working with them, they are selfish idiots who do not deserve someone like you as a friend and colleague! You deserve much better than that.

Anna:
Yes, they apparently think only of themselves. And I don’t think they will manage. They know nothing about running a business.

In the last line of the dialogue the judgments start going outwards again, which is a common reaction when someone has received sympathy. When you treat someone who is angry or disappointed with sympathy, it’s like “putting out fire with gasoline”. The reaction often increases, because the sympathy serves as a confirmation that there is something wrong with the “other person”. The risk is that the person who receives sympathy continues to talk about others, instead of with them.

If one day we communicate our disappointment with the person you were talking about after receiving this type of support, there is a risk that it will be even harder to make contact with them than it was before the sympathy. It becomes more difficult because our static images of how and what the other is (a coward, selfish, and so on) have been confirmed and now lie in the way of seeing things as they really are. Our thoughts that they are responsible for what we feel might also have been amplified. When we experience it as if the power is in their hands, we do not act our self to change the situation. Powerlessness can change into anger expressed as threats or demands.

To be able to communicate in a way that is most likely to lead to
connection in a charged situation, we need a lot of support. We can get this support from others if they listen to what we feel and need and avoid pep talks, analyzing, comforting, or giving us advice or sympathy.

Empathy and Shame

Empathy melts away what has prevented us from getting a deeper inner connection. Empathy and shame can be seen as opposites, while empathy opens us up, shame closes us down. For shame to be reached by empathy, vulnerability is needed. Empathy occurs when we dare to show our shame and when we trust that we are being received and heard. A characteristic of people who quickly recover from shame is that they have a great ability to feel empathy for both themselves and others.6

When we are given advice, a pep talk, reprimands or sympathy when we open up, it makes it difficult to experience empathy in a way that melts away shame. When we are vulnerable and open to someone else, we want to be treated with understanding. To be treated with compassion by someone else is often what is the turning point so that shame will not continue to run riot within us.

Empathy and Anger

When we are angry, if we are treated with compassion, the anger often quickly shifts to a different feeling. With support from the listener, if we can get in touch with the needs behind the anger, we will not be angry anymore. We will feel intense emotions, but we will be able to let go of the guilt induced thinking that made us feel angry. We can use these intense emotions to get in touch with our needs on a deeper level. We will not necessarily get our needs met, but we will be more okay about that when we are in touch with the essence of our needs.

Empathy and Guilt

When feeling guilt, if we are treated with compassion it helps us become free from the internal struggle of whether to act in one way or another. We will have greater access to mourn the needs that were not met by what we have done or not done. Guilt can be an unconscious habit where we are constantly trying to force ourselves to do more of what we think we “should”. Empathy can help us end this torture and find more constructive ways to handle a situation.

To Be Met with Empathy

Anna: (Since she could not get the words out when she met Peter (page 27), she expresses her desperation to another friend.)

*I am so disappointed in myself! I did not even dare to mention what I feel, when we met. As cowardly as I am, it’s no wonder that they ran over me ...* (Now, sadly.) ... *I let myself be treated like a door mat.*

Friend:

*Sounds like you are really disappointed and want to be understood in how hard this has been for you?*

Anna:

*Yes, but ... I have been creating it myself. I simply get what I deserve.*

Friend:

*So you mean that you are really sad and would have liked to have made other choices?*

Anna:

*Yes, it is so difficult to deal with this and move on, it is killing me and I am accusing myself too, because I did not dare talk to them.*
Friend:

*Is it that you long to get clarity about what happened? And at the same time are you afraid to talk to them because you need to trust that you will be able to connect?*

Anna:

*Yes, but I do not know what to say, what would you say in a situation like this?*

With the help of this empathetic support Anna might get in touch with her own feelings and needs enough to be able to raise this with her friends. She might also begin to understand that her friends took this action to meet their needs, even if they have hers left out. The enemy image of them can switch into a picture of flesh and blood people - with the same feelings and needs as she has.

In the end of this chapter you can read how a dialogue might sound if Anna was more aware of what was going on within her on the level of needs. If you want to create the conditions for yourself to be heard, often it is useful first to try to understand what needs the others wanted to meet with the strategy they chose, whether we like their strategy or not.
Labels and Moralistic Judgments - Tragic Ways of Asking for Empathy

- You are so pushy!
- What do you mean by pushy?
- You are always in such a rush and want it your way!
- OK! But you have no right to call me pushy just because things don’t always work!
- Look at you, now you are being pushy again. Calm down, we’re just talking.

During my childhood my dad and I often quarreled (as in the dialogue above). It often started with one of us putting a label on the other - or demanding something - and then the battle was on. Labels often led to self-fulfilling prophecies and the anger grew with every exchange of words.

When we can’t manage to carry all the shame or guilt that we feel, we often “dump” our emotions onto someone else. The creation of enemy images and seeing “evil” outside of ourselves sometimes seems incredibly liberating. It relieves the pressure so that we can cope with our situation, but if we think it will solve our problems, we will be disappointed. Instead of changing their behavior people usually defend themselves against judgments and analysis of how or what they are. Their energy is spent not on the connection between us or in learning new ways to handle similar situations, but on defending themselves.

Swedish research on empathy has established that one thing that stands in the way of our ability to relate emphatically is that we see others as objects. When we put labels on people it turns them into objects, and we stop seeing them as human beings. Then it is easy to not treat them with care and respect.

When the effectiveness of soldiers during the First and Second World Wars was evaluated, it was discovered that many bullets missed their targets. Up to and including World War II the firing rate hovered at 20%-25% of soldiers in direct combat. As long as the soldiers...
saw human beings they missed them, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore American soldiers that went to Vietnam were trained to see the enemy as objects and not as human beings. The result was scary - with a lot fewer misses. Josh Stieber, former American soldier in Iraq in the 2000s explains how training for the invasion of Iraq created soldiers without compassion. “We were taught not to see Iraqis as people. We were trained to shoot first and ask questions later.”

One way of dealing with labels is to remember that behind all the judgments are needs that are not being met. While it can be challenging to hear when others use labels, we can, by transforming them, get in touch with their underlying needs. As soon as we hear judgments, whether it is ourselves or others who judges, we can assume that the need for empathy is not being met.

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9. Miki Kashtan. *Beyond Reason: Reconciling Emotion with Social Theory*, UC Berkeley, 2000. Once studies documented the prevalence of non-shooting strategies, military training was changed drastically, with the specific intent of making more soldiers killers. Current military training actively desensitizes soldiers to the effects of killing, and conditions them through simulations containing immediate rewards for killing, to acquire behaviors which are almost conditioned, so that when in battle they will simply repeat the sequence before having a moment to reflect. The net result of such training was that the shooting rate during the Vietnam war rose sharply to about 95%.
My Longing Is

My longing is mutuality; I call you selfish.
My longing is connection; I call you inaccessible.
My longing is security; I call you irresponsible.
My longing is acceptance; I call you narrow-minded.
My longing is warmth; I call you cold.
I yearn for meaning and call you superficial.
My longing is integrity; I call you boorish.
My longing is trust; I call you unreliable.
My longing is care; I call you inconsiderate.
My longing is intimacy; I call you absent-minded.
My longing is creativity; I call you square.
I want you to listen to me, and call you deaf.
My longing is honesty; I call you untruthful.
My longing is encouragement; I call you discouraging.
My longing is trust; I call you careless.
My longing is self-worth; I call you stupid.
My longing is support, I call you spineless.
I so much want to be noticed and call you blind.
Katarina Hoffmann

Empathy Instead of “Sorry”

Empathy is understanding how it is to walk in another’s shoes, at the same time as you know that they are not yours.
Szalita

Shame and guilt can paralyze us and make us do or say something in a way that does not lead to connection. We can be so shocked by the shame that we do not even apologize when we have made a “mistake”. And if we apologize, it is in a way that seldom leads to more connection. It is therefore useful to find other ways to do it and the first step is to listen with empathy. It will help others feel understood in how our actions have affected him or her. When we use the approach of empathy, it is never “too late” as we start where we are. Whatever the other person says, we listen and try to connect with the pain he or she is experiencing. Here, the phrase “better late than never” is really true. The effect may not come as directly, and it may take a long time to repair the trust when a lot of pain has been triggered over time, but it is possible.

As a second step, we express how it affects us to hear the other person’s pain. We might say that we regret the way we chose to act, now that we understand the consequences of our actions for the other person.

Usually, at some point, the other person wants to hear why we acted as we did. The third step will be to tell what needs we tried to meet in doing what we did, even though they might not have been met. We go to the third step for the sake of clarity, although we now - in hindsight - would act differently.

Unfortunately, an apology which does not contain these three elements can be seen as a way of trying to “smooth things over”. It is important that I really am willing to take in how my choices affected the other person for the apology to have any effect.

Remember that for a child who has just done something that hurt someone else or has broken something, it may be difficult to say anything at all. When the child turns a blind eye we can see it as a sign that they are overwhelmed and probably not very susceptible to hearing more just then. Depending on the child’s age it may be more constructive to wait a while before you talk more about what happened. On the other hand, I once got a warm apology from an adult three years after an event, so perhaps it is not just children who need time to recover from what the shock of shame often does to us!

### Apologize with NVC

1. **Listen with empathy to the other person.** Really take in how what you have said or done has affected him or her.

2. **When you have listened to what is expressed, express what happened in you when you understood how your actions affected the other person.**

3. **Express what needs you were trying to meet with the hurtful action.** You express what drove you, and if you now, having realized the consequences, might choose other ways to act.

### Self-Empathy

Sometimes we have no one else who can listen to us with compassion. Then we need to listen to ourselves in ways that connect us to our Shame, guilt and anger make us experience ourselves as separated from ourselves and others, therefore it is important that we find ways to
reconnect. Shame especially allows us to be painfully self-conscious. The sense of separation and painful thoughts about being locked out can be overwhelming and it’s useful to have an internal dialogue that supports us.

When I listen to myself with empathy I do almost the same as when I listen to another person. First of all I admit to myself what evaluations or demands I have of myself or anyone else. Then I focus on hearing the feelings and needs behind them and, lastly, clear up how I want to move on.

Mourning Without “Getting Lost”

To mourn the “mistakes” we have made is a natural process that occurs if we are in touch with our feelings and needs. We humans have an innate concern for others and shame is a common expression when we realize that we have violated limits. When we allow the shame to show the way, we can use it to ascertain what we need to grieve.

It is said that we learn from our “mistakes”, but I see many of us making the same mistakes over and over again. If we learn anything or not from a mistake, depends on how we handle it. In order not to get caught up in judgments about ourselves and to learn something new from a “mistake”, it is useful to be able to feel grief for that which has occurred in an effective manner. It is only when we grieve in a way that brings us in touch with our needs that learning occurs. One of my friends told me about an occasion when she had been ashamed in a way that she really learned something from:

“I remember how more than 20 years ago I wrote a letter to a person that I then thought behaved in a way that was completely inexcusable and quite stupid. I used irony and certainly some superiority too, to make it really clear to this person what I thought of his actions. The other day I remembered this letter and found myself terribly ashamed of it. I began to think of how I would feel today, if anyone found and read it. This letter for sure did not create connection as it was not formulated in a way that considered either his or my need for respect. What I did was to consider my need for integrity, I was not going to allow him to bully me in any way,
and I wanted to stop him. While thinking about this, I got in touch with what needs were not met then and with the needs I was trying to meet. This brought up a feeling of great sadness. I realized that I could actually have met my need for integrity without giving up the need for respect and care.”

If we want to transform shame, it is important to get in touch with the needs that were not met when we did what we are still ashamed of. Then we connect with the needs we were trying to meet in doing what we did. We allow ourselves to feel the feelings that are stimulated when we connect with these needs. When emotions get more space than our evaluations, mourning occurs and this leads to completeness and closure. To mourn in this way helps us to see how we can act differently in the future to take better care of our own and others’ needs.

As long as anger, shame and guilt have us in their grip, we are unable to take in others’ needs. We create nothing new, because everything is about us and about how horrible it is to feel what we feel. We are easy to manipulate and control if we let these feelings take over our mind. It is only when we use the emotions as keys to a deeper place within, that we become fully accessible to ourselves and to others.

The Shame-inducing Word “No”

Sometimes it is challenging to ask for what we want. The fear of getting a no can make us lower our ambitions and to refrain from expressing a clear preference. But what exactly is it that makes it so awful to be met with a no? Many of us hear no as criticism, even if we logically know that it’s just a sign that someone does not want to do what we ask for.

Expressing present requests is a challenge if we have learned to interpret no as proof that there is something wrong with us. Spinning off from this also gives undesired results in the other direction - if someone asks us to do something and we are ashamed or feel guilt at the thought of saying no. We want to acknowledge people and are afraid that they will associate us with someone who lowers their worth.

The three statements in the box below help me deal with no, whether it is my no to others, or their no to me, in a way that minimizes the anger, shame and guilt.
Three Precious Assumptions About “No”

1. Behind every no there is a yes to something else.

2. Saying no is an invitation to further dialogue.

3. There are always several ways to meet needs.

Let me demonstrate how I use these three claims.

1. **Behind every no there is a yes to something else.**

   If I ask if you want to go to the movies with me and you say *no*, I know that you have needs which you do not believe will be fulfilled by this. Your *no* may mean a *yes* to your need for rest, or perhaps movement.

2. **Saying no is an invitation to further dialogue.**

   If I hear your *no* as an invitation to further dialogue, I can confirm that I hear that you are in need of rest or what I think you need most. Since I still want to have my needs (in this case, community and fun) met, I continue to communicate about them; but now, include what you need.

   - *I hear that you have a real need for rest. And I would like to keep talking about how you could have that need met without me giving up on my need for fun. Are you willing to spend five more minutes on that?*

3. **There are always several ways to meet needs.**

   When I hear that your need is for rest or movement, I propose a strategy I think will meet those needs, which can simultaneously meet my needs for companionship and recreation. For example, it can sound like this:

   - *I go to the movies with someone else and you stay at home and rest.*
   - *We both stay at home and socialize in a way that can meet both our needs.*
   - *We take a walk together. (Maybe to the cinema)*
The Language of Needs Leads to Connection and Compassion

In the start of this dialogue Anna is still angry because her way of thinking is partially changed. In the end, she gets more in touch with what she needs and is more willing to listen.

Anna:

- *How could you do this to me? What idiots do something so horribly selfish. You could at least have informed me - but you are too cowardly!* (Continues to think that she certainly will show them what happens to those who behave as they did!)

Cafe Friend: *(Thinking that she has been attacked and responding in a firm voice.)*

- *We are free to do what we want! You were not even there and besides, you were always changing your mind! You are so fickle.*

Anna: *(Taking a few deep breaths and reminding herself that behind everything people do, there is a desire to try to meet needs, she decides to try to get in touch with the needs the others are trying to express with the label *fickle*.)

- *I'm guessing you're frustrated when you call me fickle and I wonder if it's because you want me to understand how important it is for you to be fully able to trust those who you work with? And perhaps especially in a project that is as important as this?*

Cafe Friend: *(Now, tentatively, as she hesitates wondering whether Anna really wants to understand.)*

- *Yes, you … you always have so many wild ideas … it is not easy to determine what you really want half of the time, if you really are going to be part of something or not?*
Anna: (Glad that she tried to understand, instead of arguing because she notices that it creates more connection.)

- You mean you do not want to worry about whether things will be done; you want to be relaxed with everyone doing what they have said they will do?

Cafe Friend: (Now calmer.)

- Yes, we have actually planned to make a living out of this, so it’s not just a fun thing that you can play around with and then let go of when it does not fit you any longer. (Then, with hesitation in her voice.) But ... but I understand that it may not have been so nice to hear that we started without you ... 

Anna: - Oh, what a relief to hear that you understand that this has been hard for me. It has been tremendously hard, actually. I wanted so very much to be a part of this and I did not understand what happened. Do you want to tell me more about why it was that you did not tell me that you were going to start the café? I’d love to hear about it.

Now the connection is established (even if it is fragile), and there is room for more honesty and creative solutions. When this type of connection has been created there is usually enough creativity to find ways to meet everyone’s needs.

With Anger and Shame Transformed

Anna begins a conversation with her friends and says she wants to be heard in how sad and disappointed she felt when she found out that they had opened the café without her. She is careful to stick to the observations and avoid expressing any interpretations. She also clearly expresses what she feels and needs, and concludes with a request.
Anna: - Part of my frustration is that I still do not fully understand how come none of you talked to me about how you were going to start the cafe. Over time, I understand that my disappointment and anger came from the fact that I had been looking forward to doing this together with you, to experience community and meaning. I'm afraid that what I am saying is not clear or that someone will hear it as blame or criticism of you, so I am wondering if anyone would like to tell me what you have heard me say? (She puts it in a way that she hopes will minimize the risk that the others will hear what she says as a demand, criticism, or as if she wants them to be ashamed and feel guilty.)

One of the cafe friends: - I hear you saying you are disappointed because you wanted to be with us in the project?

Another:
- I hear that you are longing for meaning and community.

Anna:
- Yes, and I still do. And I'm grateful to hear your words, they give me confirmation that you have heard some of how this is for me. So I wonder if I can continue, or if there is anyone else who wants to say something first? (What she says is met with silence, so she continues.)
- Even if it feels unsafe to ask, it is so important to me that I want to do it anyway. I wonder if there is anything I can do that would make you say yes to my taking part in the project now?

Here, the answers can be more challenging to hear. Anna can continue to listen to the others expressing needs that have not been met, in relation to her. The dialogue needs time because there are several things they have not previously communicated with each other.

One of the cafe friends:
- Yes, when I hear you now, it feels easier. Though I would like to be honest and say that I do not fully trust that you really will do what you say you are going to do.
Anna: (Listening, determined to understand what they feel and need as she reflects what the other has said with a genuine desire to understand.)

- Mm, I hear that you are not sure and maybe worried as you want to trust that things that are decided on will be implemented?

The dialogue continues and now the communication between them is important, not only the end result. It may take time for all parties to repair their wounds and to restore trust. But when there is mutual connection, they are able to arrive at a completely different approach that takes everyone’s needs into account.
Chapter 4
The Shame Adventure
When Shame Takes Over

When we feel shame it affects our bodies in a tangible way. It is virtually impossible to fully concentrate on what we were doing just before the shame came over us. When we feel shame some of the blood flow to the brain is stopped and the neck muscles lose their tonicity. One could also say that shame makes us “stupid” as we rarely make constructive decisions when we feel shame because we see the world from a limited perspective.

Shame is stimulated when we suddenly become aware of something about ourselves we have so far been unconscious of. When this occurs while we are among other people, we often pretend as if nothing happened. In this way it gets a grip on us, we tense up, close up, numb our vulnerability and get a longer way to our heart.

If we instead accept what has happened and our response to it, the shame melts away, even if something embarrassing has been revealed about us. However, no matter how degrading something seemed to be just a little earlier, the discomfort changes as soon as we tell someone about it. Especially if the other person listens to us without expressing judgements about us or what we did. Using this approach to handling our shame, we have a chance to grow and understand more about how we can relate to others and ourselves.

In the past I rarely thought of myself as someone who was shameful. Actually I even took pride in being a person who never got embarrassed. When I started working on this book (and did the exercises at the end of this chapter), to my surprise, I realized that I felt shame in many everyday situations. I discovered a lot of situations where I had felt shame, but had pushed it away so fast, that I did not notice it. Now I have begun to understand what gifts I have been missing all these years by so doing.

One of the first times I realized that I felt ashamed was when I was driving around in the car in a large parking lot and found no free spots. I caught myself thinking, “I hope no one sees that I have gone around the parking lot three times now.” I felt shame! Most of the time, I would have dealt with such thoughts by rebelling against them. I would have thought that I did not care about whether others saw me or not. I maybe even would have taken some extra turns around the lot just to prove it. Now I became curious as to why I was feeling shame over such a small
(and seemingly unimportant) thing. I realized that something absurd was going on in my mind. That there was no place for me in the parking lot meant that I had been rejected. The parking lot did not want me. It confirmed that I was not important and that if someone else saw that I was not “wanted”, he or she would not want to be with me either.

When I thought about it, I realized that behind this shame were needs of acceptance, respect and community. As soon as I understood the link between the feeling and the needs, the shame changed into laughter. It was easy to see the humor in the situation. But if anyone else, a few minutes earlier, had laughed at how stupid it was to feel shame over this, I would have taken offense. The actual situation was a valuable learning about how important the human need of acceptance and being part of a community is.

Shortly after this incident, I saw a cartoon making fun of a nearly identical situation. In the picture there were two people holding a sign saying “Round 342”. Behind the steering wheel of a car, going around a parking lot, is a man who is shrinking down trying to avoid being seen. So I guess I’m not the only one to feel embarrassed by this.

Shame is more than just an uncomfortable experience in the body, as it often brings with it condemning thoughts about ourselves. Many of us struggle to find acceptance and love for ourselves. We have grown up in a world where we have learned that you must prove that you are okay, and where approval and acceptance come from the outside. When
we do not feel love and respect for ourselves, it is extremely difficult to learn something constructive from shame. It is rather a malaise that threatens our inner peace and our place in the community. Many of us would do almost anything in order to avoid the feeling, and this shrinks our possibilities to act. It is possible instead to turn face to face with the shame and to make friends with it.

After the situation in the parking lot, I discovered there were many times when I felt ashamed, even if only slightly, in situations when I had thoughts about not being okay, wanted, valuable, normal, or something similar. Every time I allowed myself to stop and feel the shame and became more connected with the needs behind it, I found more self-acceptance. Today shame is a reminder that I have lost touch with my needs, than an enemy to fight and escape.

My own exploration of shame has also helped me to see more of others’ humanity. I realized this when I was at the cinema and saw Stieg Larsson’s thriller *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. It contains some extremely violent scenes and a rape. The woman who is raped later brutally takes revenge on the rapist, which includes pushing a dildo in his anus. Beside me in the theater sat a group of four men. During the scene of the woman’s revenge, they laughed several times, looked at each other and exchanged a few quick comments. At first I was annoyed and thought less flattering thoughts about them. Then it occurred to me that they probably felt ashamed and that their laughter was a nervous one to let go of tension. After that it became much easier for me to see them as human. It was a relief to see that my knowledge of shame contributed to more empathy for them.
What Stimulates Shame

What stimulate shame varies and depends on culture and environment. According to a study of shame made by United Minds, at the top of things (for Swedes) that stimulates shame is to have an untidy home when you get visitors. Some other common shame stimulators are thinking that you are unattractive, being caught having sex, masturbating or stealing.\(^1\)

Donald Nathanson has summarized the experiences that lead to shame into eight categories.\(^2\) Situations that stimulate shame can often be found in one or several of these categories and I think you can recognize yourself in many of them.

1. Comparisons
2. Dependence and independence
3. Competition
4. Self-criticism
5. Appearance
6. Sex
7. To see and be seen
8. Closeness

1. Comparisons

We have been taught to compare ourselves with others. Among other things we compare appearance, and the size of everything - from cell phones to cars and skills. The internal criticism might sound something like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
I am weaker than... \\
I'm not as funny and attractive as ... \\
If I could only be as smart as... \\
If I were only as beautiful as ...
\end{align*}
\]

Comparisons can also include what you are worried about that others will think of you:

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I hope nobody thinks that I’m seeing myself as superior.

As early as preschool age children begin to compare themselves - Who will be first? Who is strongest? Who is best. We hide away from situations where we think that we are small, weak, stupid and ignorant. Being left behind by our partner, after he or she has initiated a relationship with someone else, is another situation where comparison takes us off on a shame journey.

Shame can be a difficult and recurring experience for anyone making choices beyond what is seen as “normal”. We want to fit with the norms in the culture we live in and anything that is different, such as minorities, people with a disability or difference in appearance, can be a trigger for shame. One way to handle this is to try to remove all signs that reveal us as belonging to this group. Of course it is costly and tragic as it eventually limits everyone’s living space.

In his book Tätt intill dagarna, Mustafa Can shares how he, as an immigrant teenager in Sweden was ashamed of his mother. As an adult he sat at her deathbed and experienced those memories of his shame to be the most difficult ones to talk about. He now got ashamed of his shame, which made it even harder for him to get in touch with his dying mother.

To be thought about as if we think we are superior or special may also be experienced as shameful. I received an e-mail from a friend that described her concerns about being misunderstood and compared:

Yesterday my boss sent en e-mail to everyone, saying we had done a really good job this week (and we’ve really worked our butts off). I responded jokingly with, “Great! Then we hope you finish working early today so that you can hurry home and bake us a cake for tomorrow!” And then today he brought a cake. WOW, WHAT A SHAME REACTION IT TRIGGERED!

And as if this was not hard enough to handle - in the end, my teammates laughed and said “thank you for fixing the cake”. I could not stand the shame and burst out saying: “he probably thought about it himself before my e-mail…”

I do not think I would have reacted the same way if it was not the boss! “I feel awful. What if people think I am favored in some way or think that I believe I’m more influential or important than them!”

2. Dependence and Independence

“I am nothing without her.”
“If people knew how I let myself be controlled, I would be ashamed to death.”
“No one cares about me.”
“Nobody wants to be with me.”

As a teenager I spent time with a person I really liked although I repeatedly felt ashamed to be associated with. He had no other friends. I wondered who was I if he had no other friends? I could not be particularly important if I wanted him as a friend but no one else wanted it. I was afraid that others would not want to hang out with me if they saw me with him? It was like loneliness could be contagious. What if others rejected me or condemned me? I was ashamed of him, I was ashamed of myself, and most of all I felt ashamed that I had these thoughts.

Many of us feel shame when we find ourselves powerless, vulnerable and dependent. This can occur in situations when we think that we cannot handle something without a certain person being present. We have learned that it is important to be independent so showing that we are depending on someone else can be very shameful.

We can feel ashamed to be associated with certain people depending on their behavior, nationality or religion. We may also feel shame to say that we have been cheated, or to disclose that we have invested money in something that turned out to be a hoax. It’s as if we think that we risk being “infected” by what others do, and that we will not be treated with respect if others see that we in any way is connected to anyone behaving in this way.

Shame can also be connected to thinking that we are not connected with anyone. High on the list of things we are ashamed of is not to be living in a couple, having no close friends, or not being part of any context of importance. That we are alone can be interpreted as there is something wrong with us or that we do not deserve to be part of a community.
Michael was stuck in a difficult economic trap. Since he could not face his shame, he had fallen into a cumbersome financial carousel that spun faster and faster every day. He could not stand the shame of saying that he could not afford it, when his friends asked him to come for a trip or to a party with them. Although he was living on borrowed money, he often bought his friends drinks when they went out as if to demonstrate that he did not have any money problems. The less money he had the more he borrowed from the bank and the more he spent.

He was in big debt and instead of going to the bank and talking to someone who could help him, he took so-called SMS loans. When he could not pay back the money he took further loans. The thought of anyone gaining an insight into his financial life and to have to face the shame over this, made him hide the facts as much as he could. In the end he was using his entire salary to pay the interest on all the loans. Finally it all crashed.

It was clear that if he had realized how in avoiding shame at all costs, he had made the situation worse, he could have changed things much earlier. If he had had the clarity of the value in the advice to “not do anything to try to avoid the feeling of shame”, he might have taken the “bull by the horns”, asked the bank for help and told his friends and family how things were. It was only when by asking for help and showing that he needed support for his situation, that he could change it.

To make a “mistake” in relation to someone you are dependent on, may feel very vulnerable and revealing. I felt a shame rush when I read the example below even if it was not me who had sent the flowers.

I had been applying for new job, ended up in the interview and finally the choice was between me and a woman named Maria G. The manager of the place was also called Maria. Thursday afternoon Maria L (The director) called and offered me the job. I was really happy. On Friday, a messenger came to my work with flowers and a card that said, “Congratulations on the job, Maria”. I took it for granted that was Maria G (whom I knew as warm and caring) who had sent the flowers. Moved, I called her and as she didn’t answer left a message on her answering machine: “Thank you for the beautiful flowers ... I’ll call you later.”
Then I told everyone I met what a fantastic person she was. On the way home in the car Maria L called. With cheerful voice, she asked, “Did you get the flowers?”...
“Were they from you?”
“Yeah, just wanted to make sure that they arrived.”
“Oops, I just thanked the other Maria.”
“Oh, I haven’t yet told her that she didn’t get the job!”

3. Competition

Only number one counts!
I am ashamed of losing.
I deserve to be respected as I have shown that I am the best.
You are a worthy winner.
We will never be able to achieve the same results as them.

For some of us, our inner critic is silenced only when we show that we are competent. The winner (whether we call it competition or not) has earned respect. We can make fun of or ridicule the one who loses, because she or he does not deserve our respect.

In my town tickets were raffled off to a concert with a music group I wanted to hear. Different parts of the raffle would take place at several different times and I made sure to be on the list for the first round. A few days later I found out who had won and those who had not were asked to try again two days later. Something happened in me at this time that I didn’t understand until much later. I began to feel ashamed. Not a strong and frightening shame but a vague unease that was strong enough that I didn’t sign up for the next raffle. “I had lost! I was unworthy. What if someone were to see that I tried again, and again did not win!”

Regardless of whether I won a ticket or not, I decided that I wanted to go to the concert. But then I read the list of who had won and one of my friends was on it, and I began to hesitate. The thought of meeting him at the concert made me feel so ashamed that I was even thinking of staying home to avoid this discomfort.

Nevertheless, I decided to go to the concert. I encountered a challenge as soon as I entered the concert hall. In this big place, with
numbered seats, I had of course, been placed next to… yes who do you think? My friend cheered happily when he saw me and thought it was great fun that we had been placed next to each other! I said nothing, but felt that vague discomfort in the stomach. I pretended as if nothing was going on, but during the concert my thoughts often dwelt on the fact that he had won and I had lost. But I did not say a word, did not celebrate, did not express annoyance, asked nothing - I just turned my back on the whole thing.

It took me all the way to the concert’s end to fully accept the vague but insistent shame. I did not want to acknowledge it - it was ridiculous to feel like I did. It was not until I was able to experience a genuine acceptance of my reaction that I could accept the feeling completely. Until then, it seemed threatening to rejoice that he had won and I had “lost”, but when I finally accepted the feeling, I could be happy with him and his joy.

Winning is an indication that I’m capable, desired and deserve to be loved and respected. I’m better than anyone else and maybe even “The best”. All these thoughts were with me, even though it was a simple lottery where my only active part had been to send in my name!

I was surprised to discover how strong my conditioning around competition was and what internal conflict it resulted in. I was also surprised at how strong my unmet need for acceptance, respect and to be seen, affected me and got in the way of my need to celebrate with the other person. In my eyes competition is one of the worst strategies we may use to meet those needs.

In competition there is one winner and possibly we also celebrate number two and three, or even the top ten in some more generous contexts, but the rest are left with the shame of having “lost”. The idea that the person who wins is the best, better than the rest, often takes away a lot of the joy in a competition. While the memory above is a bit fragile to write about, I am retrospectively grateful to have made this discovery, because my understanding of what is called envy and jealousy have deepened considerably through it.

Some people have found this reaction to losing a lottery, a game of chance, surprisingly illogical, and certainly it would have seemed so to me as well, if told by somebody else. But having experienced it first hand myself it was clear that my reaction was of shame, not logical,
but very physical. Other people have expressed relief after hearing this story, as they have hidden their shame in similar situations for years in the fear of not being received. To recognize the vulnerability in any situation is for me one of the signs that it holds some information for me.

4. Self-criticism

Why do I always make a fool of myself.
The only thing I’m good at is failing and destroying good things.
There is something wrong with me.
I can’t even do something as simple as keeping my own home in order.
What an idiot I am, I’m ashamed of myself.

We have been taught to deal with mistakes by criticizing ourselves. The way we talk to ourselves in these situations is often based on how we should be ashamed of something we have done or have not been able to do.

A mother told me, full of shame, that she had read her teenage boy’s diary. While reading it she had been so embarrassed that she was about to vomit.

“I could hardly breathe. If someone were to see me, they would understand that what I was doing was wrong. I was not as afraid that my son would see me as that any adult would see and condemn me. These invisible eyes were so unpleasant that I stopped reading after a while and had to take a long walk to calm myself down.”

5. Appearance

I am ashamed of how ugly and unattractive I have become.
I hope no one sees how fat and out of shape I am. I look 20 years older than I am.
Now I am blushing too, which makes me even uglier.
Appearance is high on many lists of things that stimulate shame. We think our bodies ought to look a certain way, follow a certain ideal. We are ashamed not only of how we look, but sometimes also by how others who are close to us (our grandparents, children, parents, friends and partners) look.

“I've always thought that Sweden is a country where one can fall in love with whoever you want without being questioned or outcast. Then I fell in love with a younger man and was shocked by my own and others’ reactions and by all the thoughts I had about how I should renounce or deny my love. Previously, I had rarely seen my appearance as important for acceptance and love, but suddenly I was hugely focused on every single sign of the age difference in my appearance. Any hint of wrinkles or gray hair became a huge problem and brought shame and discomfort. Thinking about whether others saw that I was older than him took such enormous amounts of energy that love and being present in the connection with him almost didn't get any space at all.”

6. Sex

Talking about sex is linked to shame for many of us. You giggle about it, cover it up in jokes and it may feel hard to have a conversation about it. At the same time we want to be sexy and attractive. A Swedish study of shame shows, surprisingly to me, that today’s young people aged 16-23 years were those that were the most ashamed of being “caught” masturbating or having sex.4

Many of us have learned to be ashamed of our bodies, our looks and all sexual expressions. Sometimes sex, and making out, even is called filthy. The experience of shame is so disgusting and so uncomfortable that we learn lots of ways to escape it.

He/she will not be turned on by me.
I have dressed too provocatively.
I will not get a hard on.
I'm not sexy enough.

4 United Minds 2007
I do not like this, but I do not dare to ask her/him to do something else. I would ask her/him to caress me right there, but what if he/she does not want to?!!

A man may be ashamed of not getting a hard on, because it is a sign that he is not a “real man”. Somehow the belief is that a real man is always capable and willing to have sex. A woman may also feel ashamed if he does not get a hard on, because she can take it as a sign that she is not attractive enough for this usually so capable man. Katarina Wennstam refers to research in her book *En riktig våldtäktsman*⁵ that describes how many men who have participated in gang rapes have only pretended to have ejaculated.⁶ Several also pretended to have penetrated the raped woman, and hidden the fact that they did not even get a hard on. It is interpreted as unmanly to not always be horny and ready for sex, even in a context that for most men is not exciting at all.

### 7. To See and Be Seen

“To be caught with one’s fingers in the cookie jar is worse than the fingers having actually been there.”⁷

Another way to describe shame is “to be caught with one’s hand in the cookie jar.” When someone catches us in a situation we are ashamed to be in, we often wish a door would open in the floor below us so that we could disappear. I remember how as a small girl I was in pain reading about the naked emperor in the fairy tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”. The story became more and more unbearable. My shame had its peak when it was revealed that all had been made up, but that the people claimed that they could see the beautiful clothes in order to avoid the shame that they actually were unable to see the beauty of the clothes. The story is characteristic to this particular category.

We can recognize that shame is getting to us when we hear ourselves thinking in ways similar to the ways below.

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⁵ The direct translation of the title is “A Real Rapist”.
⁷ Gullvi Sandin. SvD. “Oj vad vi skäms” 8 oktober 2007
Take me away from here.
I just wanted to die, it would have been less painful than to stand there and be shamed by them.
I feel so much shame seeing him do this and he does not even understand how embarrassing he is.
I hope no one will come to visit now, when it looks like a bomb has struck our home.

During a long flight from Asia to Sweden I lay down on the floor between the seats and slept. When I sat up a few hours later there was a man standing by the side of the row where I had been laying. He saw me and a hot wave of shame rushed through my whole body. In this situation, I was helped by having learned that all my feelings can be a support in understanding what I need. And it was, of course, acceptance I needed in this case.

When I switched focus, from worrying about what the man might think of me, to the need for acceptance, my feeling changed. The desire for acceptance was still there, but it was clear to me that to feel acceptance was not dependent on if he accepted the way I had chosen to sleep. It became clear to me there is a difference between the experience of acceptance and the different ways of experiencing it. What had satisfied my need for acceptance was not that he did something different, it was my own approach to him and to my needs that made a difference for me. To accept and embrace my own reaction of shame led me to experience acceptance.

It was comical to see how fast shame came over me, although I had no idea what the man had been thinking. I put imagined thoughts into his head. What do I know, perhaps he envied me, and longed to have had the same opportunity to find some deep rest? And if he thought what I did was not acceptable, normal or appropriate, I still had a choice to experience acceptance. As it was a long flight and I needed more rest, I again snuggled down and slept for a while. When we landed a few hours later and were standing at the baggage belt waiting for our luggage, the man approached me. “Did you sleep well?” he asked with a smile. This time it felt warm and nice to be seen by him.
8. Closeness

Sometimes I feel too much ashamed to want to have people around me, but animals are always acceptable. They do not judge or try to take away my feeling and even though I’m snotty-nosed and foul smelling, it seems my dog always appreciates me.

Cecilia

Although we want to be close to someone, closeness often raises the fear of what it means to be vulnerable to someone else. We may also be afraid of how to interpret another’s no if we ask to get close. A person’s rejection is interpreted as evidence that we are not loved or desired. It can stimulate thoughts that I simply am not worth loving or even am impossible to love. When we feel shame and get close to someone it may be difficult to really dive in and enjoy it. In extreme cases, the shame can be so strong that the idea of abstaining from intimacy can be attractive. It may be a great relief to think that you have found a way to never be ashamed in this way again.

I sat in the backseat of a taxi on the way to the airport. The car was quite small and we were three people sitting packed into the back seat. I sat in the middle and the guy on one side of me pressed himself against the door. Finally he burst out asking the driver, “is it standard now-a-day to sit three people in the back seat!?”. His words fed the idea that he probably thought I was ugly or intrusive. I interpreted the words as a indirect way of expressing dislike of sitting next to me. It took me a while to figure out that I felt shame and that beneath it was the need for acceptance. Only then did I realize that I actually had no idea what was going on inside of him. When I let go of these thoughts, we started a conversation and I saw no outward signs that what had been going on in my mind was actually true.
Shame Bingo

To understand how shame affects you, you can use the shame bingo card for a period, perhaps a week or a month, to map your shame, perhaps in preparation for doing the other exercises. Go back to the bingo card now and then and use it as support for getting to know in what situations you react with shame. Getting an idea of the situations in which you feel shame, can help you regain enjoyment of life.

Make a note on the Bingo card when you recognize that you have experienced shame in relation to any of the 8 categories and if you want to you can immerse yourself in the following topics:

1. Describe a person or type of situation that almost certainly would provoke shame reactions in you right now.

2. What is your most common behavior in and after these situations?
What Is Shame?

Feelings of shame are triggered in us, for example, when we perceive that we face disapproval from others for something that we have done or said. Shame sends shock waves throughout our system. It’s easy to go on the defensive, when your body is on alert. The increased blood flow creates heat in the face and we might blush, our eyes turn down and our head drops forwards. We wish that a hole would open up beneath us so that we could sink through the earth.

Even in a three-month-old baby it is possible to detect a sudden decrease of tension in the neck muscles and how the upper body becomes tense. This leads to the baby sinking down a little when eye contact he or she has with an important person has been broken.8

When we feel shame we often want to hide our blushing face. The word shame has its origin in the Indo-European word “(s)kem,” which means, “to cover”. Maybe it comes from our wanting to hide from anyone when we feel shame.9 According to the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins the shame effect is linked to vision, similar to disgust being linked to taste and dissmell to the sense of smell. As eye contact between child and parent is essential for connection, according to this theory, a parent’s disapproving glance will induce shame in the child.

In moments of shame, many of us want to “smooth over” what we have done or avoid talking about it. A bit of our most private self has been exposed and we will do anything to get away from it. We stiffen or smile and laugh nervously to release some of the tension. When we try to avoid or hide what has occurred, it makes it even harder to deal with the shame. It usually does not disappear fully even with the cleverest of strategies, but is still there lurking in the shadows deep inside.

To express shame, we use different words. We might call it painful, embarrassing, awkward, and humiliating or that it is something threatening our honor. We say that we have made fools of ourselves and that we feel disgraced, destroyed, silly or inferior. Often we have no words that completely match the experience and maybe we would not call it shame.

Many of those I talked to when I was preparing this book, like myself, were not aware of how often they actually felt ashamed, until we talked about what shame is. Often shame is so hidden behind automatic patterns of behavior that many of us never even feel shame as we have already chosen a strategy to protect us from it.

The feeling of shame often comes suddenly, but then hangs on for a while. It is hard to completely shake it off and there are other ways to handle it than to simply run away from it when we want peace from it. I see its strength as a sign of something important going on in us as we experience ourselves facing the threat of being rejected or not being accepted by another person or group. The tragedy, which at the same time offers hope, is that in most situations the threat is not real, but something that comes from our own way of thinking.

Göran Larsson describes shame as “an invisible electric fence that gives me a much needed shock, a flick on the nose, when I violate someone’s border and integrity”.10

To be excluded from a group in the past was a real threat that could lead even to death. An individual’s shame was a signal that he or she

10. Larsson, Göran (2007), Skamfilad - om skammens många ansikten & längtan efter liv. Cordia/Verbum förlag AB.
had surpassed someone’s boundaries and was therefore a means of protecting the survival of the group and individuals. Given that, it is no wonder many of us perceive it with great horror to question a group’s norms. It may be perceived as a life threatening danger. Shame can perhaps be of best service as a reminder of the value of having respect for others’ boundaries. If we use our shame reaction constructively, instead of being ashamed of it, we can use it to find our way back to being responsive to both our own and others’ feelings and needs.

We can look at shame the way we look at a fuse. Just as an electric fuse blows when we overload the circuit, an internal fuse blows when we miss the first signals of needs not being met. When we do not manage to balance others’ needs with our own, we are likely to feel shame.

A participant in one of my shame seminars wrote this:

“Shame seems to always tell me that I want to have a deeper connection with my fellow human beings, perhaps about giving them more space or love!”

Many have marveled at how birds can fly in huge flocks without crashing. We also have the ability to “feel into” each other. If we did not have an intuitive sense of being mutually dependent, we would, for example, collide much more frequently in crowds or on a ski slope than we do. This ability is severely affected when we are not in contact with what we feel and need. We can not work with total efficiency in the “flock” if we are not in contact with our internal signals. If one or more individuals in a group does not have that connection it affects the entire flock. Being able to regain contact with our inner selves, when we are victims of shame, is crucial when it comes to how we can serve the group.

Shame functions ingeniously by placing the responsibility on the individual in a situation that is also affected by the way power is distributed in domination systems. It provides an internal navigation system, which does not give power to individuals, but gives them the responsibility to act according to what is “right”. The paradox is that as this inner navigation system is now in the hands of the individual, it is also the weakest link in supporting domination systems. Since every individual has access to it, we can take back the power, and use the shame to support a more life-serving system. We do so by seeing
the natural core of shame and acting according to that.

We can separate our choices from the shoulds, the musts and the duties that have previously given away our power to those above us in the hierarchy. Shame then becomes a gift, showing us better choices to take others as well as ourselves into consideration when we act. Now we can truly look forward to the next time we feel shame, because each such occasion is an opportunity to make an aware choice in how we want to create our world.

When Shame Goes Sour

There are many nuances in what we call shame. Vulnerability in the connection with others originates from the core of shame. Shame can manifest itself by shyness and uncertainty in situations when we try to connect with others. We ask ourselves how close we want to be to others and how we will be received.

Very young children are vulnerable and shy, long before they learn the rules of society. They have a sort of gentle delicacy in their way of relating to their surroundings. Tentatively they gradually learn how to relate to what is happening outside of them. As the child learns to live in this world, shame and embarrassment tend to subside, or at least to modify its form. So far, everything is in line with life. But when the child learns to equate guilt and shame with a sign that there is something wrong with him or her and that they are not good enough, shame and guilt become extremely painful and difficult to handle. To hear things like “come on, don’t be shy” or “look how cute she is when she is shy,” again and again, can numb our sensitivity or contribute to the inability to accept our vulnerability.

A child’s shame and embarrassment when not treated with care and respect, but with laughter or ridicule and being pointed at, can lead to thought patterns that make it difficult to deal with shame. The need for respect is not met and the child often takes upon himself the responsibility for this.

Shame combined with moral judgments makes us try to deal with shame by using a variety of behaviors that do not lead us where we
want to go. Many of us never ever experience shame, because we defend ourselves against it instantly as soon as we get a glimpse of it. Therefore, we are missing priceless lessons about life that we could receive if we only dared to look at these situations. Something that was originally meant to serve us becomes “sour” and starts to taste bad.

Shame may be experienced as a wound in our hearts, inflicted by an unseen hand. It is often described as something that “burns and stings within us.” When shame is strong it is a challenge to know how to express ourselves.

Shame shows us the adverse side of what is regarded as normal in the very culture we live in. It shows us the price we pay when our standards creates smaller “boxes” than we can fit into, for example, if we fall in love with a person who has the “wrong gender” or the “wrong age,” if we have an unusual hobby or style of clothing, or if you have views which others consider unconventional.

Shame Can Be Managed

Assumptions That Help Us Deal with Shame

• How I choose to look at a situation affects whether I feel shame or not. It will also affect my ability to change the situation in the direction I want it to go.

• Instead of trying to get away from the shame I can see it as a “warning” that helps me to see that I am in touch with my judgments and not with my needs.

It is fully possible to change the inefficient and habitual patterns of behavior that we use to deal with shame. The first step is to become aware that the ways we act when we feel shame do not serve us in the long run. The compass that is described in chapter five is of great help in doing that.

An important help in dealing with shame, as I have previously
touched on, is to learn to recognize how it feels in your body. You may feel how your face gets hot, and notice streams of cold or hot streaks flowing in the body. You may find awkwardness in meeting somebody’s eyes, your mouth may feel dry, your stomach might contract and you may feel restless and want to leave. The signs are different from person to person, but when you have learned to be aware of your own body’s reactions to shame, it will usually be easy to recognize.

To follow shame through the thought that stimulates it to the feelings and needs that exist in the core of it, is an exciting, challenging and rewarding journey. Along the way you will discover that shame has many faces, but at its center you will find the need for respect, acceptance and belonging.

To get to the core of shame, it helps to be able to distinguish the needs for respect, acceptance and belonging from the strategies we choose to meet those needs. By separating them, we no longer give others the possibility to blame us. We now have the power and the responsibility to deal with our shame.

Conversely, we can help others with the same thing, by not taking responsibility for their feelings when they blame us. Every time we do not take responsibility for what others feel, it gives them a greater opportunity to develop new ways of acting that can more effectively meet their needs.

**Taking Advantage of Shame**

Through shame we get support in discovering when we have done something against our own values. When we feel shame after having revealed something that has been said to us in confidence, we have the chance to become aware of how good it feels to act out of integrity or out of concern for others. We can become aware of how we yearn to contribute to others’ wellbeing, when we feel ashamed to have used harsh words with our children. If we have been unfaithful, we can be ashamed and through that discover how we value mutual respect, trust and care. We can benefit from shame as it helps us to discover how we can respect other people’s boundaries while balancing that with our own needs for respect, caring, integrity, and the need to contribute.
To see the beauty that is actually present in our feeling of shame, we need to learn to deal with thoughts of being worthless, that we have made a fool of ourselves or that we are a big fraud. When we have learned to understand what the discomfort of shame carries with it, and to observe the thoughts that stimulate it, we no longer experience shame as unpleasant. Since we no longer believe in the interpretation that shame means that we do not deserve to be loved, we can also give ourselves the freedom to act in new ways.

Being able to distinguish between the pattern of thoughts that feeds shame and the needs behind it, helps us deal with things that before this might have paralyzed us. Hence the importance of being able to distinguish the natural core of shame from the thoughts within the dominance structure that we have been marinated in.

Just because we understand shame it does not change the feeling. What helps us digest shame and come to its more life-serving core is when we embrace our shame fully and observe how it affects our bodies, our thoughts and emotions. Realizing that it is shame we feel does not help us to change the behaviors we are ashamed of. The change of behavior comes when we experience understanding and empathy for the discomfort that shame raises. After that we can focus on how we can meet needs in other ways.

The thought of exposing our imperfections is uncomfortable because we are sure that no one will like us when they realize that we are not perfect. The belief that only if we are perfect will we be accepted and loved is devastating. It leads us astray. It is only when we are willing to expose our shame and our vulnerability that shame can really let go of its hold on us. There seems to be no shortcuts. But there is a “royal road” which is about vulnerability and about opening up and telling others about our shame.

At the same time it is useful to remember that in some situations it is challenging for others to listen to our shame. Listening to others embarrassment, can lead to shame within oneself. Therefore those who are ashamed and show it, face the risk that instead of being met with understanding, they are received with excuses and blame, or that someone will try to reduce one’s problems by giving advice, a pep talk or comfort. The other’s capacity for empathy is tested in this so-called “secondary shame”.
From Shame to Connection

Follow the four steps below to regain connection and inner balance after a shame attack.

1a. Experience the effects on the body that shame has. It can be experienced as warm waves that will make you blush or as a discomfort in the stomach.

1b. Remind yourself that it is valuable to get in touch with your feelings and needs. Do not do anything to avoid or numb the shame. If you act before you have connected with yourself, it is possible that you will do something you will later regret.

2. Realize that you need support and that you will benefit from sharing how you feel with another human being.

3. Get in touch with someone you know can listen and tell him or her what you are ashamed of. If no one is available, make sure to take the time to listen to yourself with compassion. Shame cannot keep us in its grip when we experience empathic connection.

4. If you did not perceive the shame erupt through your body, you can recognize it in how you move in any of the directions in the compass of needs. (See chapter five.)
Shame and Vulnerability

*Live never to be ashamed if anything you do or say is published around the world - even if what is published is not true.*

Richard Bach

The way we behave when we are ashamed often breeds further guilt, fear, distance and self-criticism. We easily forget that everyone feels shame at times and therefore we try to pretend that we are not ashamed. But the more we try to hide that we are ashamed, the more power shame has over us.

To understand when you can benefit from being more vulnerable, ask yourself in what situations you feel vulnerable, but avoid showing it. Do you get tougher and colder? Withdraw? Are you trying to do things to “buy” love? Do you argue about who is wrong and who is right? Are you satisfied with these choices? Or do you long for deeper connection? If you want to create connection with other people it can be very useful to show the vulnerable feelings you usually hide.

Human contact is essential for all of us. To have deep contact with others contributes to meaning in our lives. Daring to show vulnerability leads to connection. Others may recognize themselves and also experience being significant as they support us. When we try to hide our shame over making a mistake, we miss the path to the deeper connection that vulnerability gives us. We are not designed to keep our mistakes within. We are created for connection and therefore empathy is so very important to us. As human beings our greatest asset in survival has been the ability to empathize and cooperate.

We can see shame and empathy as opposed to each other, but we can also see the core of shame as an opening for empathy. The depth of vulnerability we dare to show, determines whether we move towards empathy, or towards shame in our lives. So shame can be described as a barrier to empathy, but also as an invitation to more empathy.

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Some time ago I entered a restaurant stressed because I had a train to catch. I raised my hand and said excitedly “excuse me” when I saw the waiter. He gave me an intense gaze and when he came to the table he said in a cold voice:

_Couldn’t you see I was about to serve you!_

It was clear that he had not appreciated my outstretched hand and my eagerness. His eyes made me freeze and I was ashamed. I was ashamed because I had wanted to be observant about how he took great pride in his job and in being attentive to the customers. I was touched by how much I actually cared for his needs, even if I was in a stressful situation myself.

When I felt how hot flashes were moving through my body, I became aware that I was ashamed. Since I also noticed that my face was stuck with the corners of my mouth in a stiff smile, I realized it was time to embrace the shame. As soon as I had done it, I experienced empathy for him as well as for myself. I did not have to work hard to understand that his need was to experience dignity in the work he performed. His way of dealing with the situation made it challenging for me to feel seen and accepted, but the shame helped me to get in touch with my own needs and to enjoy the situation again.

**Being Ashamed of Feeling Ashamed**

“To blush in front of a girl is worse than being caught with your pants down”.

Gabriel 18

According to Nathanson shame is always preceded by something we enjoy or are glad about. We might for example feel deeply connected with someone or celebrating some success. Shame interrupts our pleasure to remind us of the needs that are at risk of not being met. It may be a need for integrity, respect, acceptance or connection.

Shame is at best a vague malaise that makes us pause and reflect on what has just happened. If we have talked about something that we deem to be private, maybe we will stop to evaluate whether it is
likely that we will be accepted in a certain community were someone to hear what we have said. We ask ourselves if we have joked about something that is “forbidden” or laughed “too loudly” because we are keen to fit in and be careful not to damage important relationships.

When I hear someone talk about shame, it is very often about how to get rid of it. The very shame seems shameful. We are ashamed that we blush or feel insecure. We try to hide the reactions that tell us that we are a fraud or that there is something wrong with us, out of fear that others will notice it and find there really is something wrong with us. When people find they are blushing they often get even more ashamed. Thirty-three percent of young people in Sweden say they are ashamed that they blush so easily.\(^{12}\)

To focus on getting rid of the blushing is like throwing the fuse box out of the house because it’s such a hassle having to change a fuse. It will not help us find the cause of why the fuses are blowing. When we are ashamed of the shame, it will certainly not leave us. It keeps us in a tight grip and the harder we try to get out of it, the harder it has us. In fact the shame might also have increased because in our struggle to avoid it we might have done more things we are ashamed of.

We think it is bad to be ashamed, because it can be seen as proof that we are weak, that we have done something wrong, or that we are not on top of things. So it becomes a challenge to accept that we are ashamed and to talk about it with others.

To use the word shame to express what is going on inside can be very charged. Several people I’ve talked to about shame experiences have said it is easier to approach shame when they have replaced the word shame by expressions such as being shy, embarrassed, or that something is painful or vulnerable. There is nothing wrong with being ashamed or even in judging oneself. I would never suggest that we should try to stop or avoid being ashamed. I propose that we use our self-accusations as signs that we need to pause and become aware of what is going on inside of us. Only then will shame be a key to deeper understanding of ourselves. If we are preoccupied with avoiding shame, we will be easy to control as many of us are so easily shamed. When we are willing to feel shame, without giving in to the thoughts that are tightly linked to it, it’s harder to turn us into obedient puppets.

\(^{12}\) United Minds (2007).
Innate Shame

A question I find exciting is whether the feeling of shame is innate or not\(^\text{13}\). On the one hand, it is not important to know if the feeling of shame is innate or not. The important thing is that we can manage our shame in a way that serves us and other people. For me it has been valuable to label shame as something innate, as that has helped me become less ashamed of being ashamed.

On the other hand, the value of believing that shame is an innate feeling that all people throughout history have shared, is that it is helpful as a support in deciding what we want to focus on, when faced with strong feelings of shame that we experience as overwhelming.

I see the feeling and the needs that exist in the core of what we call shame as innate. They give us a vulnerability that allows us to interact with others because it gives us compassion for the needs of everyone, including our own. Furthermore, we have a strong need to contribute and make a difference. When the need to contribute is not met and we have done something we would like to have undone, mourning occurs naturally.

When we feel shame, we feel separate from other people, if only for a moment. The shame occurs when we have lost the ability to understand that others’ needs have not been met. As long as we do not find other ways to ensure that we are taking care of each other based on love and care, shame will be there. We can use shame to remind us of the value of acceptance and respect, and to achieve a balance between individual responsibility and mutual care. With increased self-awareness, we will hopefully be more responsive to the needs of others without having to take a detour around shame.

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\(^{13}\) Within the Affect Theory shame is called our only social feeling. Shame occurs, according to Nathanson and other researchers, in humans at the end of their first year of life. At that time we have already been subjected to certain cultural imprints, so it’s expressions will differ between people.
Cultural Shame

Depending on the norms of the society, the family, or the organization we are in, we feel shame in different situations. In every culture there are certain things that “we should be ashamed of”, or behaviors that are simply not accepted.

What makes us ashamed varies not only between cultures, but also over time. Every culture has its own special “shame scale” and the etiquette is different in Sweden, in Japan or in Morocco. In the book *The Reader*, based on a true story, Hanna Schmidt prefers to get a lifelong punishment rather than to be put to shame at being unable to read. She cannot stand the shame it would mean for her to acknowledge this openly and therefore she does not provide the evidence that would set her free.\(^{14}\)

Many of us have avoided shame in our lives in a similar manner but seldom with such dramatic consequences. We hide sides of ourselves in order to experience respect and sometimes it can have a major impact on our perception of authenticity and our zest for life. This is especially true if we have learned that our value as a human being lies in what we are able to achieve.

In psychological literature, I have found claims that make it sound like seeing nudity is automatically shameful, that it can even be harmful. And I wonder, how many people in the world actually have a separate toilet with a locking door and in how many generations have people lived as we live? Do they mean that indigenous peoples who live in hot countries and are naked or only meagerly cover some parts of the body, are creating shame in their children and even hindering their ability to develop? Or is it only when it is outside the norm that nudity is shameful?

Who is it that decides what should be regarded as “normal”? I believe that nudity in itself cannot create shame, and we must explore what creates the idea that something is normal or not. It is of great value to know this difference if we want to see clearly what shame is all about.

My mother was born and raised in the inlands of Northern Sweden. She was born in 1936 and grew up without running water and

\(^{14}\) Schlink, Bernhard (1998), *The Reader*. Orion Publishing Co. The book was made into a film in 2008 with Kate Winslet and Ralph Fiennes.
electricity (as much of the world’s population today lives). They had an outdoor toilet with three holes. When the winters were dark, she and her sisters often went there together. They helped each other by holding a kerosene lamp for light and kept each other company in the cold and darkness. My mother has often described it with warmth in her voice and expressed how much she values the community she shared with his sisters. Sharing the toilet space was no more or less shameful than anything else they did together. It was just simply a natural part of their way of life.

And how many girls have not visited the ladies’ room together. We giggle and talk as a natural celebration of the connection that may arise on these occasions. There is nothing shameful about it at all.

The importance of showing up at an appointed time is not the same in different cultures. In Sweden, we can be ashamed if we arrive two minutes later than agreed upon. In other countries people arrive 30 minutes “late” without a shred of shame. My first contact with this was when I was 18 years old and was a volunteer worker on a kibbutz in Israel. I arrived late one afternoon together with a Finnish girl whom I also shared rooms with. We were asked to appear the next day at six o’clock in the next morning to our assigned job. I woke up and saw that we had only a few minutes to get to work on time. A wave of shame hit me and I sat up straight as an arrow and said to my Finnish friend that we had better hurry. We were going to be late!

She was probably just as embarrassed as I was, because without a word she slipped into her clothes and was ready to go. We groped our way in the dawn light, and to our relief we were at the appointed place a few minutes before six. It was completely dark and there were no other people in sight. But the door was locked. Confused, we just stood there and stared at each other for some time. At ten past six the foreman cycled by, said a brief good morning, and unlocked the door. At half past six the workforce gathered, came in and sat down for a coffee and chatted. No one seemed ashamed that they had not been there at six o’clock. I was boiling with judgments, but it changed into a feeling of wonder. When the irritation had subsided I realized I had a lot to learn about life and the different ways to live.
Disgust and Dissmell

According to the Affect Theory, we humans have nine different emotions: joy, surprise, anger, fear, sadness, shame, dissmell (a reaction to a bad smell), of disgust and curiosity.

Affects can be described as “physically measurable responses that impact our body”.15

The bloodstream increases or decreases and the rhythm of breathing changes and different chemicals are released. Affects motivate us to meet our needs. Their purpose is to strengthen the stimuli so that an individual will repeat behaviors that feel good and avoid those that feel bad. The affects are happening in our bodies even if we are not aware of them.

The affects dissmell and distaste are regarded as having an important role in our development as humans. Both have helped us to avoid being poisoned. These emotions are so strong that even the memory of something that tasted disgusting can affect our appetite negatively. In young children dissmell and disgust are a biological protection as they spit out everything that tastes or smells bad.

As adults, we can feel disgust in relation to a person that we want to keep a certain distance from. This revulsion often gets mixed in with our prejudices about the person. The judgments we have of another person make us reluctant to get in touch with what he or she needs and wants, and we often choose to try to avoid the person. We might say or think things like:

*I feel repulsed by what she has done, or He disgusts me.*

Disgust and dissmell are often mixed with feelings of shame, which can magnify an experience and make even the slightest shame-filled experience painful. We laugh nervously, pull up the corners of our mouths in a frozen smile and try to hide the shame in a “sneer”, anything to avoid the shame taking over.

Shame in itself is not so uncomfortable. It is when it is mixed with dissmell and disgust that it becomes so uncomfortable that we want to get rid of it at all costs. Without this mix, shame might not be more unpleasant than other emotions.

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Time Goes, Shame Stays

When we do not know how to deal with shame, it can stay with us for decades. To this day I continue to feel great shame in remembering certain episodes from my childhood. More than 35 years later, I can feel the shame I felt when I pilfered candy and the clerk caught me. To this day I feel my stomach constricting, I almost blush and I want to avoid meeting other eyes when I talk about it.

When I was eight years old, I got a pair of sandals with laces that were tied up the legs. I was proud of them because I thought they made me look grown up. The laces often shuffled down along my legs tangling down at my ankles and I guess, in retrospect, it might have looked quite comical. But it was far from comical to me when it happened right outside the shop closest to my home. Some older children saw it and began to point fingers and laugh at me. I was so ashamed that even today, when I think of the event, I feel a slight discomfort in my body.

The Shame of Untidiness

To have an unexpected visitor arrive when your home is a mess stands at the top of the list of shame for us Swedes, according to a recent Swedish study. 56% of Swedish women in the survey and 42% of men, a total of 49% of those surveyed, say they would feel shame in such a situation.¹⁶

I’ve often been told that I am careless and cleaning is not one of my favorite pastimes. I often feel shame when someone comes to my house and it is not tidy. Often, the awkward dialog that then occurs sounds like this;

- *Yes, it is untidy here as usual,* I say apologetically.
- *I didn’t come here to clean up,* replies the other person jauntily.

When I visit someone and they also excuse themselves, something like this often slips out of me:

Although a dialog like this might be said in a joking manner, it can also be tense and a bit uncomfortable. In both cases the purpose is to get the other person to stop feeling shame and to relax. Shame in these situations can be seen, even if it is vague. You can see it on our smiling stiff mouths and worried eyes. It can be heard in our tight laughter and our cheeky comments.

The more shame we feel over a messy home, the less chance there is that it will be cleaned with some kind of regularity. When we do not see ourselves as free, we perhaps rebel with a cheeky:

- I can have my home as untidy as I want. It is my home!

It is counterproductive to shame and blame anybody, even ourselves, and even when it comes to cleaning.

Shame Gets in the Way of Learning

“Shame is a form of self-hatred, and actions taken in reaction to shame are not free and joyful acts. Even if our intention is to behave with more kindness and sensitivity, if people sense shame or guilt behind our actions, they are less likely to appreciate what we do than if we are motivated purely by the human desire to contribute to life.”

Marshall Rosenberg17

It is difficult to think clearly when we feel shame. Shame is a kind of cognitive shock that freezes us because we do not know how to meet our own and others’ needs. Therefore, it is one of the worst conditions we could find ourselves in when we want to learn something or make critical decisions. When we are ashamed of something, we will seldom focus on restoring what we have done or to learn something about what has happened. Our attention is on, at all costs, how to escape the uncomfortable feeling.

To induce shame in people is therefore an inefficient way to help

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them learn new behaviors or to make them discover how their own behavior affects others. Anxiety about having to feel ashamed again restricts their desire for a deeper commitment. Shame makes us passive, rather than active, and when you feel shame it is often difficult to concentrate. Organizations and schools that stimulate and reinforce feelings of shame therefore have difficulties in enforcing learning processes and thereby important changes. It may ultimately become completely unbearable to stay in that situation.

I am now and then consulted by different organizations in which there is a lot of frustration about how people are not ready to change. When we look deeper into the situation, we always find that behind low willingness to change there is fear of punitive shame-and guilt-inducing communication happening. It is only when change is voluntary, and people see the opportunity to meet more needs by making the change, that they become willing to change.

When people already feel guilt or shame, their emotions usually do not subside by anyone encouraging them not to be ashamed. These emotions are handled more efficiently by learning to recognize the reactions and then make conscious choices based on needs. Instead of telling others not to be ashamed, we can accept that they feel shame or guilt, and see it as a beautiful sign that they are not cut off from contact with their own and others’ needs. You might ask:

- *Ah, you mean that you yearn to be able to help others in a way that you experience as even more respectful?*

Or:

- *Do you feel sad because you want to find ways to act in a way that protects everyone’s needs?*

We have more potential to learn from our mistakes if we think:

- *Everybody fails sometimes. I feel shame that I made a mistake and I mourn this, hoping to learn something from it. Shame is a sign that it is time to get in touch with my own and others’ needs.*
Childhood Shame

When I was spanked - as violence towards children often is called - it was not the hitting that was most painful. The most threatening and insulting was when I was told to remain in bed until I “had calmed down.” The spanking was often sudden and always when I was wound up, had been having fun and was making noise. My mother was stressed and did not have much support and eventually the situation became overwhelming for her.

The use of shame, spanking and other punishments were a common way to raise children well into the 1900s in Sweden. Methods used in schools were to let children stand in a corner being shamed or to wear a “shame cone”, slaps with rulers, and spanking. Sweden was the first country with a law against corporal punishment in 1979 and many countries have followed. There is no evidence that children benefit from being subjected to punishment or insult, or that it makes them more considerate and attentive to others’ needs.

As adults we can feel ashamed of our natural feelings and needs. It can feel extremely vulnerable to ask for support if we have not been supported as children, but have been told that we must manage on our own. Many of us feel ashamed even to ask for things that every one of us needs.

One day I heard myself say something I immediately knew I was likely to regret later. We were on our way to a fancy restaurant, and my three-year-old son did not have any clothes on. It was summer and hot and he did not understand why it was important to put clothes on now, when he had been naked all day. After having tried different ways to persuade him to put the clothes on, I said:

- Everyone else has clothes on so...

I stopped before I had completed the sentence. I was reminded of something I had heard from friends, who were parents of teenagers. In my head these parents’ irritated voices echoed. They complained about what their teenagers always said to justify themselves:

- Everyone else gets a …

The parents went on to say:
- He does not take any responsibility, claims that all his friends are allowed to be out until eleven o'clock.

Or

- It is ridiculous to buy such expensive shoes just because everyone else has them. Also, it is not true that everyone has them.

Or:

- She thinks she can get away without punishment by claiming that she just acted as everyone else has.

Parents and children might have different issues that they argue over, but the arguments are often the same. I wonder how many times I have heard my friends motivating their children the way I was about to do. They told their small children that they had to do something “because everyone else…”, and later received “a taste of their own medicine” when the children became teenagers.

I noticed that what triggered me in the situation with my naked son was that I wanted to avoid shame. What would people think of me, if he walked around there naked! When I realized it was my own shame I was trying to escape, the absolute demand of clothing let go of its grip on me. It was now easy to listen and to talk about how I was influenced by his choice. I told him that I felt shy at the thought that he would be without clothes at the restaurant. I also told him that I felt concern for others and their ability to relax and enjoy their dinner. To my surprise he was suddenly willing to put on some thin clothing.

Teenage Shame

You think only of yourself!
Don’t be so selfish!
You should be ashamed!
Do you really think this would be good enough?!

These statements were often used during my childhood and all were charged with shame and guilt. We had no place for “time-outs”, as are
used in the modern Nanny program, but these expressions made me sometimes experience growing up as one BIG “time out”.

When I was younger I struggled to deal with eating disorders for more than eight years. And only as I was doing research for this book did I fully realize how much shame I felt when I choose to either starve myself or to eat compulsively. I was ashamed of my body and ate to escape the shame, and then I vomited and felt ashamed of that and threw up again, in a constantly revolving carousel. The way I was treated by adults made it more difficult to deal with the situation. What I needed most was to be heard. Finn Skårderud, psychotherapist and psychiatrist from Norway has suggested the term “shame-based syndromes” to describe conditions as eating disorders, addiction and other self destructive behavior. He believes that shame is both a trigger and a consequence of eating disorders, as was my experience.

Every time I met one of my relatives, he commented on whether I had gained or lost weight. When I was a teenager, the first few minutes together created such pressure for me that I did everything to avoid having to visit him and his family, even though I liked them a lot. The thought of the shame I would experience when he looked at me and said, “you have got a little bit plump”, was unbearable.

I never knew what to answer, even if the reality was opposite of what he said. The stress I felt was enough to silence me. I went there only when my parents forced me to. And because I felt so much shame, I never told anyone about how this was for me. I wished my parents had questioned his way of focusing on the weight of us children. It would have helped me not to get stuck in the thoughts about my body that made the visits unbearable.

As a teenager, when your body is changing in significant ways, shame is often close. How you look is most often, crucial in teenage cultures. I remember being one of three teenage sisters and how we fought for space in front of the bathroom mirror. Going to school without having full control of your appearance was not okay. It felt like I was being watched all the time. On one occasion, when my sister cut my bangs very short, I decided to stay at home until it grew

18 A TV-program about the upbringing of children where one often uses the shame corner, shame, carpets or anything that will show children that they have done wrong.
out. My parents forced me to go to school and I still remember it as a difficult moment.

A central feature of families ruled by shame is that you would rather not talk about what happens in the family to someone outside of the family. It took me eight years of self-starvation and compulsive eating before I talked to someone outside the family about it. Before that I just carried it inside me. My recovery from anorexia and bulimia began when I went from shame to anger. I had not been angry in a long time but suddenly I became angry over a little thing and got a fit of rage that made me faint. It was only then that I realized I needed the support of someone who could really listen to me.

It was the most horrifying dream I ever had.
I was sixteen and had gone to school, wearing one stocking with a seam, the other without.
In the dream I walked at first straight and proud in the hallway.
I heard someone whisper “have you seen”, increasing giggles and shouts, echoing in my head, while my heart was pounding wildly and my skin glowed red and warm.
I see myself trotting, in the ever longer corridor, lined with big noisy boys and girls with poisonous tongues, and I just want to run, out and away, sink through the ground, dissolve to nothing and not see a single soul again, EVER.
It may seem as the only escape from shame for someone who is sixteen and has gone to school wearing one stocking with a seam, the other without.
Katarina Hoffmann

The Place of Shame in Child Rearing

As vulnerable as children are it is painfully unsafe for children to experience humiliation. In their vulnerable position, it is difficult for them to experience not being part of a group, or to not be accepted as they are.

When my son was four years old, he (like many others) had difficulties dealing with others laughing at him. He used to quickly become gloomy and like a thundercloud if he sniffed any evidence that someone
was having fun at his expense. His antenna was perfectly tuned and responded immediately when his need for respect and community were not met. Instead of responding with this, *It was probably not meant seriously*, or, *I was only joking*, we can help children get in touch with their needs in these situations.

I used to say something like, *Is it that you want to experience respect and that is difficult right now.* Although these might seem to be very “adult” words, my son seemed to understand that I wanted to make sure he was treated with respect. He would look at me, nodding, and then continue playing as if nothing had happened. It was easy to support him to regain his self-respect, as he did not try to hide his reaction. Later in life, when many children have learned to hide that they are ashamed or when they are dissatisfied, it can become more difficult to detect when they need our support.

It is well documented that there are no long-term benefits to shaming or blaming children. On the contrary, recurring shaming leaves traces for a lifetime and contributes to an inner nightmare climate. In the US, shaming of children at the age of ten has been shown to be related to drug use, teenage drop-out and to crime.20

**Reasons Why it Could Be Wrong to Steal**

"**Is it wrong to steal?**"

"**Yes!**"

"**Why?**"

We can say that something is *right* or *wrong* based on different assumptions or on what is called moral development.21 What interests me is not whether something is right and wrong, but why we would call it so. Let’s explore some reasons why we would say that it is wrong to steal. In the first three examples shame and guilt are part of the motivation.

*It is prohibited by the law.*

The motivation of why it is wrong to steal is that we have to follow

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the law. If someone violates the law, I will probably be angry and think they should be punished. If I am doing something forbidden, I will feel shame or guilt.

_I may be punished if someone sees me._

The motivation here is to escape punishment. If I steal anyway and later am punished for it, I might get mad at those who punished me and if I get the chance, I will take vengeance on them.

_Others would not like me._

The motivation here is to be liked, “to buy love”. If I were caught doing something forbidden, I would probably feel shame or guilt.

_It may harm others._

As mutual respect and caring is important to me, I avoid doing anything that might hurt others. If I do something that turns out to harm others, I mourn that I have not found a way to stand up both for me and for them at the same moment. I do what I can to repair the damage.

**Shame and Honor**

_Get back into the closet! You do not count. You are the wrong age, you have the wrong color of eyes, hair or skin, and unfamiliar sexual or religious preferences. Adapt, or stay forever hidden. Get back into the closet!_  
Ellen Larsson

Feelings of shame are close when we challenge the norms about how things _should_ be. Whether the norm is about how men and women _should_ be or how to behave when young or old, as soon as someone goes outside the norm, shame is lurking.

Honor-related violence is associated with cultures in which an individual’s actions can cause shame for an entire family or group. Some behaviors or choices are taboo and can end up in violence,
death, or in renunciation from a group. A Swedish exhibition, *Honor related violence - an issue for others?* revealed in a striking way that this occurs in all cultures based on domination, which means almost *all* contemporary societies.\(^\text{22}\)

They presented a true story where it initially was not clear in which culture, religion or geographical area the situation had taken place. One of these stories described a woman who eventually went to the police and reported the husband and father of her child, who had abused her for years. After that her own family of origin started to send her threatening letters. She would not be allowed into their homes unless she promised to go back to the man. The family justified this demand by saying that she would bring shame to the family if she continued. They demanded that she go back to the man if she wanted them to be willing to ever see her again. Although everyone who saw the exhibition with western eyes, assumed this could never have been a story about a “swedish family”, it was revealed at the end of the story to have been a totally swedish family.

As soon as someone violates or exceeds the norms of the group or society, no matter what they are, it tends to be noticed. What has happened is often rejected, viewed with skepticism, suspicion and even disgust, as in the story above where the woman was rejected by her own family. On the other hand, for others, this same action could be a cause for celebration. For example women’s groups would applaud her action and courage seeing it as inspiration, giving courage to others.

Sometimes we have integrated societal morals so deeply into our identity that we - for better or worse - see them as limitations on what we can and cannot do. A friend sadly told me that his wife wanted a divorce. When we had talked a while he cried even more and then bursted out, *And there is nothing I can do about it, I can not even beat up her new partner because it’s a woman.*

His woman had decided to leave him, not for another man but for a woman. He connected the idea of beating up his rival with an opportunity to regain his own sense of honor. He was in a situation that was beyond his imagination, one that broke his own system of norms and that led to a strong sense of hopelessness.

\(^{22}\) The exhibition *Hedersrelaterat våld - en fråga för de andra?* Piteå museum 4 Okt - 22 Nov 2008.
To Take on Somebody Else’s Shame

Sometimes shame over what someone else has done to us tends to go inward. Women who are raped or subjected to other ill treatment often feel shame about what they’ve been through. They sometimes react by wanting to keep secret what has happened.

Prior to working on this book, I listened to a lecture called, *Why doesn’t she leave him?* It was about, for many of us, the unimaginable reasons that women stay in relationships where they are abused. There is, of course, no simple answer to the question, but I am totally convinced that societal norms play a major role here. The shame of going beyond what is seen as normal is a big step. The woman who is abused needs to have not only the strength to leave the one who beats her, but she needs to also leave somebody she might still love, the father of her children, plus the, in our culture, so common dream of a romantic relationship and the nuclear family (which many consider as the normal way of life). If she leaves him, shame often becomes her companion. She has now violated the norm, showing that she is incapable of living in a relationship. Even if she was the one that was abused she often takes on a lot of the shame of why it happened.

Agneta Sjödin writes in her partly autobiographical book, *En kvinnas resa*, how the main character is confronted with memories of a situation when she was raped. She describes how during the rape she became worried that any of her friends would come in and see her. When I read her book, I was myself reminded of how I, during a trip to India, was attacked and subjected to an attempted rape. I managed to beat myself out of the two men’s grip, but when I safe again, I remember how I hesitated to tell my friends what had happened. Shame came up with thoughts like “how could I be so stupid” and “it was my own fault.” Luckily, I recognized myself in these thoughts from reports I had read about how battered women often take on the blame. Then I was able to go to some friends who supported me in my shocked condition.

It was not until I began exploring the depths of shame that I realized that I actually had been raped when I was 18. During more than 25

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years I had blocked out the memory. I had been attracted to the man, but when we got close, it became clear to me that I did not want to have sex and told him so. He was not prepared to stop but raped me. I cried floods of tears when two decades later I realized I had preferred to pretend that I was ok with it, rather than to experience the shame of telling anyone that I had been raped. Unfortunately, I understand that I am far from being alone in having kept this kind of secret within me.

When someone talks about their shame it is easy to feel shame yourself and to want to avoid talking to the person about it. The feeling of shame is contagious, so we become ashamed when they are ashamed.

The first time I heard a woman I knew tell me that she had charged her husband, whom I also knew, with assault, I remember that I writhed in my chair. What should I say? What should I do? What I wanted most of all was to walk away. I also realized that the thoughts I had in my head were not the best to express out loud. They were something like this, but is it really necessary?, do you really have to make it so official?

I was embarrassed both for her and about me and my own thoughts and not about what the man had done. It was not until much later that my anger rose in relation to what the man had done.

**Sex and Shame**

The charge around sex is based on vulnerability and therefore also on a certain degree of shame. Did you not feel at least a slight sense of shame, the last time you talked to someone about what you think is exciting when it comes to sex? Besides the vulnerability in getting close, many of us are ashamed of our bodies; to show ourselves naked then becomes an additional challenge in an already volatile situation.

When we begin a sexual contact, we often feel vulnerable yet willing to take the risk to be laid bare. As we feel increasingly confident that the other will receive us, we can act to deepen our connections.

I have heard many say that they experience sex as tame in a relationship where they no longer feel a certain excitement and attraction. Sometimes I support couples that want to come closer together and one of the things that comes up is the difficulty of expressing clear and
specific requests. Especially when it comes to sex, this is challenging. Many have become accustomed to one way of having sex, even though they may want something else. To tell someone how you want to be touched can trigger so much shame that many people never take that step. Men have often told me that they want to ask questions about where and how the woman wants to be touched, but are too shy to do so. Thoughts such as “if I were a real man I would know how to satisfy my woman” can be devastating.

”Can I be this horny? Will you still respect me then?” are common questions that the women I have coached have wanted answers to from their men. They tell me they feel a pressure to be sexually liberated, but still not too sexual. They want to feel they are treated with respect, but often do not know how to express their requests so that they can get what they want. In these cases it is more often about a woman’s relationships to herself and what she allows herself to feel, than about what men think. However, knowing that a man appreciates a woman’s arousal is valuable information for women to hear, which would allow them to enjoy sex freely.

A couple who had been married for 30 years told me that they, after having participated in a relationship course I gave, finally dared to ask for what they wanted when it came to sex. Not surprisingly, it had led to a much higher quality of life and to more closeness in their relationship.

In the domination structure sex is largely based on domination and submission. The erotisation of female submission has made violence a part of our sexuality.

We might not recognize our sexuality when we do not feel passion and heat and we might even feel shame about that. Then we might try to avoid shame, through exciting fantasies, which means that we are not truly present with the other. Or we might withdraw more and more from sexual connection.

Couples who know each other often describe their sexual encounters as less exciting but more enjoyable than when they first got to know each other. Perhaps the more silent enjoyment comes from the fact that they have found ways to transform shame and that sex is now more about intimacy than about power or tension.
Practice Dealing with Shame

If we want to make our experiences with shame more useful, it helps if we can trace our feelings of shame for a while. Below is a set of exercises that can bear fruit for years to come. I have often asked myself what our shame would look like in a society that was not built on hierarchy and competition. Would we feel ashamed of our appearance without the massive marketing of our bodies that most of us are affected by today? If we lived in a world in which we had learned other ways of repairing mistakes than by self-criticism and punishment, how would our internal dialog sound and would it lead to shame? Would we feel ashamed if our inner dialog sounded different? However since most of us live wholly or partially in traditional dominance structures, with all that belongs therein, we may gain most from getting to know our own shame and to learn how to manage it in ways that serve us.

List Shameful Events

Make a list of 5-10 smaller events when you experienced moments of shame in your life. Write a note about moments when short-term obstacles to experiencing vibrancy and joy appeared. It may be a situation as the one about not finding a parking space and circulating around the lot many times, or asking for directions to something that is right in front of you, or when you make a small mistake in traffic and someone honks at you. It can also be situations that seem more charged, as when somebody yells at you or finds you in an uncomfortable situation.

Note in each situation your automatic reaction - your shame reflex in the situation. Use the compass of needs in chapter five as a guide. An alternative to this list is to use the Shame Bingo card on page 93.
The Laughter of Shame

Thoughts that lead to shame come up when we feel open and happy. Shame makes us more aware of ourselves, but unfortunately, we then often lose touch with our joy as the strong feeling of shame takes all our attention.

It is as if we have an internal thermostat that regulates how happy we are allowed to be. When it hits the ceiling the shame comes in. By getting to know our shame, we can consciously turn up the thermostat and make room for more joy in our lives.

One way of doing this is to watch a comedy that you like and identify where you laugh. The exercise will be clearer if you avoid the American TV comedies with the audience laughing in the background. Also note how many times you laugh when someone is embarrassed, put down, or ridiculed. This is a fun and clarifying way to get to know your relationship to shame and joy.

My son loves to watch Mr. Bean. I mostly suffer with shame at what this man manages to do. It has taught me a lot about what “triggers” my shame, while a part of it has been transformed into joy, seeing how much my son enjoys it.

Use Words to Explore Shame

You can use this exercise either alone or in groups.

1. Choose two of the words in the list below and write each of them at the top of a blank piece of paper. There are many more words than those on the list that you can use, but let’s start with them so that you get a glimpse of what this exercise can contribute. Words hold different charges for different people. Some of the words that bring shame in one person stimulate pleasant feelings in another.
Revealed, jealous, rejected, betrayed, defeated, disappointed, naked, shy, put down, stupid, bad, bad character, bad conscience, poor self-confidence, egoist, a fake, poor, false, locked, cowardly, wrong, ugly, silly, contemptuous, prohibited, loser, ridiculed, humbled, humiliated, embarrassed, greedy, helpless, intruders, ignored, impotent, clumsy, criticized, insulted, sensitive, ridiculous, power-hungry, powerless, manipulated, measured, awkward, unintelligent, immoral, unreliable, unsexy, inadequate, irresponsible, paralyzed, perfect, neat, private, disrespectful, sexy, selfish, ashamed, guilty, beaten, dirty, hurt, wounded pride, losing face, broken, mannered, nerdy, inferior, weak, vulgar, worthy of scorn.

2. Remind yourself of a situation where you used this word, or heard someone else use it. What did you feel? What did you do?

3. Describe how you would have acted in that moment of shame if you chose to move in each of the four directions of the compass of needs.

4. Imagine meeting one person who was sensitive to your feelings in that particular situation.
   What would he or she have said to help you manage these feelings in a way that would be helpful for you?
   What would help you to experience empathy?
   What would help you to be honest?
   What would help you to get in touch with your needs and desires?

5. What did you need in this situation?

Please use lists of feelings and needs at the end of the book as support.
   Take the time to get in touch with your inner self.
Shame in Important Relationships

Make a list of the relationships that are most important to your well-being right now. Make it as specific as possible and preferably short. Instead spend your energy on connecting with the questions in the points below.

1. List at least four specific situations in which your connection with any of those relationships was interrupted or disturbed in any way. Use one or two sentences to briefly describe each situation.

2. Recognize one or two of the most prominent reactions that shame had on your body in every situation. Describe each shame reaction with only a few words. Also describe briefly your thoughts.

3. Now connect your shame reaction to your feelings and needs. What did you feel and need in the moment? Use the lists of feelings and needs at the end of this book as support and take your time to get in touch with them.

4. What would you have liked the other person to say or to do which would have helped you to meet your needs?

5. What could you have asked the other person for?

6. What would you have liked someone else to do in that situation that would have helped you to meet your needs? What might this other person have said?

7. What request could you have expressed to that person?

8. What would you have liked yourself to say or do in that situation to help you meet your needs?

9. What request could you have made to yourself?
Your Daily Shame

Keep a diary for at least a week or preferably a month. Use one page a day. Describe on each page the situations in which you have experienced shame on the past day. It is common to find five to ten situations a day. The more experience you get in paying attention to feelings of shame, the more situations you’ll probably discover.

1. Describe the experience of the shame you feel. Including how it feels in your body.

2. Note the exact situation when it happened.

3. Note the triggering event and what you did at the time. Describe clear observations, free of interpretations as far as possible. For example: What you heard someone say, what you saw someone do and what you did, said or thought.

4. Connect what you felt to what you needed in the situation.

5. What would you have liked to have done differently? What would you have liked someone else to have done differently?

6. What could have met your needs at that moment?

7. What do you feel and need right now when you do this exercise?

8. Are there any requests you want to express to yourself or someone else?
A Day of Shame

Select a day when you specifically explore what it could mean by not doing anything to avoid feeling shame. During this day carry a notebook in order to capture the insights you get from this. After completing the day, write a summary. During the shame day, take these steps:

Step 1
When you discover that you are about to do something to avoid feeling or to get rid of shame, don’t do it! It’s not about trying to feel more shame (there is usually quite a sufficient amount as long as we attend to it). Only discover when you feel it and how it affects you.

Step 2
Then be aware of what your needs behind the shame are. And what you feel when you connect with the needs.

Step 3
Be clear about what needs you want to meet by avoiding shame, and also what needs are not being met by avoiding something. For example, you may avoid bringing up some subject that feels uncomfortable with a friend with the intention of protecting the relationship and experiencing harmony. The needs not being met may be honesty, integrity and trust.

Step 4
After completing the shame day take some time to reflect on what you learned about yourself, your needs and about shame.
Shame-filled Relationships

Imagine yourself in a situation where you have been involved with:
- colleagues,
- friends,
- relatives, or
- any other group of people.

You leave them and they remain gathered together. Ask yourself what is the worst thing you can imagine that these people will say about you? Your answers can give you valuable clues as to what situations you feel vulnerable in and that might stimulate shame in you. Maybe you can see a pattern of what needs are challenged in those relationships.

Another way to find which areas are particularly sensitive to you is to complete the following four sentences as the shame researcher Brené Brown suggests.24

1. I do not want people to think I’m ...
2. I want to be seen as someone who...
3. I would die if people found out that I...
4. “I can not stand the thought that others would perceive me as...”

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Chapter 5
The Compass of Needs
Learning to Recognize Shame

Many of us miss the fact that we are actually feeling shame because we instantly defend ourselves against the feeling as soon as we sense the “smell” of it. In this chapter I will describe some common strategies we use, often unconsciously, to avoid shame. If we have not learned to recognize the feeling of shame in our bodies, we can start recognizing what behaviors we turn to when we try to avoid shame.

_The Compass of Needs_ is a tool to help us learn this. Together with the principles of NVC, as previously described, this tool will help us to recognize and befriend our shame and increase our understanding of anger and guilt.

When we move in one of the four directions of _The Compass of Needs_ (or a combination thereof), we are missing the important needs that are hidden behind shame, anger and guilt. I have received stories of similar small “miracles” from students and friends who have made use of _The Compass of Needs_ for some time to detect when they avoid shame. This awareness has given them other ways of acting, which has benefited their relationships with themselves and others.

The Compass of Needs

Many authors (Jung, Schiff, Nathanson, Bradshaw and others) divide the human approach to shame in four different positions or strategies. Donald Nathanson uses something he calls “the compass of shame” to describe the various strategies that people use to avoid shame. With its help he describes four types of strategies designed to manage shame.¹ These strategies are used to manage an experience of not being good enough, or to be ashamed of who you are. My idea of how the compass can be used as a support is a bit different from Nathanson, in that I connect all the strategies to needs. I therefore call it _The Compass of Needs_.

Using the compass, I have become more aware of emotional nuances. I clearly see that I can choose many different ways to act when I feel shame, in contrast to previously only having seen the choice of

¹ Nathanson, Donald L (1992), _Shame and Pride_. W.W. Norton & Co.
one or two ways. This has given me a greater sense of freedom and choice. *The Compass of Needs* has helped me to see shame as a key to deeper inner connection, instead of something I try to get away from at all costs.

When we understand that we are trying to avoid shame, we become aware of the costs that this can have for us. By running away from shame we lose the chance to connect with our needs and we may choose strategies that are not likely to satisfy them. When we act in any of the directions of the compass of needs, we are not fully connected to our needs. So it’s not about replacing any of these strategies with one of the other three.

It’s about discovering how we act and think, in order to be able to consciously choose how we want to meet both our own and others’ needs. This gives us a unique opportunity to increase our understanding of the concepts of “rebellion” and “submission”. When we learn to recognize their inner signs, we can use them as keys to our needs in a totally new way.²

### Whose Fault Is It?

Imagine a horizontal axis of a compass. Along this axis we are looking for the answer to the question “Whose fault is it?” and, “Who is to blame?”. It is the “right-wrong axis”. To the left of the axis (west), we blame others for having done something wrong and think they are abnormal, selfish, evil and so on. To the right (east) we blame ourselves, we are inadequate or not good enough for various reasons.

The language along this axis is based on static assessments, right and wrong, on labels, diagnoses and analyzes.

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² All the directions of the compass of needs are what we in NVC call “jackal” strategies.
Who Has the Power?

Along the vertical axis of the compass, we look for the answer to the question, “who has the power?” To the north of the axis we withdraw and give up our power. We submit and give our power to someone else. We use so much of our attention in avoiding the situations that make us feel ashamed that we may no longer be present, even in relationships that previously were very important to us.

To the south we do the opposite, we rebel and refuse to do what someone requests from us, even if it is at the expense of others and even if our relationship with them will suffer. We show that we are indeed are free to choose how we want to act.

The game we play is based on either having power over others or to submit and let others have power over us. At this axis we use language that denies freedom of choice and mutual responsibility: “I do not have to do anything,” “I have to,” “no one can stop me,” “it was not my job,” “I am inferior,” “I am superior,” “I did as the manager said,” and “I will not do what someone else tells me to do.

Four Directions for Dealing with Shame

The experience of shame can be handled in several ways. When we choose one of the four directions of the compass of needs, we hope to get away from the shame we feel so that we no longer perceive it as overwhelming or unpleasant. We want to get back to a sense of dignity and respect, after having felt humiliation and shame. The goal becomes avoiding the shame and replacing it with anything else, be it negative or positive. When we’ve tried a certain behavior and it has led to a decrease of shame or the shame disappears altogether, we often use that behavior again. When we try to avoid behaviors and situations that have triggered shame, it limits us.
A tragic result of using strategies to get away from shame is that we miss the awareness of needs that shame could have brought to our attention. Thus we miss the chance to develop or gain further insight into how we can relate to others in a more satisfactory way. Moreover, usually these strategies, in the long term, increase the amount of shame in our lives rather than reduce it.

When we become aware of how the four directions of *The Compass of Needs* recur in our lives, we can, instead of trying to get rid of the shame, use any strategy in any of the four directions as a reminder to returns us to our needs. Shame in some shape will be chasing us as long as we do not connect with the needs behind it. Only when we understand its message about what we need, can it transform and let go of its grip. Then we receive more space to choose and act in.

In each direction in *The Compass of Needs* therefore, there are certain ways to act. Either we withdraw, criticize ourselves, rebel or attack others. It’s almost as if there is a ready-made role of behavior in every direction. We seem to have learned some common ways to handle humiliation. Since the strategies are so common and recurrent in our culture, it is easy to identify them in theater, film, or role-plays. In my trainings we often use role-plays as a tool for learning. On several occasions I have taken a role in a dialogue and after a while one of the participants has exclaimed, “This is exactly what my husband says. You use the very same words he uses! How could you know? “ I didn't know, of course, but since I have had the same “programming” in dealing with certain situations, it is easy to get into the role.

**What Does Your Compass Show?**

Many of us have a favorite direction we choose, even if we sometimes make use of all four. Often we choose our strategy unconsciously and in a very subtle way. We may not even be aware that we have felt shame and that we have acted to get rid of it. It may be sudden laughter, in an attempt to avert our embarrassment, or a gesture when we think we’ve done something that we judge as ridiculous or
embarrassing. I guess most of us have seen someone who has lost some kind of competition stuck in a stiff smile. The smile is an attempt to hide the disappointment, the self-loathing or shame, but most people upon seeing it, see through this “fake” smile.

Although this compass is mostly used to handle situations that generate shame, it works also as well in situations where we feel guilt or anger. In these situations the exploration usually leads to shame as well before you get to the needs hidden beneath the shame.

1. We move away from shame by hiding, being silent and giving up on our requests and dreams.

2. We move towards shame by showing that we are willing to submit and shrink ourselves to fit in.

3. We invade shame through rebelling against any sign of it. We do this by doing the things we are afraid of, doing what is unusual and what is startling, all of which demonstrate our independence.

4. We learn to attack anything that is shameful to us. We do this by trying to gain power over others, becoming angry and inducing shame.

1. We Withdraw

“Anyone who cannot show himself; cannot love.
Anyone who cannot love; is an unhappy man.”
Sören Kirkegaard

One way to avoid feeling shame is to withdraw from contact. We want to get away from the eyes that seem to examine us, or our actions, at any price. This leads us to subject ourselves to ideas about what we should do to be okay and shrinks our living space. We let others

take the rudder and submit to any decisions taken. We can be silent, physically leave the scene, become mentally or emotionally absent, or occupy ourselves with something else to avoid meeting with the shame.

We withdraw even though we are aware that it will cost us our social safety net. Even if it is very lonely it is a relief, as the number of times when shame arises decreases, as we no longer have anyone close enough to really see us. It means that fewer people will find out that we are abnormal, useless, incompetent (or that there is something else wrong with us). The people we care about see less of us and we hope this will minimize the risk that they will see what a fake we are. And although we are the ones who have avoided contact, it is easy to imagine that others have rejected us and that is why we are alone.

When we use this strategy to escape shame, it often catches up with us after a while. Now we feel ashamed because we don’t have any close relationships and worry about what people will think about us when they discover this, and so the strategy leads to more shame rather than less.

When people around us notice that we are avoiding connection with them, they may become worried because they do not understand what is going on within us. They may interpret it as we do not want to connect with them. It can make them believe that we do not like them and this can stimulate their shame so they can, in their turn, withdraw. We have thus created yet another problem with our behavior which was supposed to solve our problems.

The situations that make us withdraw are different for each of us. It could be a divorce, a lost job, illness, being bullied, beaten up, having failed an exam, caused damage to someone and more. Most often, this is a behavior or a single incident that we think will stamp us socially, in one way or another. Other common reasons are that we want to hide an addiction of any kind, or that we have lost our will to live. Avoiding contact in this way can lead to lost art, poetry and music, since the creators can not stand the thought that others might not like what they have created.

When we are ashamed, it is difficult to feel belonging in relation to others. Only at the moment when we choose to put words to it is there an opening of an opportunity to share this so far shameful experience. To tell what is going on, instead of withdrawing, can
change everything around. We discover that what we were ashamed of is not shameful anymore.

Even a slight feeling of shame can distract us from contact with others. If instead of re-connecting, we withdraw, we become lonely islands - on the surface still socializing, but avoiding shame by hiding important parts of ourselves.

If we accepted and embraced the shame, we would be able to get in touch with important needs. When we do not get in touch with our needs, we have not only lost a great opportunity to grow, but even worse, we have lost connection with the people who could have helped us to get through these challenging situations.

I will again use the story of Anna to show how she could act and think in order to avoid the shame of the café situation. If she were to move in this direction of the compass and withdraw she would probably think something like this, “I do not want to talk about it. I can’t do anything about it anyway, I might as well let it go.”

Anna will do anything to distract herself and escape even the thought of what has happened. To be reminded of the situation creates so much discomfort that she tries not to think about it. If she thinks she might run into some of her old friends, she take detours and makes sure she never passes near the cafe.

Sometimes she catches herself in thoughts such as:

*It was not meant to be.*

*This was never for me.*

*One should not aim too high.*

*It is too difficult to co-operate, I’d rather do things on my own.*

Sometimes the thoughts escalate to:

*I might as well give up, there is no point in trying. Things never end up as you have imagined anyway.*

If Anna had known about the compass of needs, she would have discovered that she had moved in the direction that is about trying to avoid the shameful situation. She would then have become aware that she had lost touch with her feelings and needs and could have
done something to recreate the connection with her and the others. What can she do when she realizes that she has withdrawn, not out of full choice, but in an attempt to avoid shame? She can listen to herself with compassion. She can ask someone to listen to what she is feeling and needing.

The steps below describe a self-empathy process.\(^4\)

1. The first step is to discover how she acted. She makes an observation of her own behavior. 

   \textit{Two months have passed without me having made any attempt to connect with them. I hear myself saying that I might as well give up trying to be part of this project. I hope I never have to see them again.}

2. She connects to what she feels: 

   \textit{I feel terrified and nauseous at the thought of communicating with them about this.}

3. She \textit{allows} the fear, gives it space to really feel it and asks herself what needs she is trying to meet by not communicating with her friends. 

   \textit{The needs I try to meet by withdrawing, shown by the fear, are safety, acceptance and respect.}

4. She asks herself what needs are not being met by avoiding the situation? 

   \textit{My needs for meaning, community, peace, and hope are not being met by avoiding the situation.}

5. She asks herself what strategies she can use to better meet all those needs? (In both points 3 and 4) It may include writing a letter to those involved in the café or to contact them in some other way. The more possibilities Anna realizes that she has to choose from, the more likely it is that she will act, instead of being passive. If she thinks that the only way to meet her needs, for example, is to talk with all her former friends at once, she gets stuck and nothing happens.

\(^4\) Read more about idea of self-empathy, in Chapter three.
6. What requests can she express to herself and others that could support her in what she wants to do? If she has chosen the strategy to withdraw it is important to connect with someone she feels safe enough to talk to in order to break the ice. It can be a great challenge to take that step, but it is usually easier when she has realized why she has withdrawn.

2. Looking for What Is Wrong With Ourselves

In the moments we feel shame, we are extremely vulnerable to people in our environment. One way to try to handle shame is to find something we do not like about ourselves. It is usually easier to put up with criticism from others if we have already belittled ourselves and shown that we also think that we are useless or not as good as them. They cannot get to us because we have already lowered ourselves beneath the level at which they are criticizing us.

When we resort to criticizing ourselves there is a hope (often hidden) that their criticism of us will not be so hard. We show that we are ashamed of what we have done, feel badly about ourselves and maybe even show that we know we are not worthy of their love, so that they will be more lenient. If others still blame us, our own self-criticism has already built up a kind of mental defense that allows us to stand whatever they say to us.

When we use self-criticism as a way of dealing with shame filled situations, we can stay in relationships where we are criticized and even physically harmed by another person. It can be difficult for someone outside the relationship to understand that we put up with this sort of treatment. But when we are so deeply self-critical and have agreed to be treated badly, it is often difficult to believe that there is anyone who really cares. One of the reasons why a person finally breaks with destructive patterns or leaves dangerous relationships is that someone outside the relationship has expressed what they have seen.

Before we get to the self-critical approach we have perhaps tried to withdraw and felt it to be unbearable. We try this strategy instead and
it sometimes becomes even more destructive. In an attempt to limit the pain of experiencing isolation and alienation, we accept relationships where we do not defend ourselves when the other person indicates that there is something wrong with us or that we are not worthy of love. We devalue ourselves in relationships when we assume that we have to make ourselves less than who we are, in order for others to want to be with us. As a boxer who takes a dive in a match because he has been paid to do so, in these relationships it is safer to act inferior. In our society where so much is based on competition, and so many aspire to be winners, we can always find someone who wants to hang out with and be compared with a loser.

When we use the strategy of criticizing ourselves, we feel shame, but at least we are not isolated or alone. We are part of a relationship or some kind of “community” setting and it often feels better than withdrawing. This strategy has consequences for the individual that chooses it, for the context it is a part of, but for society at large as well. If the internal pressure becomes too great and the person who has taken this underdog position can no longer keep their frustration contained, it can have tragic consequences. We’ve seen it in the descriptions of the young people who have been part of so called school shootings in the US, Canada, Germany and Finland. Some of the things that these young people have in common is that they were withdrawn, spent a lot of time alone and did not make much of a fuss - until the day of the shooting. They were not described as aggressive, violent or loud before the incident.5

They have dealt with shame for a long time by using the first two directions of The Compass of Needs. This contributed to their frustration with the world around them, which built up until they couldn’t hold it any longer. Sometimes, this went hand in hand with an interest in guns, war and violent movies. Therefore it is in all of our interests that children and young people get tools for dealing with shame in other ways than by submission or violence.

I have watched with horror that ideas like “shame corners” have been “modernized” on the TV show “Super Nanny” (and others like it) and how these programs have become very popular. Although we in the Swedish school system no longer make use of the shame corner,

5. See for example Michael Moore’s movie “Bowling for Columbine” from 2002
children are sometimes asked to go out of the classroom because the teacher thinks they are disturbing the class. In this way we teach them to deal with shame by being excluded from the community. I understand that the intent behind a teacher who asks a child to go out of the classroom is to contribute to the other children. However, when we punish children’s “mistakes” with strategies such as exclusion, shame, or ridicule, they learn strategies that in the long run may prove to be fatal both to themselves and others.

“*It’s My Fault*”

When Anna discovers that she has chosen to use the strategy that is about attacking and criticizing oneself, she may choose to use self-empathy as a first step to address the situation. In order to find empathy for herself, she begins by observing what she says to herself. Remember, this is only a first step. In order to prevent getting caught in her usual strategy again, she will also need to communicate with others about it.

1. The first step is to observe our thoughts. Anna lets them have free space for a while and listens to what she says to herself about herself. Especially interesting are the moral judgments that she makes about herself and thoughts about what she should or must do. She says to herself that she is boring, complicated, not attractive, and now also a coward who does not do anything about it. She thinks that she should dare to do something about this.

2. The next step is to get in touch with what she is feeling when she criticizes herself:
   
   *When I say to myself that I’m boring ... I feel disappointed and lonely.*

3. The third step is to link her emotions to her needs. Anna’s feelings of disappointment and loneliness can be an expression of her need for understanding, hope, and support.
4. In order to move forward, the fourth step is to ask what she can do to meet those needs. It could be talking to someone she trusts would understand her, writing a letter to the people involved, or bringing a third party as support if she goes to talk with her old friends.

3. Rebellion - Invading the Feeling of Shame

“Don’t give any system the power over you to rebel or submit.”
Marshall Rosenberg

The fact that we found a strategy that helped us in avoiding shame in one situation, does not guarantee that it will work forever or in all situations. Sometimes we are overwhelmed with shame, although we have made every effort to escape it. When our habitual strategies no longer work to get rid of the shame reaction, we will use almost whatever means are available to us.

In the third direction of the compass we try, contrasted with the behavior in the opposite direction, to be noticed at all costs. We are only satisfied if others see us. Here we do the opposite of what we are not allowed to do. We might do things that people have teased us for not daring to do:

WATCH ME!, I’m going to do whatever I feel like!

When we choose to rebel in order to escape shame, others easily miss that we feel shame. Shame is effectively hidden because we do not shy away from resistance, but do exactly what stimulates the shame.

Another way to try to avoid shame is by having grandiose dreams. One way to do this is to magnify the value of a group that we belong to. We can ascribe to a small political group, a neo-Nazi group, or a group that is gathered around spiritual values, for example, a position it actually doesn’t have. We can imagine that we have the solution to all problems and that if others just listened to us and did what we said,

all would work out. We take any means possible to show how superior we are, so that people will understand our full potential and that they cannot manage without us. To rebel in this way is an attempt to use other people’s reactions to strengthen our sense of pride and to drive away the shame.

Other common methods to invade what we feel are: lying, inventing excuses, shifting the focus, or distracting ourselves in some other way. We can also do something challenging or daring, and divert attention from the appalling disgrace. Perhaps the rebellion takes the form of a constant quest for external confirmation of our popularity, fame or prestige, which is at the expense of our inner lives.

Alcohol or other drugs are often used in order to get rid of shame. We use these as a way to chemically diminish emotional intensity or to focus on something else and it usually works, but only until we have sobered up. How many of us have not gotten drunk and done things we would never do in a sober state (because we would have been too embarrassed), and woken up the next morning shamed by our behavior. Now there is the anxiety of yesterday’s actions to deal with as well, making the idea of having contact with the people who were with us the night before threatening.

Some people use sex as a way to demonstrate their freedom from shame. But since sex also easily exposes us and our shortcomings, it can lead us to withdraw again. None of the strategies we use when we rebel against shame work in the long run - if we want to be in close and nurturing relationships with others

We have, as I have suggested earlier, learned a lot about what is good/bad, normal/abnormal, appropriate/inappropriate. When we act with rebellion, we do everything to get away from one polarity that we do not like. If you are afraid to be seen as a stingy person, you will try to compensate by acting to be seen as generous. You pay for everyone’s drinks, you travel and give away expensive gifts, whether you can afford it or not, and hide the concern that this may cause. If you have learned that it is important to be like everybody else, you show how free you are by doing the opposite. You may dress or behave in ways that stand out as much as possible. If you are worried about being called a “coward”, you engage yourself in a dangerous sport. If you have learned the importance of owning and having expensive things
you can rebel by not owning anything at all and of course vice versa.

The problem in invading the feeling and becoming shameless, is that you miss what is in the inner core of shame. You become hard and cold and do things that you regret. Shame is still gnawing in the background, as it has not been transformed, only pushed away. This means that a person who rebel, easily switches into a strategy of either attacking others or himself. As a result she or he can no longer manage to fend off the shame that is eating him or her within.

We all rebel sometimes, but when it becomes our standard way of dealing with shame, we will be constantly on the run, away from others and ourselves. If we want to make another choice rather than to invade our feelings and rebel, it is important to understand that just because you take the opposite position there has not been a change at the core of the problem.

For deep change to happen we first need to get in touch with the feelings and needs behind the rebellion. But first we need to learn to recognize that we are rebelling in an attempt to control and invade our feeling. Let’s see how it might look in Anna’s case.

“I Couldn’t Care Less”

Anna is not communicating with their friends about the situation. Indeed, she has other things to do, such as dreaming of how she could start her own – much better and more amazing - place. It will be a place where everyone wants to be seen and that will attract celebrities. Sometimes she thinks things like, *they will see whom they have been cheating*, but on the outside she pretends like she doesn’t care.

She starts going to parties and wakes up the following day with some remorse for the things she did the night before while drunk. But she brushes it off and thinks that she has the right to have fun and nothing should stand in her way.

When Anna hears of The Compass of Needs she recognizes that she has been rebelling against her feelings of shame. One sign is the thoughts about her own superiority, and when she thinks that she does not need anyone else. How she acts when she is drunk is another
wake-up call. She feels strong and invincible, she needs no one's approval, but she is not very sensitive to the feelings and needs of others.

What can she do if she wants to use NVC to handle what is going on inside her? The following steps explain briefly how she can use NVC after having understood that she has chosen one of the strategies in the compass of needs.

1. The first step is to make an observation of her own behavior after she heard that her friends had started the café. Then she notices what she is thinking in the situations when she acts the way she has observed. It may include: *I'll show them. They will see who they amused themselves with.*

2. She then connects with what she feels when she thinks in this way. Maybe she feels sad and lonely.

3. She asks herself what needs there are behind these feelings. Feelings of sadness or loneliness can help her make contact with what she needs, for example, care and belonging.

4. She asks herself what other strategies she can use to meet those needs? What can she do right now to meet the needs – of, for example, care or meaning? The strategies could also in this case be to talk to someone she trusts will understand her, write a letter to those involved in the café, or connect with them in some other way.

5. What requests could she make of others that could help her do what she came up with in question 4?

What requests might she express to herself that could help her to get her needs met?
4. Looking for What is Wrong With Others

When we do longer want to withdraw or blame ourselves, and alcohol or drugs are no longer numbing the shame, we might turn to the strategy of blaming others. This strategy can range from fairly innocent but sharp comments about others, to our trying to really humiliate and denigrate them. This can eventually lead to bullying, sabotage, physical abuse or assault.

Withdrawing at this point no longer feels okay, as it in itself creates yet more humiliation and the risk of being called a coward or abnormal. The choice to blame ourselves is no longer an option, because we cannot endure another moment of feeling inferior or of attacking ourselves.

The only way to regain our self-respect seems to be to prove that we are more powerful than others. To prove ourselves to be superior, smarter, stronger, bigger, faster and even nastier and more vulgar can be strategies we choose to rise above others. To do this we try to find ways to point out what is wrong with them in every possible way.

It does not really matter how we outshine anyone or how we prove that others are inferior to us. The main thing is to win, come up in rank and become superior. To diminish anyone else can - at least temporarily - provide a relief from our own judgments of ourselves that we are never good enough.

To move in this direction within The Compass of Needs is a bit different from the other three because we so clearly direct our energy outwardly and blame others for what we feel. In the moment when we devalue others and make them inferior, we get a break from the shame, albeit short-lived.

Hierarchies and differences in power between individuals in a group have a great impact on whether this strategy is simple to use or not. Generally one can say that anyone who formally has great power over other people is more likely to succeed with this strategy.

A tragic result of it is that in the US it is estimated that up to 100,000 children refuse to go to school every day because they are afraid of being bullied and vulnerable to someone using this strategy against them. Sarcasm and irony are variations of this strategy. To a friend who is just proudly showing you his new car, you say,

Well, I guess that was all you could afford!
And if your friend responds from the same strategy he or she may say,

_This is coming from you?! who is running around on something that looks like a ride-on mower._

For most of us, there might not be anything deeply insulting in this dialogue, but it clearly reflects where we are going when we use this strategy. We want to win at any cost and in any arena. In escalating this strategy the insults can be paired with vague threats, claims and labels on the other with the purpose of enhancing our own strength. It can be expressed in a humorous tone, but the purpose is to avoid shame. And if someone reacts to it by getting hurt and openly criticizes us for our behavior, we can always turn it off and say,

_I was just joking!” Don’t take everything so seriously, we have to be able to joke with each other!._

This game looks different in different social and cultural groups and people may feel badly by being subjected to this sort of jargon.

Some symptoms of this direction in *The Compass of Needs* are very visible, our tabloids and news reports are usually full of these things, bullying, fighting, vandalism, domestic violence, assault in the street, rape and murder. In Sweden there is a concept known as adult bullying which can also be a consequence of this. In Sweden there are annually about 300 suicides among adults in which the person who died had been subjected to bullying.\(^7\)

Nobody feels good about hurting others. I have heard few who feel genuine pride after having scolded anyone or been in a fight. It may give a temporary satisfaction, but shame over how you have expressed yourself or acted usually catches up with you after a while.

I am absolutely convinced that no one who is connected with him or herself really wants to bully or take advantage of someone else. In painful situations, however, it requires a lot of empathy for someone to get to that inner connection that is needed when we want to take responsibility for our own pain.

Anyone who is connected with him or herself knows the unbeatable joy of contributing to others. We can see the bully as someone

\(^7\) [http://users.utu.fi/inorri/vuxenmobbing.htm](http://users.utu.fi/inorri/vuxenmobbing.htm) 20th September 2009.
who has learned to deal with shame in a way that ultimately does not serve themselves or others. We can use it as a reminder that they are in need of empathy, even if it is a major challenge for us to address them in this way.

“*They Are to Blame!*”

When Anna realizes that she is trying to deal with her shame by finding fault in others she can make use of NVC. She begins by observing her own thoughts. In this direction within the compass, it is useful to pay attention to *should* thoughts. Thoughts that others should have done things differently.

1. Anna lets the thoughts have free space for a while and listens to what she says to herself. She finds these thoughts: *They are selfish cowards who should think more about others. They can not do this to me without being punished!*

2. Then she comes into contact with the needs that are behind these thoughts. The needs in this case might be for respect, support and care.

3. When we are connected to our deepest needs, the anger transforms. Anna’s anger shifts to disappointment and sadness.

4. Anna asks herself what strategies she could use to meet her own needs, without it being at the expense of someone else. She decides to ask a friend to listen to her for a while in order to get more clarity on what is going on within her.

5. What requests could she express to herself and others that could help her meet her needs?

6. A version that also works well in this particular direction is to get in touch with what feelings and needs the other people involved in this situation might have.
Summary

Four Directions

We can summarize the strategies we use when we feel shame into four different types of behavior. These four ways can be combined in many ways. They have different “costs” and they all aim at helping us to escape from shame.

1. We submit, withdraw, become quiet and avoid expressing what we feel, need and want. This can easily lead to depression, despair and apathy. Thoughts which are signs of submission can be:
   - *Nobody wants me anyway.*
   - *I need nothing, I can manage on my own.*
   - *I will not show that...*
   - *I might as well give up; it will not turn out as I was hoping anyhow.*

2. We engage in relationships but criticize ourselves as soon as we get closer to something that can stimulate shame. Our inner critic has free reign to attack and judge us. We show that we are victims, losers, not to be counted on, and we apologize and show that we are ashamed that we are so insufficient. Shame often turns to guilt. Self-critical thoughts often sound similar to those below:
   - *If I could just learn to not be so ...*
   - *I'm not enough ...*
   - *I am such a ...*
   - *Why do I always ...*

3. We rebel against what we perceive as demands or threats to our freedom or lack of respect. In rebellion, we avoid feeling shame by showing that we are independent and free to do as we want. The consequences are that we can easily become cold and mute. We stop giving attention to the needs of others and thus we find it more difficult to satisfy our own needs for care, reciprocity, solidarity and love. Thoughts associated with rebellion could be:
I have come further than that - I do not care ...
I have no problems! If nothing happens soon I will leave.
Look at me and I’ll show you how things should go!
We are not afraid of anything! More people should be like us and the world would look different.

4. We threaten, attack, condemn, criticize, and blame others. Others are to blame when we are angry because and they should act differently. We demand, use sarcasm, irony, argument, and justify ourselves. This leads to anger. Thoughts that are a signs that we have moved in this direction of the compass may be:

*It is your own fault, you must start taking responsibility.*
*They are cowards and too weak to be able to do this.*
*She / he / they / you are too ...*
*She / he / they / you are not enough ...*

Supporting Others in Dealing With Shame

New problems are created every time someone chooses one of the directions in *The Compass of Needs* in order to avoid shame. The different strategies have different consequences. We can damage important personal networks and relationships, contribute to others thinking that there is something wrong with us, or that we do not want to have anything to do with them. We can use force, which can bring about lasting implications on how people trust in us. It may require a lot of time and energy to repair the results of what our choices bring about. In this situation it is obviously helpful to have support from others.

**1. When Someone Chooses to Withdraw**

If someone withdraws or seems to give up on what they need, you can show them that you are interested in staying connected. Checking if you have done something that has influenced him or her to withdraw, can help you to be received as someone who can be trusted. Trusted in this situation is someone who is not actively doing things that increase
the already overwhelming shame.

When we connect with these people it can look as if they do not appreciate it at first. But I have often heard people say what prompted them to break a destructive pattern was that someone else was willing to reach out for them although they had chosen to withdraw. Remember that there are also other reasons besides getting away from shame why someone withdraws. The person may just want peace and quiet, for instance, but it is better to ask what is behind the withdrawal than to assume that you know.

2. When Someone Blames Him or Herself

If someone blames herself, you can address the self-criticism with honesty and empathy. You can listen for the feelings that are behind the judgments and help the person find out what the need are.

If you choose to treat them with honesty you can express the feelings and needs that are stimulated within you, when you heard their self-criticism. If you express appreciation, make sure that the aim is not to try to get them away from how they judge themselves or to calm them down. They can be temporarily calmed by this kind of praise but it works more like a bandage that just hides a wound, rather as a real healing. There is usually no deeper change if someone only hears the assurance that they are ok. The next day, they are often back in the same place. Usually it is empathy they need, not a pep talk or being taken care of.

The self-blaming thoughts carry information about life-serving needs.

3. When Someone Chooses to Rebel

It is valuable here to start any dialogue by paying attention to things that this person actually has accomplished. If you have the ability to express appreciation and for the positive intention you can see behind what they do, it will probably lower their guard a bit. However, do not express appreciation in the form of praise. Don’t express approval, that you think they are good or that they have done something good. This
will probably provide more energy for their rebellion, or lead them to believe that you sympathize with their choices. Instead express what needs of yours were met by something they have done and how it makes you feel. It might be that your needs are met by their effort to do something but not necessarily the outcome of it.

Criticizing them does not create contact, but will rather lead to a stronger reaction from them as they want to prove that they do not need you approval. What you first want to do, is to connect in a way that can help you achieve a shared reality.

After having created a connection with them, you can with respectful sincerity, tell them what you’ve seen that you are feeling distressed, angry or worried about. Tell them how it affects you when you see what they do. If they have difficulty hearing you, respond - if you can - to their reaction with empathy and then move back to honesty again. When we are trying to meet them where they are, it could sound like this:

“When you walked out during the call after saying, `I don’t care about this any more. I wonder if it was because you yearn for more understanding about your choices?"

An expression of honesty could be something such as:

“When I think of what I saw you do last night at the party, I am worried because I want to be assured that you are well. Do you want to tell me how it is for you to hear what I just said?”

Connection with someone who chooses to rebel needs to be built up slowly, step by step. This person will want to end the dialogue if she or he experiences it as an attempt to restrain their - often highly valued - freedom. Behind this reaction is their fear of being confronted with the shame they have tried to run away from for so long.
4. When Someone Chooses to Attack and Blame Others

“We must be the change we want to see.”
M. Gandhi

Remind yourself that no one who is connected with his or her own feelings and needs, will bully anyone else. A person with high self-esteem does not need to attack someone else in order to feel okay. You can respond to the criticism with empathy, and help them get in touch with what they need and find new ways of acting.

Gandhi’s words above describe what I think is the best way to meet someone who attacks us. If you get combative, when someone has chosen to move in this direction of the compass, it can be perceived as an invitation to compete about who is the strongest. Since arguments are often a part of the strategy that the person has taken to avoid shame, it is more constructive to choose another way to relate. When you do that you also show that there are other ways to deal with the situation than by focusing on whom to blame. We can show that it is possible to communicate in other ways. We can show that - instead of hearing judgments – we can listen for the needs they are so desperately trying to meet, with this (tragic) strategy. When they trust that we really want to understand them, they are usually more open to hear what we have to say.

Now I hope that the four directions of the compass are clear and you feel inspired to deal with shame in ways that are more satisfying. The key to getting there is that we get in touch with our needs when we discover that we have acted in any of the four directions.

As a support to understand in which direction you usually move when you feel shame, you can use the exercises on the next page.

From Shame to Vulnerability

Favorite Identities
I want to be perceived as:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Unwanted identities
I do not want to be perceived as:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

What does it mean for me to be perceived in this way?
What do these labels mean to me?
Why are they so undesirable?
What needs could they show me?

Complete the following sentence in relation to your unwanted identities:
If you put a label on me and reduce me to this list of unwanted identities, you miss the opportunity to discover that I am complex and that there is a lot I can do, among other things...
Inspired by an exercise by Brené Brown.\(^9\)

Keep a Diary to Get to Know Shame

Write a diary on your experiences of shame. You can write once a week, or every day to continually learn about your reactions. As you become aware of how you react when you feel shame it is possible for you to change what does not feel satisfying. This diary is the first step in learning to recognize what behaviors you choose to escape shame. You can find examples of situations on the next page.

1. Describe as many situations as possible where you felt shame.
   Rate the intensity of guilt on a scale from 1-10 where 10 represents the highest intensity.

2. Make a list of your reactions by using The Compass of Needs and make observations of what you did when you came in contact with the shame. Often, the reaction - that you acted in any of the directions of The Compass of Needs – can be a clue that shame is involved.

3. Place each reaction in any of the four directions of the compass of needs.

4. Now, or sometime during the day, add thoughts about yourself that were reinforced in the moment of shame.

Examples of Situations for the Dairy

Example A:
I run a third lap around the parking lot and feel uneasy about the continuing search for an empty place. The thought: “I am rejected,” or “This is embarrassing”.

Example B:
You look forward to a booked phone call with a friend, but when you call you reach voice mail. The thought: “Oh, they forgot all about me, I’m not important...they didn’t really want to talk to me I guess”
Example C:
You do not express what you feel in situations where there are many people looking at you. The idea: “I’m shy, this is embarrassing.”

Example D:
Someone says: “Why haven’t you done what you said you would do?”
The thought: “I am criticized.”

Example E:
You are talking about something that interests you. Suddenly the listener’s face is completely indifferent and his or her attention wanders or they change the subject. The thought: “I’m boring, this is humiliating”.

Example F:
You want to leave the restaurant before you have received what you ordered, but cannot find the waitress who took your order. You do not want to tell your friends that you can not remember what the waitress looks like because you think you will be considered a fool. The thought: “I have myself to blame for not being sufficiently attentive, so typical of me.”