

On Loving and Forgiving Yourself

"You do not need to be loved, not at the cost of yourself. The single relationship that is truly central and crucial in a life is the relationship to the self... Of all the people you will know in a lifetime, you are the only one you will never lose."

Jo Courdet, Advice From A Failure

Toxic shame's greatest enemy is the statement I love myself. To say "I love myself can become your most powerful tool in healing the shame that binds you. To truly love yourself will transform your life.

Scott Peck has defined love, "As the will to extend myself for the sake of nurturing my own and another's spiritual growth." This definition sees love as an act of the will. This means that love is a decision. I can choose to love myself, no matter what the past has been and no matter how I feel about myself.

Try this experiment. Imagine you are sitting in your favourite chair. Get really comfortable and relaxed. Now close your eyes and imagine that the person you currently love and respect the most is sitting across from you.

(Don't pick someone you're in emotional pain about.) The person can be a spouse, lover, child, parent, friend, hero, etc. Close your eyes and see that person now. Take three or four minutes . . .

Now get in touch with the feelings you have when you experience that person with you. I felt warm and vitalized and appreciative when I saw my best friend. This is my felt sense of that relationship.

Now close your eyes and see yourself sitting across from you. Stay in the experience three or four minutes . . .

The first time I did this experiment, I felt myself begin to criticize myself. This happens to me occasionally even now when I look at myself in the mirror. Just notice what you felt when you looked at yourself. One person I was working with recently saw her cheeks as too fat, and felt bad about her posture. Most of us have some negative feelings about ourselves. If you're shame-based and

you've done nothing to heal your shame, you will probably feel intense feelings of rejection. The rejection of self is the core of toxic shame.

Accepting Yourself Unconditionally

To counteract these negative feelings about yourself, make a decision to accept yourself unconditionally. You do this by an act of choice.

"I love myself. I will accept myself unconditionally."

Say this out loud and often. What this amounts to is unconditional love.

I can remember vividly the first time I truly accepted and loved myself unconditionally. It was awesome! I later read a book by Gay Hendricks where he talked about the same thing. (See Learning To Love Yourself by Gay Hendricks.) He described how he would confront people in his workshops with the simple statement, "Will you love yourself for that?"

At first when I read the dialogue of one of his therapeutic interventions with a group member, I was taken aback. Surely there are things we do that are unworthy of love. As Gay went on and on, asking the person if he could love himself no matter what he did or didn't do, I realized that our love needs to be for who we are, not for what we do. You are lovable, period.

Remember that toxic shame turns you into a human doing because toxic shame says your being is flawed and defective. If your being is flawed and defective, nothing you do could possibly make you lovable. You can't change who you are.

Understanding the distinction between being and doing is one of the great learnings of my life. I tried so hard to achieve and do better and better. But no matter what I did, I still felt that deep sense of defectiveness that is the mark of internalized shame. Saying "I love myself for whatever. . ." is a powerful counteraction to the voice of shame. Saying "I accept myself unconditionally" can transform our lives.

One of the best successes I ever had therapeutically was dealing with a lady's weight problem. The success came as a result of this exercise. She felt she was 25 pounds overweight. She was contemptuous of her body and put herself down with comparisons and self-labeling. I worked with her for several

months, continually challenging her comparisons and put-downs. I'd ask her, "Will you love and accept yourself for that?"

No matter what she said, I'd challenge her with that statement. Gradually she began to accept herself just as she was. I refused to talk about diets or exercise. I knew that until she accepted herself exactly as she was, she would never change. She couldn't lose weight by continually shaming herself. How can a problem which is organized and motivated by toxic shame be cured by increasing the toxic shame? Every time my client compared herself or put herself down with a negative label, she started a shame spiral. The shame spiral intensified the toxic internalized shame, and that set her up to eat more as a way to mood alter the pain of the shame. So self-labeling and odious comparisons are the way to stay overweight, not the way to lose weight.

In order to heal the shame that binds you, you have to begin with self-acceptance and self-love. Love creates union. When we make the decision to love ourselves unconditionally, we accept ourselves unconditionally. This total self-acceptance creates atonement. We are at one with ourselves. Our full power is available to us because we are not dissipating our power by having to guard our hungry dogs in the basement (our split-off parts).

Choosing to love ourselves is possible, even if we have negative feelings about ourselves.

I have often disliked one of my children, but that didn't mean I stopped loving him or her. If we make the decision to love ourselves unconditionally, we will start feeling differently about ourselves.

As we choose to love ourselves, our self-value will be enhanced. Years ago Sidney Simon and Kirschenbaum wrote a book called Values Clarification. They suggested that a value is not a value unless it has seven factors in it. The seven factors are:

- It must be freely chosen.
- It must be chosen from a consideration of alternatives.
- It must be chosen with clear knowledge of the consequences.
- It must be prized and cherished.
- It must be publically proclaimed. It must be acted on.
- It must be acted on repeatedly.

Choosing to love yourself is a free choice. It is a simple decision. The alternatives are a shame-based lifestyle with disastrous consequences. I'm encouraging you to say, "I love myself," out loud, to proclaim that you love and accept yourself unconditionally. If you act on such a belief repeatedly, you will grow more deeply self-loving and self-valuing.

Giving Yourself Time And Attention

If you decide to love yourself, you will be willing to give yourself time and attention.

Scott Peck's definition of love implies that love is hard work. It involves expansion; it means we have to extend ourselves. To extend yourself requires work.

The work of love involves giving yourself time. How much time do you spend with yourself? Do you take time for proper rest and relaxation or do you drive yourself unmercifully? If you're a "human doing", you drive yourself. You need more and more achievement in order to feel okay about yourself. If you're willing to love and accept yourself unconditionally, you will allow yourself time to just be. You will set aside times when there's nothing you have to do and nowhere you have to go. You will allow yourself solitude, a nourishing time of aloneness. You will take time for hygiene and exercise. You will take time for fun and entertainment. You will take vacations. You will take time to work at your sex life. You will be willing to give yourself pleasure and enjoyment.

The work of love is the work of listening to yourself. You listen to yourself by monitoring your feelings, needs and wants. You need to pay attention to yourself. This may mean learning techniques for getting in touch with your feelings. It may mean joining a share group where you get feedback. The work of paying attention to yourself requires discipline.

Again, as Scott Peck has pointed out, discipline allows us to enhance life's pleasure. If you love yourself, you're willing to delay gratification so that something else more conducive to your growth might take place.

When I was a shame-based drinking addict, I could not even think of delaying gratification. Like most children of trauma and dysfunction I never thought there was going to be enough. I wouldn't delay gratification because my shame-based self didn't trust that I could get anymore.

Discipline demands telling the truth and being responsible for my own life. If I love myself, I will live in reality. I will commit to telling the truth and being responsible. Those behaviors increase my self-esteem. I love those behaviors in others, why wouldn't I love them in myself?

We have a saying in the Recovery Community — "Fake it 'til you make it." Sometime we must just decide to act ourselves into a right way of feeling, rather than trying to wait 'til we feel like changing. This applies to loving yourself. Make the decision. Say it aloud. Act like you love, value and accept yourself unconditionally, and you will begin to feel more self-loving and accepting.

Self-Assertion

Another action and work of love that will enhance your self-love and heal your toxic shame is to become more assertive. Assertiveness is based on self-love and self-valuing. This is different from aggressiveness. Aggressiveness is usually shame-based behavior. To become aggressive is to win at any cost. It often involves shaming another person. Shaming someone else cannot enhance one's self-love.

I consider self-assertion and assertiveness training to be one of the powerful ways to heal the shame that binds you. As the shame internalization process took place in your dysfunctional family, your needs became bound by shame. After a while you no longer knew what you needed. There was no way to learn how to ask for what you wanted. As your dependency needs were violated, you came to believe that you couldn't depend on anyone. You lost all sense of your human rights as an utterly unique and unrepeatable human being.

Assertiveness Training is a way to learn how to get those needs met. In Assertiveness Training you learn how to say no and ask for what you want. You learn to build new physical, emotional, volitional and intellectual boundaries.

Books like, *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* by Manuel Smith, *Do You Say Yes When You Want To Say No?* by Fensterheim, and *Your Perfect Right* by Alberti and Emmons, are all useful ways to learn how to stand your ground and get

your legitimate needs met. The methods presented in these books require practice.

Each of us needs to create his own Bill of Rights. We need to have total permission for our rights. Manuel Smith sets forth the following List of Rights. You may add your own to these.

- You have the right to judge your own behavior, thoughts, emotions, and to take responsibility for their initiation and consequences upon yourself.
- You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your behavior.
- You have the right to judge if you are responsible for judging other people's problems.
- You have the right to change your mind.
- You have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for them.
- You have the right to say, "I don't know."
- You have the right to be independent of the goodwill of others before coping with them.
- You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.
- You have the right to say, "I don't understand."
- You have the right to say, "I don't care."

When I Say No, I Feel Guilty

In loving yourself, think about how you loved that person in the beginning exercise. If someone was hurting him or hassling her, what would you do? If you saw him hurting or shaming himself, what would you do to take care of him? Think of the work and energy you have exerted in loving your children. Will you love yourself the same way? You really are worth it. There has never been anyone like you. Nor will there ever be anyone like you again. You are unique, unrepeatable and of precious worth.

Reframing Mistakes

A shame-based person tries desperately to present a mask to the world that says, "I'm more than human," or "I'm less than human." To be more than human is to never make a mistake. To be less than human is to believe that you are a mistake. Dealing in a healthy manner with our mistakes is crucial for the maintenance of self-love. Reframing our mistakes is a way to handle them.

Reframing, as I'm using the word, means changing your interpretation or point of view. You put a new frame around a picture or an event to change the way you look at it. This new frame will change its meaning for you. Reframing mistakes means learning to think about them in ways that remove their catastrophic qualities. Instead of awful catastrophes, you view your mistakes as natural and valuable components of your life. This is exactly the purpose of your healthy shame. When you are connected with your healthy shame, you know you can and will make mistakes and use your mistakes as occasions for new learnings or as warnings to slow down and look at what you're doing.

Mistakes As Warnings

Mistakes are like the buzzer in your car that warns you of the dangers of driving without a seatbelt. If you get a speeding ticket, it can be a warning to drive more slowly and to concentrate on your driving. Such a mistake could ultimately save your life.

Toxic shame with its mask of perfectionism changes the warning into a moral indictment. You become so preoccupied with defending yourself against the inner critical voices that you miss the opportunity to heed the warning of the mistake. Get into the habit of reframing the mistake as a warning. Focus on the warning, rather than the culpability.

Mistakes As Allowing Spontaneity

To know you can and will make mistakes allows you to live your life with vitality and spontaneity. Healthy shame is a condition of creativity. Knowing you will make mistakes allows you to seek new information and new solutions. It keeps you from believing that you know it all.

The fear of mistakes kills your creativity and spontaneity. You walk on eggs, always afraid to say what you think or feel. McKay and Fanning write,

"If you're never allowed to say the wrong thing, you may never feel enough to say the right thing, to say you love someone or that you hurt or want to give comfort."

Mistakes As Teachers

There is no way you can learn any task or skill without errors. The process of learning has been defined as "successive approximation". Watch children learning to walk. They literally learn to walk by falling down. Each time they fall, they adjust their balance and try again. Each failure creates a successive approximation. Finally they can walk.

Mistakes are a form of feedback. Every error tells us what we need to correct. As we correct each mistake, we get nearer to the behavioral sequence that works best.

As a teacher I know that students who fear making mistakes have trouble learning. They are scared to tackle new material because of the possibility of not understanding it. Such students go on to take the first job they are offered. They often stay in that job for a lifetime. They are too scared to get a new job because they would be faced with new procedures and challenges. They won't get new and advanced training because the inevitable mistakes are just too painful.

Again McKay and Fanning say it beautifully,

"Framing mistakes as necessary feedback for the learning process frees you to relax and focus on your gradual mastery of the new task
Mistakes are information about what works and what doesn't work
They have nothing to do with your worth or intelligence. They are merely steps to a goal."

Common Categories Of Mistakes

There are common categories of mistakes. Ten of the most common are:

1. **Errors of Data.** You write down a phone number as 529-6188 when it was actually 529-6185.

2. **Errors of Judgment.** You decide to buy the cheaper shoes and they lose their form in six months.
3. **White Lies.** You say you're sick and you run into your boss at the grocery store.
4. **Procrastination.** You keep putting off the visit to the dentist. Now it's the weekend and you have a raging toothache.
5. **Forgetfulness.** You go out for a fun shopping trip and forget your money.
6. **Missed Chances.** The gold you decided not to buy at \$48 an ounce is now \$432 an ounce.
7. **Overindulgence.** You ate the whole thing and you're sick all night.
8. **Wasted Energy.** You work on a manuscript entitled *Places In The Heart* and a movie comes out with that exact title. (It happened to me.)
9. **Failure To Reach A Goal.** You're on the summer trip to the beach and you're still fat.
10. **Impatience.** You try to flip the fish over the side of the boat and it spits out the hook.

Many more categories could be added to the list. These are human issues. They are natural to homo sapiens. The common thread running through all of these examples is this. A mistake is always the product of hindsight. McKay and Fanning write,

"A mistake is anything you do that you later, upon reflection, wish you had done differently. This applies to things you didn't do that you later, upon reflection, wish you had done."

Hindsight is what you see so clearly later on. The keyword is "later". It is the later interpretation that turns the action into a mistake. A mistake is a label you apply in retrospect.

At the time you always choose the action that seems most likely to meet your needs. The benefits seem at the time to outweigh the disadvantages. The action in any given moment depends on our awareness. McKay and Fanning define awareness as follows,

"Awareness is the degree of clarity with which you perceive and understand, consciously or unconsciously, all the factors relating to the need at hand."

Mistakes are the result of a later interpretation. Hence, mistakes have nothing to do with self-esteem. If you label your choice "bad" because it was a mistake in the light of later awareness, you end up punishing yourself for actions you couldn't help performing. Better labels for your past mistakes would be "unwise", "not useful" or "ineffective". These terms are a more accurate assessment of your judgment.

Expanding awareness is an obvious corollary to the problem of mistakes. If you are mistake-prone, you might consider expanding your awareness as you approach a course of action. This is the most useful solution. Vowing never to make the same mistake again is not useful because you will make the same mistake again if you do not expand your awareness.

Saying that you have always made the best decisions available to you does not relieve you of being responsible for your mistakes.

Responsibility means accepting the consequences for your actions. There is a consequence for every action. Becoming more responsible means expanding your awareness to be more aware of the consequences of your choices.

As you externalize your shame, your awareness increases. A shame-based person has a very low level of awareness because the blocked and bound emotions bias one's ability to think and be aware. Internalized shame creates a kind of tunnel vision, which in turn narrows awareness and is manifested in distorted thinking. As one heals one's shame through the various externalization processes, awareness increases. You start getting your "brains out of hock".

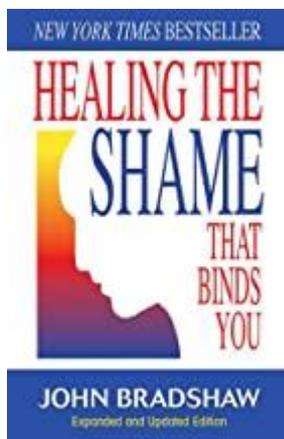
The Habit Of Awareness

McKay and Fanning describe a simple procedure they call "The habit of awareness". They suggest certain questions that you ask yourself when considering the likely consequences, both short- and long-term, of any significant decision you are to make. Here are the questions:

- Have I experienced this situation before?
- What negative consequences came or might be expected to come from the decision I plan to make?
- Are the consequences worth it, given what I expect to gain?
- Do I know any alternative with less negative consequences?

The chief ingredient of the habit of awareness is to make a commitment to yourself. You commit to examining the probable consequences of every significant act that you do. This is a decision to love yourself. It is a decision to take the time to weigh and evaluate the consequences of your choices. After all, your choices are the fabric of your life!

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by [John Bradshaw](#)