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life advice

Don't Let Shame Subvert Your Marriage

Don't let the shame of certain events come between you and your spouse. Use these tips to help come to grips with the situation and move forward.

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Don't slink away into the dark when you feel shame, address the issue head on.

“Healthy shame is a very necessary emotion. It's a response to when you've done something you believe you should not have done.”

For the most part, when we think of shame we think of awful situations like abuse or rape. But shame has a way of showing up in much more subtle ways, which unfortunately, can do considerable damage to your relationship if not promptly dealt with. Here are two examples of how shame can creep up on us, followed by a couple of tips to address your shame head-on.

Situation #1

The family finances are in dire straits. Your spouse lost their job over a year ago, the family savings are negative, and your job isn't covering even the stripped-down suck-it-up family budget. You decide to take the bull by the horns and make something better of your job. Your latest reviews have been glowing, you work for a decent upstanding company, you're sure that you can land either a higher position or a wage promotion. As a matter of fact, you are so certain of the outcome that you've convinced your spouse as well as yourself things are going to be just fine.

There you are, interviewing for the new position or gunning for the promotion. You're nervous

enough as it is, even though you'd convinced yourself and your spouse this would be a cakewalk. Now you're in HR's office and you're not so sure. Then the interviewer asks you something mundane like, "What do you consider to be your weaknesses?" You're dumb struck, not at the question—it's a very ordinary question to be asked during an interview—but at yourself. You forgot to prepare for this one. You remembered to prepare for, "What are your major strengths?" and, "Why do you think you should get this position/promotion?" but you forgot all about the weakness category. There you sit, feeling your face flush hot as you can't think, can't come up with what has to be a good answer and stammer your way through.

The interviewer thanks you politely and sends you on your way. "I blew it!" you say to yourself as you leave, humiliated. "I blew it, and it's all my fault. I should have known that one was coming, I should have prepared for it." And off you slink, riddled with shame. You feel horrible. You've let yourself down, your spouse down—you and your big mouth. And sure enough, life at your house is glum. You can barely look your mate in the eye, and conversation is down to, "Pass the peas, please."

Situation #2

You're at a family gathering. You're having a good time, enjoying your not-too-often-seen relatives and the conversation. You end up drinking a little more beer than you're used to and get involved in a rather heated discussion about gangs. Somewhere in the middle of it you proclaim rather loudly that kids who join gangs are just a bunch of punks and so what if the cops don't always respect their rights.

A dead silence follows your remark, and you suddenly remember your spouse's Aunt Helen lost her son to a police bullet in the confusion of a gang related incident. You feel that all-too-familiar flush engulf your face and wish you could just disappear. You are mortified at your own insensibility at forgetting something that important. Off you slink, riddled with shame.

You and your mate are barely on speaking terms the next day, week or month for that matter, and your marriage begins to suffer for it.

Shame

Shame. Healthy shame is a very necessary emotion. It's a response to when you've done something you believe you should not have done. Healthy shame is a product of your conscience, and as such is valuable. One of the primary distinguishing characteristics between sociopaths (people who can torture and kill without feeling bad about it) and normal people is that sociopaths do not feel shame, and therefore lack remorse.

But what about you? You feel plenty of shame. As a matter of fact you feel so much shame, you'd like to just hide your face forever! Indeed. And therein lies the problem. You see, shame is not supposed to be something you drag around behind you forever, like some sort of moralistic ball and chain, shame is supposed to be a warning mechanism, a way your conscience can poke you and say, "Hey, you messed up here!"

What you *do* with that message is entirely up to you. You're not a child anymore—when your parents dictated what you did in response to that feeling. You're an adult (mercifully) and you get

to decide what to do with it. Dragging your shame around behind you so it can slam into your ankles, trip you up and make you feel like a worthless idiot isn't the most useful approach.

Working Through Shame

Instead, use these tips and respond as follows:

1. Fix the mistake. This sounds so obvious, yet we often fail to do it. If at all possible, correct whatever it was that led to your feeling ashamed in the first place. Write a letter to the interviewer or ask for a second interview, during which you say something like, "I realized I was not well prepared for your question regarding my weaknesses. I'd like to respond to that now." Worst case, the interviewer will say, "No, it's too late." So be it. Use the experience as a reminder to be better prepared for the next interview.

To your spouse, cop to your mistake: "I'm sorry I disappointed you, Hon. I disappointed myself. I apologize." And then ask for your mate's help, "I need to prepare better for this type of interview. What are your thoughts on how I can do that?" Remember, there are two of you as a couple, working together on life's challenges! Shame has no place in that equation.

With your Aunt Helen, just apologize! Take some sensitivity training or drink less in social settings. In other words, take proactive measures so you don't put yourself in such a shame-producing situation again.

2. Forgive yourself. You made a mistake. You're human, it happens. Use shame for the valuable warning device that it is, not something with which to whip yourself into self-imposed martyrhood, with the unfortunate repercussions on your marriage.

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