



INTEGRATE TO LIVE

Restore Resilience. Cultivate Community. Impact your World

Week 15 Transcript: Strategies of Disconnection

This week, we are taking our exploration of shame one step further as we look at our survival strategies around this universal, yet painful experience.

At the root of Shame is the fear of disconnection or a loss of connection. At the core of our survival needs is a sense of worthiness, love and belonging. This is why shame is a powerful threat to our survival. I can live without food, shelter and even a sense of purpose much longer than I can live without connection.

Larry Heller, a leading expert in healing developmental trauma, said that “Shame is not an emotion, it’s a relational experience.” As a young person the threat of shaming gives us the sense of being “outside the group.”

We are designed to live in cooperative societies. If I’m not accepted nor do I belong, then I can’t get my needs met. We go into many different compensation and adaptation patterns to ensure this doesn’t happen.

Shame doesn’t begin as an inside job. We don’t come into the world believing that something is inherently wrong with us. But, in time, we no longer need someone else to shame us. We repeat the stories and tell ourselves the same shame messages over and over again.

In doing this we re-track the well-worn neural circuitry in our brains leading us to re-experience all the uncomfortable sensations, emotions, and behaviors we wish to avoid.

Just like with anger, fear, uncertainty and grief, we develop ways of being to keep us safe from feeling vulnerable. We’ve identified some of our shame triggers and shame messages. Next we’ll look at the way we defend ourselves to disconnect from the painful experience of Shame.



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The researchers from the Stone Center at Wellesley College identified 3 primary Strategies of Disconnection. These are ways we shield ourselves from the pain of shame. It's ironic that in our fear of disconnection, we employ a strategy to disconnect. No wonder this is not leading us in the direction that we desire.

The first strategy is Moving Away. When we feel shame we hide and play small. The defense orientation response in our nervous system this correlates most with is the impulses to flee and freeze.

This is where the phrase, "hang your head in shame" comes from. Our body stance is to collapse, cave in and get small. Internally, we feel much the same. We may pull away, isolate and hide in our own lives.

The second strategy is Moving Toward. When we feel shame we people please, perform and engage in perfectionism. The defense orientation response in our nervous system this correlates most with is the impulse to freeze.

Perfectionism is a self-protective posture that is quite popular in our culture. Doing it all and doing it perfectly. We worship the mythology of perfection. It's not real and it will never be attained. But, instead of recognizing we'll never reach this ideal, when things don't go perfectly we just double up our efforts and try even harder next time.

The third strategy is Moving Against. When we feel shame we fight back and blame. The defense orientation response in our nervous system this correlates most with is the impulse to fight. We put on our gloves and fight shame with shame.

Aggression is a common reaction in people who experience repetitive or chronic social shaming. But, this response drives people away and we often feel shame for shaming others.



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We cultivate our sense of love and belonging through our choices to take risks and to be vulnerable. It's the only way to experience connection. All of these shields are keeping us from being seen and heard. The answer is to practice and develop our resilience to shame and choose a new strategy.

Stay connected as we all put these new concepts into practice and be sure to download the action guide to support your process this week.