

The Surprising Power of Toxic Shame

Michael Hochstetler, Counselor



“I am a terrible person.” “I am such a failure.” “I will never be good enough.” “God could never forgive me.” I have heard such comments often. Many hurting people see themselves as chronically deficient, stupid, or even evil. What have these people done to cause such strong feelings of guilt? When I began counseling, I was amazed at the

reasons people gave. Minor conflict with loved ones, imperfect work performance, or just feeling bad are often enough to touch off a cascade of intense self-criticism. Hearing this over and over has convinced me that many believers struggle with inappropriate guilt—feeling guilty when one has done nothing wrong. Certainly, the opposite problem also exists—denying or minimizing sin. Yet I am amazed at how many believers chastise themselves for minor flaws and imperfections or for things that are not remotely sinful.

Inappropriate guilt is just one symptom of a larger problem—toxic shame. I call it “toxic shame” simply to distinguish from healthy forms of shame. The word *shame* can mean many things: a sense of modesty, or consciousness of (appropriate) guilt, for example. Toxic shame is something else entirely; something that erodes confidence, destroys trust, and undermines our fruitfulness as Christians. Someone once said that while healthy shame is a source of humility, unhealthy shame “gives you a sense of worthlessness...a rupture of the self with the self.” (John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*) No wonder the Psalmist prays, “O Lord, let me not be put to shame.” (Psalm 31:7; 25:2)

Why is toxic shame so damaging, and why is it so important to heal from it? Here are a few reasons:

- **Shame hinders closeness.** Like Adam and Eve in the garden, it makes us want to hide—from loved ones, from ourselves, and from God. It is very hard to

connect with people or fellowship with God while in the throes of unresolved shame.

- **Shame undermines growth.** Growth and fruitfulness require confidence, creativity, and clear thinking. Toxic shame is corrosive of these.
- **Shame causes self-focus.** If I am overcome with toxic shame, the one person I am thinking about is me—what is wrong with me, what others think of me, how to hide. It is impossible to be other-focused while self-shaming.
- **Shame creates obstacles to repentance.** When there are genuine sins to repent of (appropriate guilt), shame tempts us to conceal them. Some find it hard to face the reality of their sin because deep down they see themselves as ugly and unlikeable.

What brings healing from toxic shame? Here are a few things that many believers have found to be helpful.

- Pursuing healing from damaging past events has been a life-line for many people with chronic shame.
- Naming shame. When there is no word for what we are dealing with, it is that much harder to resolve.
- Recognizing inaccurate shaming beliefs and replacing them with biblical truth is an important step forward.
- Separating appropriate from inappropriate guilt reduces the impact of unhealthy shame.
- Pursuing trustworthy relationships can bring greater personal security. God meant for us to know and be known; shame thrives in isolation.
- Bringing painful feelings of shame to God in prayer is healing. For the believer, the power of toxic shame can be broken when we discover that we can be honest about our feelings and find that the God who knows us through and through still loves us.

For further reading, see *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* by Ed Welch and *Released from Shame: Moving Beyond the Pain of the Past* by Sandra Wilson.

Rocky Mt. Men's Retreat Reflections

As I ponder over the events of this past week being in the mountains of Idaho, I can't help but thank God for refreshing and renewing my spirit. We started as 12 men all with our own set of challenges. As we began to share our stories we realized that all of us men have similar struggles that we try to hide. Freedom came for me when I was able to share my struggles with others and ultimately with the Father! Being able to get away from the busyness of life and enjoy God's beautiful creation, not to mention some very good food, was rewarding for my spirit, soul, and body. Thanks to the staff at LCM and Idaho for doing the hard work and allowing it to be an enriching time for me. It's a trip I will always treasure in my heart! -Dallas Troyer

The Retreat was a perfect combination of learning in the group sessions and quiet reflection alone with God. I left the mountains closer to God and more excited to serve Him. The views, mountains, and horses made an incredible time just that much better. The staff did an amazing job of making sure we were well fed and had us all feeling like real cowboys by the time we left! -Lance Hostetler

We witnessed the work of God among us as we shared our broken stories and then saw one life touching the next. Strangers became friends and fellow travelers in just a few days. The conversations, contemplative times of solitude, the beauty and rigor of outdoor living, and the passionate truth telling from our counselor all contributed in meaningful ways to make this retreat memorable and forming. I am grateful for the opportunity afforded me through this experience. I'd recommend it. -JD Miller



Meet the New Staff

Lonita Wise, Counselor



I am grateful for the honor of being a part of the counseling staff here at LCM. As an introduction, I will briefly encapsulate some of the steps that brought me to this place. I am the fifth-born of seven children and grew up on a farm in Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

As a young adult, I began pursuing a nursing degree at Harrisburg Area Community College to become a medical missionary. During my nursing education, I was drawn to the psyche classes and began to consider working towards a degree in counseling. For the next 10-15 years, rather than the doors opening for mission work or more education, I worked as a nurse in a local nursing home and later for a local certified nurse midwife as a birth assistant. In those waiting years, the Lord, who had begun a work in my life as a young teen, continued. The lessons I learned

at the time seemed paradoxical. A favorite quote from *The Valley of Vision, A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, expresses it well: "Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, and the valley is the place of vision."

I envisioned walking with others in the emotional and spiritual healing process. In 2014, I started the 10-course program here at LCM. I began to feel the Lord leading me to pursue further education in counseling, which led me to Cairn University where I earned a master's degree in counseling. For the past year, I have seen clients at Upward Call Counseling Services in Leola. I am grateful for the privilege to be a part of LCM's caring staff who have welcomed me as part of the team and for the opportunity of working among the Anabaptist population.



LETTING GO:

A PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN AT REST

This course offers married women practical biblical tips for life and marriage on how to be happy, respectful wives. This six-week online intensive course involves daily interactive emails, one group Zoom call per week, and journaling homework.

Coaches: Cathie Gingerich and her sister Sharon Kuepfer.

NEXT COURSE DATES:

Oct 10 - Nov 21, 2022 (FULL)

Jan 2 - Feb 13, 2023

Mar 13 - Apr 24, 2023

"I love the course, the fun ideas, and being in a space with other ladies who are growing in the same ways with two wonderfully encouraging coaches. Most of all, I love the results! This is the type of thing I have wanted for a while."

- Class Participant

For more information contact Brenda at the office.

Email: bhershberger@life-ministries.com

Phone: 717-871-0540

In the Valley

Amy Wagler, Counselor

Are there losses in your heart asking to be faced head-on?

A few weeks ago my husband took me away for a week on what we called our "grief trip." We had minimal plans, keeping an open schedule to give space to process. After my brother Matt died from a brain tumor in January, I returned to work quite quickly and experienced some consequences from that. As my counselor told me, "Grief will have its way," meaning it will come out in one way or another. When I don't give my heart the space it needs, my body lets me know – exhaustion, anxiety, stress, muscle tension. We all grieve differently. I'm learning to pay attention and name what I need, because the people around me can't figure it out for me. So I entered this trip with a desire to face my sadness head-on.

Each day I did a variety of activities including journaling memories, writing letters to my brothers, making gratitude lists, and memorizing scripture. The most meaningful exercise for me was drawing significant scenes from the last four years. I am not an artist by any stretch of the imagination but drawing my little stick figure pictures brought up intense emotion. Letting it surface and having the space to write and talk about it felt healing. When I validate my grief, my body naturally releases some of the physical tension it's been holding.

Matt wrote in his tribute to our brother Ian who died three years ago, "I am going to honor you, Ian, by choosing to walk this road of grief with my eyes to the wind. I'm going to cry every tear that comes. I'm going to be present and feel every ounce of pain fully. There will be no shortcuts taken. I want to feel all of this. Every white-hot emotion. You mean too much to me not to." I admire the way Matthew modeled being fully present with his pain, while always coming back to who God is and recognizing we don't see the whole picture.

Although the trip was healing, there are more layers and listening to my body in grief will be a continued process. I don't know where this journey will take me tomorrow, but I know I can trust God who is with me, even through the valley of death.



PRAISE GOD FOR...

- His Holy Spirit that works persistently and deeply at changing us.
- Supplying our needs through our generous donors and prayer warriors.
- Sending us the clients we need to see.
- His abundant spiritual resources!

PRAY FOR...

- Direction for the administration as they look to fill needed positions.
- The board as they direct the ministry.
- God's continued presence and blessing on our facility.
- Physical, spiritual, and emotional strength for our staff.

NIGHT OF MUSIC



October 16th, 2022 at 6:00 PM

Ephrata Business Center - Ephrata, PA

Ten-Course Subjects Offered

- **Core 1, Lab 1**

November 10 - 12, 2022 - FULL

January 12 - 14, 2023 - FULL

March 2 - 4, 2023 - FULL

- **Core 2, Lab 2**

Tentatively planning for April of 2023

Upcoming Events

- **Night of Music** – October 16, 2022; 6:00PM

Ephrata Business Center

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Email: info@life-ministries.com

Website: www.life-ministries.com

Spring Garden Office

5207 Old Philadelphia Pike, Kinzers, PA 17535

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