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Resource Newsletter of

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Shame on Me

Many of us have grown to adulthood with child-based shame thoughts. Our self confidence can be readily undermined when these "little boy" or "little girl" thoughts creep in. These thoughts seem to have a life of their own and frequently are negative or critical.

Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning in, Self Esteem, mention that these negative thoughts originate from an internal "pathological critic". They go on to discuss a number of categories of "cognitive distortions" or exaggerated thoughts.

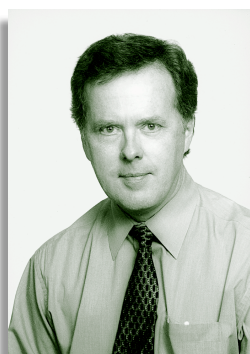
These "tools of the pathological critic" include: overgeneralization, global labelling, filtering, polarized thinking, self blame, personalization, mind reading, control fallacies and emotional reasoning.

We must be in relationship with another person(s) whom we perceive as accepting attuned and responsive.

There are other considerations, however, to help in the battle against self shame and some of them come from the book The Culture of Shame by Andrew Morrison. He makes the point that in order to alleviate shame, "we must be in relationship with a person (or persons) whom we perceive as *accepting, attuned and responsive*."

The affirmation that at least one living person cared (or cares) can make all the difference. When shame

feelings loom large, it can be helpful to reconnect with such a person or memories of them.



Denis Boyd
Registered Psychologist

Morrison goes on to state that the essential quality in the healing of shame is "self acceptance" which needs to be internalized as an antidote to the child-based internalized feelings of shame. Sometimes it takes time to replace the shameful thoughts with self accepting ones.

"We fear rejection and abandonment by others only when we believe we are incompetent and unworthy. As we begin to tolerate our own imperfections and failures, this fear and the secretiveness it spawns both diminish." "An important sign of the alleviation of shame is a greater openness, a new willingness to be observed *as we are* instead of *as we would like to be*."

Shame appears behind masks such as rage or depression. Rage can be a spontaneous response to the sudden appearance of shame; in an attempt to rid ourselves of shame, we attack someone in our environment as its imagined instigator. We expect negativity from others because we project our own negative judgments about our shortcomings onto others. We attribute to others the feelings of self-scorn that were in fact initiated from within.

Morrison states that there is a conundrum or dilemma with regard to self shame: "we seek to deny or dispel shame; yet ultimately the only way to resolve it is to acknowledge and confront the distress and the doubts underlying it." We must risk "self-exposure". This involves taking the chance of revealing feelings, thoughts,

needs, fears, and self-doubts to another person, who accepts rather than ridicules these "soft spots".

Overcoming shame is hard work.

The major step in alleviating shame is to achieve flexibility and thus ease or abandon the quest for perfection.

We need to challenge and expose shame thoughts and accept, nurture and help the self to develop beyond its role as harsh critic. Self-reflection can distinguish now from then, me from other and inner from outer. We need to examine our perfectionistic ideals and modify them to something more realistic.

The challenge is to disengage judgments about performance from judgments about one's self value. The major step in alleviating shame is to achieve flexibility and thus ease or abandon the quest for perfection. To have a need must not, in and of itself, be cause for shame.

Adler summed it up years ago when he stated that the challenge is to have "courage to be imperfect" ■

In This Issue:

Shame on Me	1
Teens on the Internet	2
Fear of Abandonment	3
Have You Hugged Your Kid Today?... 4	

Teens on the Internet

A short time after Jennifer (16) got her own computer, her parents started to notice changes in her behavior. Generally a well-motivated, active teen with good grades, Jennifer now had difficulty getting up for school in the morning. Assignments were being missed, her grades were slipping, she was missing scheduled activities like soccer and band practice and she seemed unusually quiet and withdrawn. When her parents tried to discuss these changes with her, she became defensive and irate and she always seemed to have a reasonable explanation for what she was doing.

Jennifer's parents were aware that she was spending an inordinate amount of time on the computer. She was on it first thing in the morning, immediately after school and the last thing at night.

The Internet has been compared to a large city without a police force.

Often Jennifer was still on the computer when her parents went to bed. Jennifer explained she was using the computer for research and to complete her homework assignments. Whenever they entered her room, however, she seemed to be secretive about her on-line activities. Jennifer would generally react angrily to any such intrusions and would quickly try to hide the screen. Discussions with other parents seemed to confirm that this was typical of some of their children too. Jennifer's parents weren't sure what to do or even if they had anything to be overly concerned about.

Jennifer may be experiencing depression, social problems, drug use, self-esteem issues, or academic difficulties and these should all be considered. What we do know, however, is that Jennifer appears to be obsessed with the Internet. She is exhibiting the classic warning signs of potential Internet addiction: excessive fatigue, academic problems, declining interest in other activities, withdrawal from family and friends, and defensiveness about Internet use. Many parents and, in particular, those with limited computer savvy are at a loss

about how to handle this situation. Some quickly adopt one of two extreme responses: benign neglect or outright banishment. Neither seems to resolve the issue.



Rick Hancock
Registered Psychologist

Teens will use the computer for many things other than schoolwork. At the top of the list is their ability to maintain direct contact with their friends through programs like MSN Messenger. This allows for a great deal of privacy without the worry of being hassled by parents for tying up the phone line. Although many teens appear to spend a lot of time in this activity, most simply enjoy the acceptance and camaraderie that comes with staying socially connected to their friends. Un-

fortunately, some will engage in anonymous and intimate conversations with "virtual" boyfriends and girlfriends in far away countries through open chat rooms. This may be harmless, yet there are stories of teens who do meet with their net contacts and find themselves in awkward or dangerous situations.

Once parents have determined that they need to approach their teen about his or her Internet use, consider some of the following communication strategies:

- Find a good time to talk. This is ideally when they are not on-line. "Before you log-on, I need to talk to you for a few minutes."
- Decide in advance what you want to say. "Jennifer, we miss you spending time with us like before and you seem

so tired and depressed lately." Try not to blame, accuse, or sound critical.

- Listen empathetically and be prepared for a defensive stance. Don't argue.

In addition to how you'll be communicating, consider some of the following ideas:

- If there are two parents, either separated or together, present a common front.
- Set reasonable rules around use of the Internet.
- Make the computer visible while ensuring reasonable privacy.
- Be aware of what activities your teen is engaged in on the Internet without being unduly intrusive.
- Educate yourself and your children about the potential dangers of Internet use.
- Use outside resources as needed.

The Internet has been compared to a large city without a police force. There are exciting adventures as well as dangers. We don't want to deny our children the freedom to exercise personal responsibility but we do want to maintain an open dialogue about the Internet so that it doesn't become an unknown private world. Responsible parents stay informed and have the courage to address problems as they develop. How we handle these issues will determine how safe our children feel to approach us when they too recognize that there is a problem. If you feel this issue is beyond your ability to handle, consult with a professional who is familiar with this topic ■

Reference: Young, Kimberley. (1998) Caught in the Net. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

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Fear of Abandonment

7he fear of being left all alone to cope in a hard and scary world is universal; everyone feels it sometimes. But there are people whose lives are far too controlled by this fear. These insecure ones don't trust their abilities to cope by themselves. While it is fine to be interdependent with others in life, it is important to be one's own person and know where one is going, whether or not there are always people to support you.

If threatened with having to be alone, those whose lives are controlled by fear of abandonment tend to compulsively reach out to find someone, *anyone*, to have around them. They may panic if someone doesn't call back right on time or is late for a meeting. Sometimes these efforts not to be alone can become quite desperate and extreme. The fearful one can become angry, threatening, pleading, blackmailing, all in an effort to lock the other to them. "*You can't leave me.*" Emotional blackmailing may get to the point of including threats such as "I'll hurt or kill myself if you leave."

A person who fears abandonment may also have an attitude that "I must never do anything to bother or upset important people in my life—I must keep them happy to keep myself safe." He or she may offer to do the unpleasant jobs just to bribe the other into staying around—the dishes, taking out the garbage. Sometimes it may involve being the loud, nutty entertainer.

There are those who may always be departing from relationships to avoid rejection. But they immediately start reaching out for someone/anyone new to hold on to. In new friendships, there will be this pattern of exaggerating how much the two have in common, and how they will now always feel and do the same in all things. While that's normal in the honeymoon phase of any relationship, these folks want to stay in that psychologically merged, "perfect" state of union all the time. In this way such people can really play the chameleon, pretending they've always belonged, and always did belong, to some new group or scene. The underlying desperation is usually apparent to others sooner or later.

In relationships this person may always be asking, "Do you love me? Do you really, really, really love me? Promise you'll never leave? Can we do every single thing

together?..." which naturally pushes others away.

Usually such people have lived for a long time with the feeling that they are inwardly emotionally alone, with no one to rely on. They truly have experienced having important people abandoning them at a time when they were still too young and vulnerable; or parents were physically present, but emotionally elsewhere. When the child needed them they weren't around; the caregivers were unable to be strong trees to lean on, usually due to their own emotional inabilities.

People with major abandonment fear generally have a weakened sense of self; they feel more happy, confident and real when someone else is there to prop them up and protect them from the boogeyman. The boogeyman represents their own inner fears and urges: if I'm alone, I won't be able to cope with the emotions that come up, or with outer world challenges. It is too hard to be me and I don't have the supports and resources to make it in this hard world.



Simon Hearn
Registered Psychologist

Therapy is based on the idea that inside that anxious scared person there is a competent, self-supporting person who wants to come out. The goal is not to be coldly self-sufficient, never needing people. The aim is to be your own person and move

The aim is to be your own person and move from needing relationships to wanting relationships.

from needing relationships to wanting relationships. In this way the therapist is always saying, "I think you can do it. You can make that decision on your own. You can cope with your life. You can solve problems using your logical mind and your feelings. You can soothe yourself when you are anxious and alone. You can develop pride and self-respect as someone who contributes to the world." Deep down all of us want to be grown up, balanced and mature; we just don't know how and are sometimes scared. The therapist stands by the pool and encourages, and will catch you if you start to drown, but you have to do your own swimming. ■

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Denis has been counselling couples to healthier marriages for 24 years.

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Cost: \$25.00 (\$40.00 per couple)

(Handouts and refreshments included in the registration) Limited Enrollment

Have You Hugged Your Kid Today?

"Have you hugged your kid today?" We have all seen bumper stickers with this slogan but in this world where touch has often become associated with sexuality, we are sometimes hesitant to initiate touch or even discuss it. However, the power of touching those we hold dear should not be underestimated.

In his book, *Touching: The Human Significance of Skin*, Dr. Ashley Montagu examines the importance of touch on all aspects of human development. Through an analysis of the study of mammal, monkey, ape and human behaviors, he concludes that just as breathing is a basic physical need for these species, touch is a basic behavioral need and when this need remains unsatisfied, abnormal behavior is a likely outcome.

Research has shown that though the need for tactile stimulation exists throughout life, the importance of tactile learning in the child's first two years is critical. For infants, appropriate human body contact is vital for

The sense of touch is important and represents security to a child.

survival. When deprived of it, they may become ill and possibly die, even if all their other needs are adequately met. For it is only through tactile behaviors that dependent infants grow and develop neurologically and socially. Indeed, babies can only become tender, loving, caring human beings if they are tenderly loved and cared for through their earliest years. As Montagu states, by being stroked, caressed, carried, cuddled, comforted and cooed to, by being loved, the child learns to stroke, caress, cuddle, comfort and coo, and to love others. For infants to thrive, they must receive the messages

of security, comfort and pleasure through human skin contact. Unless infants experience assurance and comfort through touch, the satisfaction

they receive from feeding, even when hungry, is compromised. Attachment researchers have found that one cannot spoil or hold an infant too much.

The need for tactile contact begins to decline after the preverbal years but remains nonetheless. What better way to meet this need than with a hug? As someone once said, "A hug holds a universe of silent meaning." A hug is able to express what words

sometimes cannot express about how much we care. Reaching out and holding someone communicates a message of caring. Both the hugger and the person being hugged benefit because they have the immediate positive outcome of feeling good. Hugs are heartwarming and can have the effect of leaving one energized and rejuvenated. A caregiver's hug accurately expresses to a child feelings of love, acceptance, comfort and a desire for closeness. Hugging is health-enhancing because it reduces tension and stress, aids the immune system, helps with sleep, assists in building self-esteem and best of all has no negative side effects. When we open our hearts and arms to others, we inspire them to do likewise. As one 5 year old put it, "Hugs are better than candy." Oh, The Power of a Hug!

The sense of touch is important and represents security to a child. When your child acts up or your teen is resistant, sullen, moody and non-communicative, appropriate physical contact can almost always be used effectively to convey your truly care. As children get older, however, they may become uncomfortable with a parental hug in front of their peers. Thankfully, appropriate and effective touch can come in many forms. A simple hand on the shoulder, a pat on the

head, a fun wrestle with dad, a slight back rub, even playing contact sports and arm-wrestling with your child/teen are all very socially acceptable in the eyes of their friends and communicate "You are valued and worthy of my time and interest."

The paranoia we have of our children falling victim to potential adult child abusers, though justified in some circumstances, has resulted in many of our children receiving limited human touch. However, the fact remains, human touch is a source of comfort to all of us and is a critical element of social behavior. If we must teach our children to avoid the touch of others, then the least we can do is ensure we provide them with ample contact of our own. ■



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