



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

## Getting to know how shame looks and feels

### Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

### Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas about how to recognise and respond to shame and stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see [emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples](https://emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples)

### Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Hopefully you have already had a chance to read our fact sheet [Getting to know where shame comes from](#).

Shame can look and feel like a lot of different things which may be shaped by our age, gender, culture, experiences and how safe we feel from moment to moment. In our families, it can influence the choices we make, how we view ourselves, our relationships with each other and what we see as possible in our lives and our children's lives. Shame is often like a chameleon, changing form and blending in, which can make it hard to spot when it shows up.

Shame can sometimes feel like a helpful force, reminding us of what we believe in or care about. It can have many effects that are neither helpful nor harmful. But in this resource we'll explore some of the harder effects of shame and what it can look like when it shows up in our lives and families.

These are stories from families who have been through tough times. Your experiences may have been different. Hopefully these stories make it possible for you to notice or remember the ways that shame shows up in your family, while sharing ideas for how you can respond when it does.

## Anger, defensiveness or aggression towards others

Sometimes shame takes the form of rage and is directed outwards. This can look like aggression or violence, but it can also look like blaming others and defensiveness, even in our own heads.

'In my older kids it comes out as anger if they're ashamed. And I'd say probably that is a protection thing, a way of protecting their core that they'll immediately come out with an anger that's external and not to do with them. If I say, "Look at the mess you've left on the bench", there could be so many things that she can read into that she thinks I'm saying: you're lazy, you're messy, that you can't look after yourself, you're selfish. And instead of saying, "Oh, OK, I'll clean it up", which an older person might do because they're old enough to work through all those emotions, she'll say, "Oh, well f\*\*\* off. Do it yourself."

## Self-doubt or not being able to speak up

Shame can make us doubt what we know, question our decisions, and distrust our sense of right and wrong. And it can make us feel small – like we need to constantly apologise for taking up space or that we don't deserve to be treated with respect and care – making it hard to speak up when we feel 'less than' or judged by others.

'My daughter has got a lot of anxiety around money. When she goes out and she wants some money to go, she feels ashamed to ask. She gets really anxious about it. She's always apologising when there's no need to, and she apologises for everything.'

'Some of my friends called me a helicopter mum because I respond to my child's need. If my child cries, I pick him up. I was stressed. I know my child is stressed. We went through a very difficult situation. Other people don't know. They keep telling me, "Oh, kids cry." Other people judge me and question that. At that moment I was like, "Oh, maybe I'm not doing the right things?" But some feeling inside me was saying that, "No, your child is traumatised. He doesn't have anyone else. You are there to look after him."

## Isolation, silence, lying or avoidance

Sometimes, isolating ourselves or not sharing openly about difficult experiences we have had can be a way to protect ourselves from shame or keep ourselves safe. But shame can thrive in silence.

Shame can make us feel unworthy of connection and cause us to:

- feel socially isolated
- miss opportunities in life
- push people away; and
- lie about our experiences.

This can make it harder to be close with others and feel a sense of belonging.

'I can see sometimes lying in my child, he just tries to feel like he belongs to the group. Sometimes he doesn't want to mention that his parents are separated.'

'I have had a lot of violence over the years through childhood abuse and family violence and adulthood violence, sexual and other. Over the years I have learnt that my kids need to know why I am the way I am. I'm a good parent now and we have a very good life but for too long I would get into bad situations, I couldn't protect myself or the kids and I struggled with anger outbursts. Now, I have shared with them bits of my story. They know about the hard things and I can talk openly and honestly with them now when they ask. I'm glad I was able to get past the deep shame I had for the things that happened to me and realise that hiding it from those who cared about me was taking away their chance to be a full part of my life and to be a full family.'

Shame can get in the way of having conversations with our children about things we are up against, like money struggles, homelessness or poverty. To learn more check out our fact sheets on:

- [Talking to children about family money struggles](#)
- [Families responding to racism](#)
- [Talking to children about homelessness](#)



TIA, 8 YEARS OLD

## Distress, powerlessness or self-harm

Shame can show up as a critical voice in our own head, constantly reinforcing negative or abusive messages we have heard. These messages may come from others or from society which (at its loudest and most relentless) can contribute to many forms of mental distress. In the following stories, families share how negative messages from society lead them to feel shame.

### Content warning

The next story talks about self-harm. If reading about this brings up any difficult feelings for you, please reach out to your networks or a crisis and support service: [emergingminds.com.au/help](http://emergingminds.com.au/help)

### Feeling deserving of pain

'I would feel ashamed of myself after I had had a meltdown. I would sit in my room and not interact with the rest of the family because I was too embarrassed. I would be like this for days at a time, this often resulted in me self-harming. I would sit in my room alone and cut myself. I felt like I deserved to be in pain.'

### Feeling like a bad father

'My dad was the main provider and I feel like I'm letting the family down cause I'm not able to do that for my family. But I just can't, I just don't have the physical capacity to do it and the mental capacity to do it, otherwise I'd be out there doing it. If I could be healthy and could work full time, maybe we wouldn't be in such a bad situation. I feel ashamed, embarrassed ... all these feelings. Makes me feel like I'm inadequate and I'm not doing a good job. But I am, because I'm trying my best.'

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Supporting children when you're struggling with money](#).*

### Physical effects

Shame can have a big effect on our bodies in the moment when it shows up and can even contribute to sickness, pain and health challenges in the long term.

'It's like a throb, a visceral experience. You do anything to avoid it. As a parent, when you can't protect [your children from shame and stigma], it's like watching something come at you and not being able to move. It's the worst feeling.'

'I was so ashamed of how I was handling my role as a parent with an addiction that it made me physically sick. I would get this feeling in my stomach, it was nausea, sometimes it even made me throw up.'

'When I feel shame, it can lead to depression and then it leads to a feeling of lethargy. Also, when I feel shame I don't feel like eating and sometimes I lose sleep over things.'

### Take a moment to think about ...



- Do any of these stories stand out to you?
- What effects of shame has your family experienced?
- What makes it more possible to see and respond to shame?
- Who or what supports you and your family to reduce the harmful effects of shame?

## Responding to shame

It can be confronting to look closely at shame and notice how much it can show up in our lives, families and communities.

If reading these stories has prompted shame to show up in your body, trying a [grounding exercise](#) or puffer fish breathing ([youtu.be/gLbKOo9Bk7Q](https://youtu.be/gLbKOo9Bk7Q)) might be useful. You can do these by yourself or with your children.

Remember, **families are always responding to the effects of shame** in big and small ways, fighting for what matters to them, reclaiming dignity and holding onto connection.

Next, you might like to explore:

- our [Families standing up to shame and stigma](#) fact sheet
- [All our Connection and belonging resources](#)
- [All our Money, housing and health resources](#)

## Recommended resources on stigma

- [An interview with Shame](#) is an Emerging Minds podcast about the many roles shame can play in a child's life.
- The article *Shame: Definition, causes and tips* talks about the science of shame to help people understand where it comes from some ideas for things that might help lessen its impact:  
[www.berkeleywellbeing.com/shame.html](http://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/shame.html)
- Brene Brown talks about shame and how vulnerability and empathy might be a way out of shame in this TED Talk:  
[youtu.be/5C6UELitWkw](https://youtu.be/5C6UELitWkw)

## Stories of lived experience

The best way to learn about the many ways that people experience and respond to shame across culture and experience is through stories:

- *We try not to take people's hate into our hearts* (an article on [dulwichcentre.com.au](http://dulwichcentre.com.au))
- Diverse LGBTIQ stories where pride and shame are not straight forward on the *One foot in* podcast: [linktr.ee/Onefootin](http://linktr.ee/Onefootin)
- *Philosophies that carry young people with disabilities through hard times* (an article on [dulwichcentre.com.au](http://dulwichcentre.com.au))
- [We've got this: Parenting with a disability](#) on abc.net.au's *Life Matters* podcast
- Challenges around pregnancy, birth and mothering, including shame, on the *Mum Drum* podcast: [www.cope.org.au/mumdrum](http://www.cope.org.au/mumdrum)

See if you can find these titles from the *Growing up ... in Australia* series at the library:

- *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia*
- *Growing up Asian in Australia*
- *Growing up African in Australia*
- *Growing up disabled in Australia*
- *Growing up queer in Australia*

([blackincbooks.com.au/series/growing-series](http://blackincbooks.com.au/series/growing-series))

## Resources for children

There are also many fantastic children's books about different experiences of shame and stigma that you can borrow from your local library (or ask them to add to their collections if they are unavailable).

- The Refugee Council of Australia has a list of picture books under 'Resources': [refugeecouncil.org.au](https://refugeecouncil.org.au)
- [ImaginationSoup.net](https://www.imaginationsoup.net) has a list of children's books about poverty and homelessness
- The Rainbow Owl has books for all ages with gender diverse characters: [the-rainbow-owl.com](https://the-rainbow-owl.com)
- Little Parachutes has childrens books for all situations including about feeling different: [littleparachutes.com](https://littleparachutes.com)

AVAILABLE HERE

**View all Shame and stigma resources**



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: [emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma](https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma)

## Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit [emergingminds.com.au/families](https://emergingminds.com.au/families)

Or you can follow us on social media or our podcast channel:

 [instagram.com/emergingmindsau](https://www.instagram.com/emergingmindsau)

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 [emergingminds.com.au/families/podcasts](https://emergingminds.com.au/families/podcasts)