



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Getting to know where shame comes from

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

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.

We talked to families who have been through tough times about what shame means to them. They shared some of their stories in the hopes of helping other families experiencing shame to know they are not alone and to remind them of the ways they can and already do respond to shame.

In this resource we will take a look at:

- what shame is; and
- where it can come from.

You may also be interested in checking out our fact sheets on:

- different kinds of stigma in [Unmasking stigma: Types of stigma](#)
- the impact of stigma in [Unmasking stigma: Effects of stigma on families](#)
- how to face stigma in [Standing against stigma](#)
- ways to respond to stigma in [Families standing up to shame and stigma](#).

What is shame and where does it come from?

Shame can be a hard feeling to make sense of.

- Where does it come from?
- What does it look like?
- Is it harmful, helpful or both?

Shame can mean many different things depending on our culture and our histories.

It can be:

- a feeling in the moment
- an all-consuming experience that shapes our sense of who we are and how we interact with the world
- something we experience individually, as a whole family or as a community.

And it can be many things in between.

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As a child, you're just constantly analysing how you're supposed to look and how you're supposed to be. So when you get somebody shaming you for doing something specific, you learn that immediately and think, 'OK, I need to adjust myself to make sure that doesn't happen again.' Because you can feel the embarrassment and it's just too much of an intense emotion that you will avoid being in a situation to feel that again.

KC, YOUNG PERSON FROM A RURAL AREA

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It's an intense feeling of unworthiness, embedded in who you are. An identity. As a parent, a big part of my existence was about protecting the kids from feeling that. Either from my husband's behaviour [related to mental distress] and also from poverty.

Shame can come from:

- guilt and regret
- social norms, stigma and discrimination
- violence and abuse.

Shame, guilt and regret

For some of us, shame feels different from guilt or regret. Where guilt and regret might have us feeling bad about something we have done, shame is felt when we believe we are 'bad'. Shame often leads to feelings of discomfort, embarrassment or an aching in your body that is not caused by our own actions but by the actions of others towards us. Shame can trick us into believing that there is something wrong with us.

For others, it feels like shame and guilt or regret overlap. We can feel ashamed of things we have done, of causing harm. And shame can feel like a useful force that alerts us to what we care about and motivates us to take action, change and repair harm.

Read some reflections on shame, guilt and regret, and how it motivated people to change.

Treating shame and guilt differently

'In my early days of recovery from alcohol and drugs I had a lot of guilt and shame about my past and the things that had happened when I was in addiction. I really had to try and separate what was mine and what was others, and also separate these two powerful feelings because they both needed to be treated differently.'

Shame helped me reframe how I parented

'For a long time, I smacked my children. I didn't have any good knowledge about parenting to parent differently. And I thought that if they were really "bad" that was the only thing I could do. I had a lot of shame over this as time went on. And that shame did kind of help me reframe how I parented and alerted me to the fact that this is not a good way to parent.'



ARCHER, 9 YEARS OLD

Regret helps us learn and serves a purpose

'I have the same feelings about smacking my kids but I call those feelings regret. Regret makes us learn and serves a purpose. I didn't feel like I was a bad person for doing it, I realised I was wrong for doing it.'

Each of these words – shame, guilt, regret – may mean different things to each of us. These resources are mostly focused on harmful experiences and effects of shame but it is important to remember that **shame can be more complicated than good or bad.**

Community ideas, stigma and discrimination

Shame can often come from community ideas or thinking about what is considered right/wrong or good/bad in families and communities. These ideas are then passed down from generation to generation, often in the form of stigma and discrimination. Comparison, competition, expectations and pressure can feed these shame-causing attitudes. They especially effect those of us who experience racism, poverty and homelessness, or whose bodies, brains and ways of living are considered 'different' or not 'normal'.

Read the following stories on how community ideas about what is 'normal' can lead to feelings of shame.

Feeling ashamed and powerless to help

'When my kids were young, their mum struggled with self-harm as a way to manage her distress. The kids love their mum so much and found it hard that they didn't know how to help her. They just wanted our family to be normal and they felt a deep sense of shame that we were not.'

Being reprimanded for stepping outside of 'normal'

'Not being "normal", being told constantly that you are different to everybody else and that you need to blend in as best as possible so that nobody notices that you're "not normal". When you step out of that normal and what you're supposed to be, and then you get reprimanded for that – whether it's in the form of being bullied at school or your parent telling you to "shush" while out in public making a scene or things like that – that's what creates it. Sometimes you will have parents that want to understand but don't know *how* to understand. And for a child who's already trying to work out their own situation, to also have to educate the adult is so difficult and hard to navigate. And you can see that they're not trying to be stigmatising, but that's just how they were brought up.'

– KC, young person from a rural area

Children living in two cultures

‘My mother is from a Muslim country and she came to visit us in Australia. She wears a hijab to cover herself. We went to the beach as a family and because of her culture and beliefs she wore her hijab swimming. My son, myself and my mother all felt ashamed. We stood out and were different. People were there in bikinis and we looked different and we could see people looking at us and judging us. My son is living in two cultures and sometimes it is really hard for him not to feel ashamed. But we are determined that the shame will not destroy our foundations and our beliefs.’

Trying to fit in and not be noticed as ‘the poor kid’

‘I had to go to a high school that was well out of my area and lots of kids who went there came from wealthy families that lived in the hills. I was from a Housing Trust area and poor. My mum couldn’t afford to buy a uniform for me, so I used to wear clothes that were the same colour as the uniform instead. This just made it more apparent that I was poor, and the other kids would tease me about my clothes. One day I went through the lost property box and took a shirt and a jumper that were part of the uniform and started wearing them to school. I did this to fit in, to not be noticed as the poor kid. The irony was that I was pretty much stealing to do so. I was ashamed of being poor, but I had no legitimate way to compensate.’

– Renee, reflecting on her childhood, Kurna Country

When stigma and shame stop us from getting help

‘When I first became addicted to hard drugs I was in a relationship and my ex was using. My kids were varying ages from young to adult. My ex left when things got bad (and when the money ran out and we were going to be homeless) and all of a sudden I found myself single parenting with a habit, no money, scary people who knew me and no supports. Anyone who had been in my life had dropped me.’

‘The drugs really cemented for me what I had felt about myself for so long – I was an outsider, I was unpleasant and no good. I’d experienced a lot of stigma over my life because I’m a bit different – I have disabilities and am alternative and queer. So the drugs just reaffirmed for me all the stigma I had experienced.’

‘When I saw the full extent of what had happened – I was now an addict, I was scared and I couldn’t parent my children properly, the guilt and shame was huge. It stopped me getting help. It was crushing. Eventually I got help for the domestic violence and in that process the drug addiction came out. I’m so glad it did because that was the first step, as hard as it was, to getting through it.’

‘I’ve been clean and sober many years now and that experience showed me that stigma can do much more damage than just in the moment, it can morph into shame and that can influence so many more areas of your life.’

To learn more about stigma, check out our fact sheets on [Unmasking stigma: Types of stigma](#) and [Unmasking stigma: Effects on families](#).

Violence and abuse

Abuse, violence, neglect and bullying in families, workplaces and communities can all create and exacerbate shame, and in many cases these effects can have long term impacts. Read the following stories to learn about some of these impacts.

Content warning

The following stories include references to emotional abuse in families. If reading these brings up any difficult feelings, please seek help from your networks, or reach out to a crisis or support service:

emergingminds.com.au/help

Intergenerational harm

‘There was a lot of intergenerational abuse going on in my home. It didn’t matter what my sister and I did, nothing’s good enough. My mother always makes us feel ashamed: “Why can’t you be like your cousin, who’s done this?”, “Why don’t you get a job that makes more money?” Being told you’re a failure, being told there’s something wrong with you. When I came out [as transgender], there was the whole shame around that which was huge, or not being able to parent when I was unwell and feeling the shame around that because I felt like I was letting everyone down ... it’s continued to affect me throughout my life.’

Shame as a form of control

‘A lot of perpetrators of abuse use shame as a form of control because it takes away the self-esteem. It’s really the ultimate form of control, isn’t it? Because shame operates on something so intangible, which is your own sense of self. It’s not to do with material things that can be replaced. If you lose something, you can buy it again, essentially. But if it’s something within the core of your self-belief, that’s much, much harder to regain.’

Read more about shame and guilt, including shame as a form of emotional abuse on The Survivor’s Trust website:

tstresources.org/shame-and-guilt



Why is it helpful for parents to understand shame?

When parents grasp the impact of shame on child and family wellbeing, it can make it easier to create an environment where feelings of shame are met with understanding and support, rather than judgement. This can help children feel valued, cared for and listened to which contributes to their overall wellbeing. Learning more about shame and where it comes from can also help families to find ways to connect or reconnect if stigma is impacting on our relationships with each other, or with our communities.

Next, you might like to read a bit more about what shame can look like when it shows up in families in our fact sheet [Getting to know how shame looks and feels](#).

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
- Brene Brown talks about shame and how vulnerability and empathy might be a way out of shame in this TED Talk: 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)
- Diverse LGBTIQ stories where pride and shame are not straight forward on the *One foot in* podcast: linktr.ee/Onefootin
- *Philosophies that carry young people with disabilities through hard times* (an article on 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

Shame is a chameleon

Sometimes it is possible to identify where a particular kind of shame comes from. But other times it is a chameleon, changing shape and colour to blend in with the environment and seem less obvious. Shame can be a confusing, mutating, blobby sense of 'not-good-enough', failure, self-doubt or unworthiness that is hard to pin down.

Take a moment to think about ...



- What stands out to you from these descriptions of shame?
- Perhaps your experience is different – what does shame mean to you?
- What, if anything, feels useful about shame for you?
- What kinds of effects does shame have on your family?

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)

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
- 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
- Little Parachutes has children's books for all situations including about feeling or being different: 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

Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit emergingminds.com.au/families

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