



SafeHouse
a modern approach to recovery

You can listen to all SafeHouse Podcasts at:

<https://safehouserehab.com/safehouse-podcasts/>



Season 05. Episode 07

Podcast Title: It's a Shame

Hi, this this is Bruno J. and welcome to Episode 7 of season 5 of my podcast Busting Addiction and its Myths.

This podcast is sponsored by SafeHouse Rehab Thailand, a premiere drug and alcohol rehab dedicated to enhancing the art and science of recovery.

First, a plug for my sponsor who has given me the opportunity to help the families and loved ones of alcoholics and addicts better understand the nature of the disease and what they can and shouldn't do about it. We say in our podcast and blog that our primary goal is to help you make an informed decision at this critical stage of your life.

SafeHouse Rehab Thailand represents the *modern approach to recovery*, founded on Safety, which is why we absolutely outperform

traditional rehabs when it comes to intake/detox, technology and aftercare.

I chose to make this episode about shame after I realised the topic needed separate treatment because of its central role in denial, secrecy and low self-esteem in the context of addictive relationships.

In his superb best-selling book, Healing the Shame That Binds You, John Bradshaw talks about the destructive power of *toxic shame*, which shows up in many families who happen to have an alcoholic or addict in their midst.

That does not mean that other types of families or people do not also experience toxic shame. The author also explains the difference between toxic and healthy shame, because that does exist too and is a useful emotion in helping us adjust our behaviour to the good. (Much of what follows is derived from John Bradshaw's writings. I have added my perspective as appropriate.)

Toxic shame, the shame that binds us, is experienced as the all-pervasive sense that "I am flawed and defective as a human being."

Toxic shame is no longer an emotion that signals our limits as does healthy shame; it is a state of being, a core identity.

How does this happen? I have spoken to many a spouse of an addict who felt such shame for so long over her loved one's addiction, who twisted herself into knots to try to control her husband's drinking, thievery, infidelity and lies, that she ultimately became convinced that there was something truly wrong with *her*.

She may have gone into her marriage as a "normal" person, unencumbered by fear, self-pity or regret, and now she is owned by toxic shame years later.

Toxic shame gives you sense of worthlessness, a sense of failing and falling short as a human being. Toxic shame is a rupture of the self with the self.

When I first described it this way to a lovely woman, I know who struggles with self-worth as a result of her unsuccessful attempts to sober up her mother, she broke down and cried like a baby. "That's exactly what I think of myself all the time all day long" she stated between tears. "I never heard it explained that way before, that's all. It goes way beyond self-worth, right? Low self-worth is just a symptom of toxic shame!"

Bradshaw says that toxic shame is so excruciating because it is the painful exposure of the perceived failure of self to the self. In toxic shame, the *self becomes an object of its own contempt*, an object that can't be trusted.

As an object that cannot be trusted, one experiences oneself as untrustworthy.

This is what I used to - repeat used to - feel like in the depths of my despair and nearing the bottom of my drinking and drug use. I had become so ashamed of the things I had done while in the depths of my disease, the lying and stealing and hurtful behaviour, that *I could not trust myself to do the normal thing*. Toxic shame had taken me over. I had become indeed a useless human being.

Let me digress a moment to share some insight from a well-known recovery program. One of the so-called twelve promises states: "That feeling of self-pity and uselessness will disappear." That feeling of uselessness defines a life of shame.

Toxic shame is experienced as an inner torment. Toxic shame is paradoxical and self-generating.

People readily admit guilt, hurt or fear before they will admit shame. Toxic shame is the feeling of being isolated and alone in a complete sense.

Ordinary shame, if there is such a thing, plays a role in many aspects of society.

That is why wives of active alcoholics will never let the neighbours' kids over to the house to play; that's why they will never open up about what is really happening at home. What others think of her and her family pre-occupies her every hour. Others knowing, she is living in an alcoholic household would be a shameful thing.

"Saving face", commonly associated with Asian culture, is a powerful force in preventing shame from being visited upon an individual, or upon the entire family.

"Bringing shame upon the family" is also recognised as an all-mighty deterrent to behaviour that would damage the family's standing in the community.

Experiencing shame does indeed serve to isolate the person from others. Toxic shame does that in a more extreme way because it does not rely on an external event to trigger it. It exists inside of suffering and sick individuals as a matter of their daily existence.

It is typically born of being subjected to shaming by parents who use shame as a means of control. They themselves may have been subjected to extreme shaming as children and therefore pass this learned behaviour on to their children.

If their existence, however, is defined by living with an addict for a long period, or even as addicts themselves, then we could call their state of shame *acquired toxic shame*. That feeling of uselessness and low self-worth is with them 24/7. They don't just feel guilt for what they might have or might not have done, *they feel shame for who they have become*.

Shame is the emotion that has us keep secrets. It is said in recovery that "You're only as sick as the secrets that you keep". Keeping secrets takes a lot of effort. We are compelled to lie, to deny, to be on guard so that the "secret" never gets out, God forbid.

My counsellor years ago told me that once you shine a light on it, the secret loses its power. I never thought that a secret had power, had a life of its own, but when you think about it, it must have power if I spend so much energy keeping it inside the box.

The odd thing, too, is that many things which seem so shameful to one person are nothing to be ashamed about to others.

The wisdom of 12-step programs is such that we all recognise the role of shame in keeping us isolated for one another. That's why we have certain Steps designed to address shame and guilt and remorse, always in confidence with the help of an understanding and trustworthy person, such as a sponsor. The Steps that address disclosure and making amends to those we have harmed are key to our healing.

It must also be underlined that the things we did when we were in the grips of addiction - this does include non-using family members as well as the addict himself - are explained by the fact that we were dominated by a powerful disorder which had us doing many things that violated our own values in a compulsive, non-thinking way.

But that only helps explain why we did what we did. It does not in any way excuse our behaviour. We must hold ourselves accountable if we want to have any chance of a guilt and shame-free life.

The guilt and shame begin to dissipate when we began to regain our self-respect as a consequence of living in an honest and compassionate, self-caring way. This philosophy applies equally to loved ones and recovering addicts and alcoholics, for addiction is an equal-opportunity disease.

For those who have a more permanent sense of shame, as in toxic shame, not the acquired shame I spoke of earlier, there is hope.

The first step is awareness that you have been living with toxic shame and didn't know it. Low self-esteem and a feeling of emptiness might be a symptom of the deeper problem.

This is not intended as a glib answer to all your problems associated with toxic shame, as the wounds inflicted on your soul will take patience, effort, and love. Therapy, ideally with an addiction's psychiatrist or a clinician in the field, is a necessary step for you to begin your journey into the light.

So, whether or not your loved gets clean and sober, *or not*, you owe it to yourself to seek liberation from addictive disease, if only one day at a time.

What did we learn about shame today?

1. Families who have an active addict in their midst invariably experience shame, and as a consequence, are compelled to keep that fact secret.
2. Secrecy requires great effort to maintain. Lying, denial, and covert behaviour take their toll.
3. Toxic shame can be acquired over time when the family member's self-worth collapses under the weight of trying to fix the unfixable.
4. Many of the crazy things we did (as addicts or as family) that caused shame are explained by being in the grip of a powerful disorder, but that fact does not excuse anything. We still need to be held accountable.
5. There is great and realistic hope for the regaining of one's self-respect when the suffering family member acknowledges powerlessness over another's addiction and begins her own journey of recovery.