

INTRODUCTION

“Mine has been a life of much shame. I can’t even guess what it must be to live the life of a human being.”

Osamu Dazai
No Longer Human

If you were a victim of childhood abuse or neglect you know about shame. You have likely been plagued by it all your life. You may feel shame because you blame yourself for the abuse itself (“My father wouldn’t have hit me if I would have minded him”), or because you felt such humiliation at having been abused (“I feel like such a wimp for not defending myself”). While those who were sexually abused tend to suffer from the most shame, those who suffered from physical, verbal or emotional abuse blame themselves as well. In the case of child sexual abuse, no matter how many times you have heard these words, “It’s not your fault,” the chances are high that you still blame yourself for the abuse in some way. You may blame yourself for being submissive, for not telling someone and having the abuse continue, you may blame yourself for “enticing” the abuser with your behavior or your dress, or you may blame yourself because you felt some physical pleasure.

In the case of physical, verbal and emotional abuse, you may blame yourself for “not listening” and thus making your parent or other caretaker so angry that he or she yelled at you or hit you. Children tend to blame the neglect and abuse they experience on themselves, in essence saying to themselves, “My mother is treating me like this because I’ve been bad” or “I am being neglected because I am unlovable.” As an adult you may have continued this kind of rationalization, putting up with poor treatment from friends, relatives and romantic partners because you believe you brought the mistreatment on yourself. Conversely, when good things happen to you you may actually become uncomfortable. You feel so unworthy that you cannot take the good in.

In addition to blaming yourself for the abuse itself, you may have a great deal of shame due to the exposure of the abuse. If you reported the abuse to someone, you may blame yourself for the consequences of your outcry—your parents divorcing, your molester going to jail, the humiliation of your family going to court.

And then there is the shame you may feel about your behavior as a consequence of the abuse. Victims of childhood abuse tend to feel a great deal of shame for things they did as a child as a result of the abuse. For example, unable to express your anger at your abuser, you may have taken your hurt and anger out on those who were smaller or weaker than you, such as younger siblings. You may have become a bully at school, you may have become angry and belligerent toward authority figures, or you may have started stealing, taking drugs, or otherwise acting out against society. In the case of sexual abuse, you may have continued the cycle of abuse by introducing younger children to sex.

You may especially feel shame because of things you have done as an adult to hurt yourself and others, such as abusing alcohol or drugs, becoming sexually promiscuous, or breaking the law. You may have pushed those away who tried to be good to you, become emotionally or physically abusive to your partners, or continued a pattern of being abused and thus subjecting your own children to witnessing abuse, or worst yet, being abused themselves. You may have repeated the cycle of abuse by emotionally, physically, or sexually abusing your own children or you may have abandoned your children because you couldn't take care of them.

It's Not Your Fault will address all these types of shame and will help you to understand yourself and your behavior better so that you can forgive yourself and rid yourself of the shame that has no doubt crippled you in many ways. The truth is, the shame you experienced is likely one of, if not the worst effects of the abuse or neglect you suffered as a child. Unless you heal this debilitating shame you will likely continue to suffer from a multitude of problems in your life.

How Shame Affects Victims of Abuse

If you were a victim of childhood abuse or neglect shame can affect literally every aspect of your life: your self-confidence and self-esteem; your body image; your ability to relate to others; your intimate relationships; your ability to be a good parent; your work performance and your ability to be successful. Shame is responsible for a myriad of problems, including but not limited to:

- Self-criticism and self-blame;
- Self-neglect;

- Self-destructive behaviors (abusing your body with food, alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, self-mutilation, being accident-prone);
- Self-sabotaging behavior (starting fights with loved ones, sabotaging jobs);
- Perfectionism;
- The belief that you do not deserve good things;
- “People-pleasing” behaviors;
- Intense rage (frequent physical fights, road rage);
- Acting out against society (breaking the rules, breaking the law);
- And most important, continuing to repeat the cycle of abuse through either victim behavior or abusive behavior.

Typically, victims of child abuse are changed by the experience, not only because they were traumatized, but because of the loss of innocence they feel and the amount of shame they carry from that day forward. Emotional, physical and sexual child abuse can cause a victim to become so overwhelmed with shame that it can actually come to define the person and prevent her from reaching her full potential. It can cause someone to remain fixated at the age she was at the time of the victimization and it can motivate a person to repeat the abuse over and over in her lifetime.

How Shame Contributes to the Cycle of Abuse

Shame is at the core of every form of abuse and is a key factor in the behavior of both abusers and victims. Shame plays a significant role in the cycle of abuse in the following ways:

- It is often shame that prevents victims from believing they deserve to be treated with love, kindness and respect and thus they tend to stay in abusive relationships far too long.
- It is shame that causes an adult to believe he or she deserves to be treated with disrespect and disdain.
- It is shame that causes a person to humiliate and degrade his or her partner or children.
- Those who abuse others are often trying to rid themselves of their own shame.
- Shame can cause emotional outbursts. It is often shame that triggers the kinds of rage that can cause abusiveness.

Sadly, shame from childhood abuse almost always manifests itself in one of three major ways:

- It causes the person to abuse themselves in various ways such as: critical self-talk, alcohol or drug abuse, destructive eating patterns, and self-harm (Two-thirds of the people in treatment for drug abuse reported being abused or neglected as children).
- It causes the person to develop “victim-like” behavior and put up with unacceptable behavior from others (As many as 90% of women in battered women’s shelters report having been abused or neglected as children).
- It causes the person to become abusive (About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children).

The Healing Power of Compassion

In spite of the fact that I had been a psychotherapist specializing in working with victims of childhood abuse for thirty-five years, several years ago I became frustrated because I continued to struggle to find effective ways to help my clients eliminate the debilitating shame they suffered. And I wasn’t alone. Many psychotherapists and advocates working with adult survivors of child abuse understand that shame is one of the most enduring effects of abuse and that clients have an especially difficult time working through it. To make matters worse, I also struggled with shame due to my own abuse experiences as a child and adolescent, even after many years of therapy.

And so I set out to find a way to help victims of childhood abuse to recover from what I considered the worst after-effect of their trauma—shame. After extensive study and research, I found it. I discovered that *compassion* is the antidote to shame. As it is with most poisons, the toxicity of shame needs to be neutralized by another substance if we are truly going to save the patient. Compassion is the only thing that can neutralize shame.

I was well-aware of how healing compassion could be for my clients. Early in my career I had read much of Alice Miller’s work and knew that she believed that what victims of childhood abuse need most of all was what she called a “compassionate witness” to validate their experiences and support them through their pain. And I had personally experienced how healing my being a compassionate witness for my clients had been, as well as how transformative having a compassionate therapist myself had been for me.

But what I found in my research was that in the past few years, many people have taken an increased interest in the subject of compassion. This is no doubt at least partially due to a number of recent studies that have revealed surprising results concerning compassion. Researchers have found that from the day we are born to the day we die, the kindness, support, encouragement and compassion of others has a huge impact on how our brains, bodies and general sense of well-being develop. Love and kindness, especially in early life, even affect how some of our genes are expressed.

The Importance of Self-Compassion in Healing Shame

As I continued my research, I also discovered that while I had come to understand more fully the healing powers of compassion, I hadn't recognized the importance of *self-compassion* – most importantly, the power that self-compassion had to heal shame. Until a few years ago, the subject of self-compassion had never been formally studied. As it turned out, as far as alleviating shame, self-compassion was the missing key. For example, I discovered research suggesting that self-compassion can act as an antidote to self-criticism—a major characteristic of those who experience intense shame. It was found that self-compassion is a powerful trigger for the release of oxytocin, the hormone that increases feelings of trust, calm, safety, generosity, and connectedness. “Self-criticism, on the other hand, has a very different effect on our body. The amygdala, the oldest part of the brain, is designed to quickly detect threats in the environment. When we experience a threatening situation, the fight-or-flight response is triggered and the amygdala sends signals that increase blood pressure, adrenaline, and the hormone cortisol, mobilizing the strength and energy needed to confront or avoid the threat. Although this system was designed by evolution to deal with physical attacks, it is activated just as readily by emotional attacks—from ourselves and others. Over time increased cortisol levels lead to depression by depleting the various neurotransmitters involved in the ability to experience pleasure.”

“There is also neurological evidence showing that self-kindness (a major component of self-compassion) and self-criticism operate quite differently in terms of brain function. A recent study examined reactions to personal failure using fMRI (functioning magnetic resonance imaging) technology. While in a brain scanner, participants were presented with hypothetical

situations such as “A third job rejection letter in a row arrives in the post.” They were then told to imagine reacting to the situation in either a kind or a self-critical way. Self-criticism was associated with activity in the lateral prefrontal cortex and dorsal anterior cingulate—areas of the brain associated with error processing and problem solving. Being kind and reassuring toward oneself was associated with left temporal pole and insula activation—areas of the brain associated with positive emotions and compassion. Instead of seeing ourselves as a problem to be fixed, therefore, self-kindness allows us to see ourselves as valuable human beings who are worthy of care.’

What was particularly of interest to me was the most recent research in the neurobiology of compassion as it relates to shame—namely that we now know some of the neurobiological correlates of feeling unlovable and how shame gets stuck in our neural circuitry. Moreover, *I discovered that due to what we now know about the neural plasticity of the brain—the capacity of our brains to grow new neurons and new synaptic connections—we can proactively repair (and re-pair) the old shame memory with new experiences of self-empathy and self-compassion.*

In light of all this and related research, I determined that in addition to offering my clients compassion for their suffering, I needed to teach them how to practice self-compassion on an ongoing basis in order to heal the layers and layers of shame they experienced.

Self-compassion as a healing tool is a relatively new concept. Therapists have taught victims how to nurture “their inner child” and this therapeutic strategy has been successful in many ways. But teaching self-compassion goes one step further. It helps victims to connect with their childhood suffering on a much deeper level. Most significantly, it allows them to connect with the memories of their abuse—but to do so at a distance—not actually re-experiencing the abuse but remembering it *as if they have become their own compassionate witness*. In other words, they can develop compassion for the child they once were without *becoming* the child. This method is far less traumatic and it allows the person to become the loving guardian and protector they so longed for as a child. In essence, it provides them a way to heal themselves. It also helps them to learn to treat themselves *today* in a more loving and kind way.

The Compassion Cure Program

I took what I had learned about compassion and self-compassion and combined it with all the wisdom I had gleaned from my many years of working with victims of childhood abuse. I

created a program specifically aimed at helping victims of childhood abuse become free of the debilitating shame that I considered to be the worst after-effect of abuse. My Compassion Cure Program brings together groundbreaking scientific research on self-compassion, compassion, shame, and restorative justice, coupled with real life case examples (modified of course, to protect the anonymity of my clients). In addition to sharing this valuable information with readers, my program includes proprietary processes and exercises that help clients to reduce or eliminate the debilitating shame that has weighed them down and kept them stuck in the past.

By learning to practice self-compassion you will rid yourself of the belief that you are worthless, defective, bad or unlovable. Instead of trying to ignore these false yet powerful beliefs, trying to convince yourself otherwise by puffing yourself up, overachieving or becoming a perfectionist, your shame needs to be actively approached, recognized, validated and understood.

Instead of denying your shame and the feelings it engenders, it needs to be brought out into the light of day. Instead of feeling shame about your shame, you need to work toward acceptance of it. Last but not least, instead of constantly seeking approval and recognition from others, from outside yourself, self-compassion will help you to value yourself from within. The Compassion Cure program that I am going to offer you will help you to accomplish all these tasks.

My Story

Although I was motivated to create my Compassion Cure program in order to help my clients who suffered from debilitating shame, my interest in the subject of shame and how to heal it originated from my own personal struggles with shame. Ridding myself of the shame I experienced as a result of the neglect and the emotional, sexual and physical abuse I suffered as a child has been the most difficult endeavor of my life. Shame defined who I was as a child and who I became as an adult. It influenced how I felt about myself, how I took care of myself, how I perceived my body and my sexuality, how I interacted with others, who I chose as friends and romantic partners, and even my career choice.

Because I suffered from all three major types of abuse, as well as neglect, I feel I can personally identify with each and every one of you reading this book. While there are no doubt

many differences in our stories, I can assure you there are many similarities as well. Those of us who experienced abuse and neglect in childhood are a unique tribe and we can gain a great deal from supporting one another. Aside from the work I do with counseling clients, this book will serve as my best way to connect with you and to offer you the wisdom of both my own experience and the experience of working with clients for so many years. Throughout the book I am going to share with you some of my experience due to shame, as well as share with you my journey toward healing.

Although I can't remember a time when I didn't feel shame, I have evidence that there was once a time when I was, in fact, free of it. I have a photograph of me as a little baby, about six months old. In this picture I am happy and smiling, with a twinkle in my eye. In fact, I don't just look happy, I look radiant and filled with joy.

I have another photo of me at 4 years old. In this picture I am frowning and I look angry. The twinkle in my eye has been replaced with a dark, empty look. It reminds me of the look I have often seen in the eyes of criminals—full of hatred and defiance.

What happened to me in those three and a half years? What had occurred that had taken away the twinkle in my eyes and the joyous smile on my face and replaced them with darkness, emptiness and hatred? The answer--shame. Shame had replaced the innocence, the joy, the exuberance for life. Shame had caused me to build up a wall—a wall of protection and defiance. The person I was defending myself against was my mother, a woman who was so full of shame herself that she couldn't help but project it onto me, her unwanted child and the constant reminder of her own shame.

In addition to the neglect and the emotional and physical abuse that I suffered at the hands of my mother, I was also sexually molested at age 9 and raped at age 12. By the time I was sexually abused I already felt like there was something very wrong with me. I already felt like a burden and a colossal disappointment to my mother. Once I was sexually abused those feelings of not being good enough, turned into feelings of self-hatred.

The sexual abuse caused me to feel permanently marked, just as if I had a Scarlett A on my forehead. It felt as if everyone could see what an evil, dirty, unacceptable human being I had now become. I felt so damaged, so worthless, that I was surprised if someone was kind to me. And because I felt so undeserving of kindness, I either sabotaged the relationship or sexualized

it. This included being seductive with the teenage boy who welcomed all the neighborhood kids into his yard to play basketball.

As it is with many victims of childhood abuse, these experiences from my childhood combined to create a deep sense of shame in me and this sense of shame helped to form my character. Shame infused every aspect of my life. Because of debilitating shame I have struggled with my weight nearly all my life. Because of debilitating shame I came seriously close to the falling off the edge and tumbling into alcoholism and all that encompassed, including driving drunk and risking my own and other people's lives. Because of debilitating shame I became sexually promiscuous, putting myself in dangerous situations and having unprotected sex. And because of debilitating shame I repeated the cycle of abuse by becoming both a continual victim and an abuser.

I realize now that discovering how to heal first my own shame and then the shame of my clients has been my calling in life. As damaging and debilitating as shame has been in my life, my quest to rid myself of it has led me to some wonderful places and has introduced me to some incredible people. Inadvertently, it led me to my career as a therapist and as an author. It led me to two wonderfully compassionate therapists and introduced me to the practices of Restorative Justice, Non Violent Communication, Buddhism and Mindfulness. The path of compassion led me to the teachings of Alice Miller, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama.

Shame had transformed me from an innocent, open, joy-filled, six month old to a defended, angry, joyless four-year-old, but my quest to heal myself of my shame actually led me back to that state of joy and open-heartedness. The person I am today is who I was born to be—who we are all born to be-- open, loving, joyous, and filled with loving-kindness.

I have experienced a lifetime of debilitating shame. While I am not saying that I have rid myself of absolutely all my shame, thanks to compassion and self-compassion the majority is finally gone. How sad that it took a lifetime to accomplish. But this doesn't have to be your experience. I worked long and hard to find the "cure" for shame for victims of childhood abuse and I am happy to say that I found it. I offer it here for you as the greatest gift I can give you.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

There are five components to the Compassion Cure program: 1) Self-Understanding; 2) Self-Acceptance; 3) Self-Forgiveness; 4) Self-Kindness; 5) Self-Encouragement. These components are presented in Part III. (chapters 7-11). It may take you weeks or even months to complete the entire program since you will want to practice the steps outlined in each chapter before moving on to the next. I highly recommend that you complete the exercises in the book, as they are designed to help you achieve each component. As readers from my previous books have reported, they got much more out of my books when they took the time to complete the exercises. Some read the book in its entirety and then went back to complete the exercises, while others report that it worked best for them to complete the exercises as they read each chapter.

Since shame can cause self-destructive behavior such as suicidal thoughts, recklessness and self-mutilation, it is very important that you seek professional help if you experience any of these symptoms while you are working your way through the book.