

### 3 ways to recognize shame

By Emily Agnew (lightly edited for clarity)

Hi, I'm Emily Agnew at [sustainably sensitive.com](http://sustainablysensitive.com). Thanks for joining me for this video. "Three ways to recognize shame".

The first way to recognize shame isn't too hard! When something happens and you know you're really embarrassed or mortified about it, the signs are obvious. Your face flushes. Your cheeks prickle. I personally break out into a sweat.

I'll never forget the first time I experienced that. I was in seventh grade band. I had missed the announcement for a challenge hearing for the oboe section. I heard the band director say, "Okay oboes, get ready to play!" And we had to play in front of everybody. I wasn't prepared. I played poorly, and I had to get up in front of the whole band and moved to the bottom of the section. So I felt all those obvious feelings of shame.

So a shame storm like that is not hard to spot. But there are two other ways shame can show up that are quite a bit subtler. That's what I want to talk about today. In order to make sense of that, let's first back up for a second and look at why we learn to shame ourselves in the first place.

It's actually quite an elegant, though horrible, coping mechanism for a kid. If you're experiencing painful or overwhelming emotions, if you're being criticized chronically or just feel like you have nowhere to go with your feelings—that your feelings are too much for people—you have to learn to cope somehow. And of course you play to your strengths when you cope.

One way we do that is to tell ourselves, "Oh, if I were just *more* this or *less* that, then this pain would stop." What you tell yourself depends on your particular situation. You might say, "Oh, if I were smarter, or if I were more athletic, or if I were thinner, or if I weren't 'too much and too intense', *then* the pain would stop." But whatever you learn to tell yourself, it becomes habitual. So the effects are more global, and not as instantly obvious as a shame storm like I felt in band that day.

Imagine you've gotten used to coping this way. And imagine that you're feeling good. Then, later in the day, you realize you're not feeling very good at all. You feel yucky and low. And you're not really sure what happened. This is what I would call "gradual onset shame". It's as if you took a clear glass of water and you took an eyedropper of black ink, and you dropped a drop of ink into your glass of water. It would disperse gradually, and after a while the water would look clear again. You really wouldn't notice any difference. But if you dropped another drop and another and another over the coming hours, gradually the glass would turn gray, and then dark.

This is what happens to our mood when we gradually shame ourselves through the day without realizing it. An incident happens, and in the back of your mind, you worry. You tell yourself you

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did something wrong. But you're not really aware of it, because it's so habitual. So it's good to know about this kind of gradual onset shame, because you can track back and do a little detective work. Then you can try to figure out, “What was the incident? When did this start? And then you can gradually start to see the wallpaper of your own mind more clearly. You can look at what you're telling yourself.

The third way that shame can show up is even more subtle and invisible. It's as if, in an effort to cope, you've put on contact lenses that hold a whole stance about yourself in the world. For example, your stance might be that you aren't really worthy to be here on the planet. That's the most intense kind of core shame: your very existence is in question.

I had something like that level of shame around my oboe playing when I was playing professionally. It was really hard for me to get help, because I went into this mindset that Carol Dweck, who wrote this wonderful book called *Mindset*, calls a *fixed mindset*. In a fixed mindset, you see everything as a referendum on your worth. So one way you try to cope with that is by already knowing everything—by being extremely conscientious and studying really hard.

But obviously, we can't know everything. We need help. So this mindset becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You don't get help, then you don't do as well. I found it shameful even to question whether I wanted to keep playing. There might've been other things I'd have considered doing, but I felt that it was shameful to even look at that.

This stance kept me in a paralyzed place—not getting the help I needed, nor considering other options. Over time, I did eventually learn to get help. But always, when I went to perform, I felt an isometric collision between something in me really wanting to express—because I loved to play—and something in me that was afraid of making a bad sound, or doing something that would be judged.

So it takes even more detective work to realize you have these shame-based contact lenses on. They can create a pervasive sense of shame that affects your ability to pursue your goals and dreams in life, and to feel comfortable around other people.

If this is helpful and interesting to you, a next step would be to watch a video about how to be with feelings of shame once you've identified them. It's called “Being with overwhelming emotions”. Just go to my website, [www.sustainablysensitive.com](http://www.sustainablysensitive.com). Under the free stuff tab, there's a page called “About Focusing”, and the video is on that page.

Thanks for listening. And please be in touch if there's some way I can be of support to you.