

*Experience, strength and hope from Al-Anon members for times when you can't get to an Al-Anon group*

Dear Loners

April 2020

I received this letter last month from a very grateful member

**Shame....one of my defects of character that I identified in step Four**

This is a very difficult topic to talk about as it cuts to the very core...the very depths of who I am. I have always felt different, not quite a part of the people around me. This goes right back to my upbringing. I grew up in a home with a very difficult father and a very co-dependent mother. There was no alcohol directly involved; but I like to say it was alcohol in proxy. My father grew up in a divorced home with an alcoholic and physically abusive step-father. I do believe that this resulted in his deep seated anger; which was often unpredictable. At times he wouldn't react or even respond to circumstances around me and at other times he would over react to the most minor thing. He was also unable to deal with or show moments of kindness or intimacy. This was seen as weakness.

I will never forget one incident at school. I must have been 8 or 9 years old. We were going on a school trip to the zoo. It cost 50c per child. My Mom just couldn't pay for the trip and I had to stay behind in the school library for the day. It would have been kinder for me to be told /allowed to stay at home. I felt overcome with terrible shame, humiliation and embarrassment. And it was from that day onwards that desperate shame was always part of who I am.

I was a very high achiever in all that I did and tried and still do to overcome this deep seated feeling 'by doing my best'. And at all times even more than my best! My councillor says I am an overachiever in responsibility! Shame is a crippling emotion often based on what others perceive others think or say about us. It isolates us so that we become less and less and our circumstances become more and more. We isolate ourselves as a protection. If we don't correct, we can't hear or see what others say or hope feel the shame a bit less.

My loved one relapsed 10 years into our marriage after being sober for many years. The first thing I felt, after the deep sadness was shame. I wanted to hide away. I hate gossip. I have never been the person who likes to talk about others or worse collect the gossip others 'need' to spread. Even as a small child I either walked away or when I could stand up for those being talked about.

The robe of shame wrapped itself around me.... Tighter and tighter, the worse the drinking got. At times I could barely leave my house. I covered up or even worse pretended people never knew. I never allowed alcohol in our home, as we had been tea-totals all our married life. Although later he smuggled it in ....initially most of the drinking was done very publically; so of course people knew.

I took on his behaviour as my own. Saw what he was doing as a part of me. Saw myself as broken, and not worthy of being a part of the family or my friendships. I withdrew.

It was easier to be isolated and alone. I was drowning in shame. Fortunately the self-pity never set in. Also I never blamed my loved one; but felt compassion towards him. I also tried to isolate him to keep him at home; to limit his drinking. Shame is felt by deep seated feelings of drowning. Being smothered by overwhelming feelings of not being enough. Not being good enough. Not measuring up.... I felt it so deeply that at times I felt I was drowning. I became hyper alert. And knew when the sleep deprivation started. I couldn't allow myself to fall asleep.

What changed? How did I grow and try to overcome this? I began to realise that it was counterproductive, self-destructive thing. And that I was doing it to myself. I also saw that for me, shame was a form of inverted pride. And that pride too is a defect of character. By feeling ashamed, I saw myself as trying to be better than others and then something happened to prevent that.

My childhood circumstances of growing up in a critical volatile, emotional unstable home; resulted in my need to do and be better so I set up unrealistic standards in my mind and used this as a coping mechanism.

An unhealthy coping mechanism which once understood and realised I have been able to work through.

I have accepted myself. And realised that I will probably always be hyper sensitive as a part of my personality and not a character defect... the story of the emperor's new clothes was always very embarrassing to listen to. I cringed as I realised what he was going through. I feel embarrassed for characters in books, people in movies and on TV. However I am learning to face the deep shame which has at times immobilised me. How do I do this?

I am kind to myself. I understand myself. I love to journal often. I work thing out and then accept them. My antidotes to shame are: Acceptance, forgiveness of myself; forgiveness of others; mercy and the grace of Higher Power.

Thank you for submitting this to share with the loners. Shame is a feeling that many of us experience. We would love to be able to share your experience, strength and hope with others.

New groups have started all over Gauteng. Please visit our website for details of times of meetings. Literature to help you with the Steps is available from the office. Please phone Julie Mon, Wed and Fri 10:00-14:00. She will be able to help you select the books that are most relevant for your recovery.

ABSA Bank, Oakdene, branch code 632 005). Current account no 1118881482.....in the name of <b>Al-Anon Information Service</b> . Please put your <b>name or group as a reference</b> .
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