

## THE RULES OF SHAME-BASED SYSTEMS

The following rules are common to all shame-based systems, both families and other types of organizations. All organizations have rules; having rules helps things run more smoothly. Unfortunately, the rules of shame-based systems and people are rigid, unrealistic, and destructive, and become the credo by which members of the system strive to function. They become the “stage directions” for your own self-destructive life script. It is also through these rules that their partners, children, and others who come in contact with the shame-based person begin to take on and live with the shame themselves. These rules are communicated both through what is said and how people act.

The rules in a shame-based system arise from an intense feeling of fear. People who are shame-based fear that, without these rigid and unrealistic rules, their entire world will fall apart. They also fear that they will be rejected and abandoned by others if they don't play the roles that these rules specify. People use these rules to try to experience some sense of power, safety, and predictability in an otherwise chaotic and frightening world. But in the process of providing some temporary relief and stability, these rules only solidify the shameful feelings within you and make the fear even worse. Finally, since the rules are ultimately impossible to follow, the system always breaks down and, in fact, generates more feelings of shame, insecurity, and defectiveness.

Think about the rules listed below and see which ones fit for you in the way you were raised and in the way you currently view and treat yourself and others.

### BE TOTALLY IN CONTROL OF YOURSELF AND EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING AROUND YOU:

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that it is absolutely necessary to be completely in charge of all your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It also means that you need to be in control of the people around you and the situations in which you find yourself. This intense need to be in control is the cornerstone of a shame-based person or system. This attempt to control may be motivated by a primitive drive for power and domination, but it may also be motivated by a desire to achieve some sense of safety and predictability in a frightening and unpredictable world. An example of control would be expecting others to do what you want them to do and expecting that they will see the world in exactly the same way that you do. Two types of controlling behavior are listed below (you can also see other information about control and being controlling in Unit D):

**OVERT CONTROL**, a DIRECT way to try to get what you want, manifests itself in behaviors like being demanding, yelling to force others to do what you want, and using emotional, verbal, and physical intimidation and sometimes even violence to get your way.

**COVERT CONTROL**, a more INDIRECT way to try to get what you want, involves behaviors like manipulating, being sarcastic, “playing the martyr,” becoming “ill,” acting “fragile,” and trying to “guilt” others into being who you want them to be and doing what you want them to do.

## **BE PERFECT AND EXPECT (AND SOMETIMES, WHEN NECESSARY, EVEN DEMAND)**

### **PERFECTION FROM OTHERS:**

If you are a shame-based person, you have been taught that you and others must always be “correct” and “do what’s right,” “never make mistakes,” and “be on top of everything” going on in your life. This rule imposes a strict requirement that you have to rigidly comply and live up to some sort of perfectionistic image of the way people and the world around you are supposed to be. It is then expected that this facade will be presented to the outside world as an valid representation of the way things really are (e.g. with you and with your family, friends, and others). This image includes an intense fear of acknowledging any problems or difficulties because doing so would communicate to others that you are, in fact, “flawed,” defective, and “deficient” as a human being and would simply invite more shame from outside. The need to live behind this flawless facade significantly decreases your ability to be fully human, with all your faults, frailties, and shortcomings. A strong organizing principle of this rule is to live up to certain stereotyped notions, values, and expectations of the dominant and popular culture. Trying to be perfect creates enormous stress and tension in your life and, in the end, you (and others) are never able to actually be that “perfect person” you think everyone is supposed to be.

- An example of this would be not taking the risk to ask questions in a class you were taking because you do not want to look “stupid” or “silly” to the other students and the teacher and thereby not opening yourself up to learn as much as you possibly could if you were more interactive and took those risks and participated more actively.

## **BLAME SOMEONE (YOURSELF OR OTHERS) WHENEVER ANYTHING “GOES WRONG:”**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that, if something doesn’t happen as you think it should, you need to assess blame, either toward yourself or someone else, and then punish the “offender,” whoever that happens to be. Blame tends to get activated in the system when the control and perfection rules break down, as they always do. The shame-based system focuses on WHO did the “misdeed” rather than on HOW the situation or issue can be effectively addressed and remedied. This intense need to find fault means that you are continually split into two parts: the JUDGE and the OFFENDER. Every problem situation is viewed as an opportunity to reject and condemn yourself or others for anything that occurs. This leads to viewing yourself and others with a mindset of constant negativity, cynicism, judgment, and contempt.

- An example of this would be yelling and screaming at a young child for spilling her milk at the dinner table and berating and demeaning her for what she has done rather than getting down on the floor with her and showing her how to clean it up. Another example was a client whose grandmother used to say, whenever he or any of his siblings became ill, “Who gave it to him?”

## **COMPARE YOURSELF CONTINUALLY TO OTHER PEOPLE:**

If you are a shame-based person, part of the legacy of blame and fault-finding is a tendency to continually compare yourself to those around you. Everyone else becomes your competition and you end up translating your own and others’ “differentness” into “deficiency.” In a shame-based system, it is not okay to be different from whatever the shame-based system says is the “correct” way to be and live. As a result, you either feel inferior, insecure, and shameful if you are not living up to these expectations. Or you feel superior, condescending, arrogant, and grandiose if you believe that others are not living up to these expectations. This continual comparing process can be taught by both your family and the larger

culture. This rule is designed to demean you and anyone else who is not able to live up to the shame-based system's rigid ideal of what you and others are supposed to be.

- An example of this might going to a dinner party and feeling insecure, inadequate, uninformed, and stupid when others know more about a particular current events topic than you do.

### **THINK ONLY IN EXTREMES**

If you are a shame-based person, part of the legacy of comparing is viewing life and the world around you exclusively in extremes. Because things have to be a certain way in order for the world to be “right,” there is only one “right” way to think, to feel, and to be. Or there is the other way, but that is the “wrong” way. You and others are either “good” or “bad.” There is no “middle ground” that allows for the many variations that, in fact, exist in humankind and make us unique and different from one another. Situations, decisions, issues, values, and, even other people, are all “black and white.” There are no “shades of gray” that even allow for the idea that there are different perspectives and different conclusions about a particular issue or for the infinite complexity of the human race.

- An example would be writing someone off as a “bad person” and a “loser” because they support an issue you disagree with rather than allowing them to have their own way of thinking about the world.

### **DENY THE REALITY AROUND YOU:**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught early to deny the existence and validity of emotions, especially the “negative,” uncomfortable, and vulnerable ones in yourself and others. Feelings like fear, disappointment, hurt, anxiety, and sadness pose a significant threat to the image you are supposed to present of “having it all together” and being totally self-sufficient and “in charge” of your life. You are also taught to deny your wants and needs so you don't dare ask directly for help, emotional support, and love. In a shame-based system, asking directly for anything is just another sign of your own weakness, imperfection, and inability to take care of yourself. Finally you are taught to deny responsibility for yourself and what you say and do because, in a shame-based system, acknowledging mistakes and being accountable only leads to punishment, humiliation, and more shame. As a result, rigid roles consume your humanness and your identity and your interactions with others become empty, hollow, and distant with little room for uniqueness, spontaneity, and genuine intimacy.

- An example of this would be pretending that you're not hurt by something a friend has said to you because you're afraid that acknowledging and talking about your real feelings would make him (and others) think you were “not a real man” or a “wimp.”

### **DISTORT THE REALITY AROUND YOU:**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that, when compulsive, irresponsible, or abusive behavior does occur, you should immediately use distortion to make the behavior into something more “acceptable.” Thus, the reality of the shaming event is minimized, denied, or justified and shifted to excuse the hurtful behavior. The goal in doing this is to assist the shaming person to avoid taking any responsibility for what has really occurred. This distortion process is also used to maintain the status quo in the shame-based system and to avoid positive change that might be triggered by openly discussing and understanding the real meaning of the shaming, abusive, or addictive and compulsive behavior. These confusing messages contribute to a “crazy-making” atmosphere where it becomes extremely difficult to

identify what is actually happening in any given situation and profoundly interferes with gaining a real understanding of what healthy and nurturing human relationships really are.

- For example, abuse and violence in a home might be excused and distorted by saying, “*Your father only hits you because he loves you and wants you to be the best,*” “*Your mother really ‘meant well;’ she only yells at you to help you learn right from wrong,*” “*Every family gets into ‘arguments’ now and then,*” and “*Your parents are jus treating you that way ‘for your own good.’*” Alcoholism might be minimized and distorted by saying, “*Oh well, all families have someone who drinks a little too much from time to time.*” Significant depression might be distorted by saying, “*I think that everyone ‘gets a little down’ at times in their lives.*”

### **DON'T SPEAK HONESTLY AND OPENLY ABOUT YOURSELF OR OTHER PEOPLE:**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught that you should never identify and talk openly about shaming, irresponsible, compulsive, controlling, or abusive behavior. It also means that you should not talk honestly about what you think, feel, want, or need in the present. Speaking honestly about how you feel or what is going on is equated with “disloyalty” to the family system and its other members. This idea of “maintaining the silence” or “keeping the secret” is not based simply on choosing the option of privacy. Rather, it is based on the belief that it is not safe to talk openly about what you see happening around you because it will lead to “punishment” of some sort and more shame. It is also based on the notion that, in fact, it is hopeless to self-disclose in an honest and open fashion since “*it won't do any good anyway*” (i.e. nothing will ever change). This “don't talk” rule, and the misplaced loyalty it generates, is probably the single most hindering factor in overcoming the harmful effects of shame. Secrets and dishonesty are always a hallmark of a shame-based system. Without honest and open sharing, true intimacy, healing, and recovery cannot occur.

- An example of this in an alcoholic family is the “white elephant in the living room” (i.e. the alcoholic's drinking and irresponsible behavior) that everyone knows about but that no one is willing to talk about in an open and direct fashion so that it could begin to be addressed effectively.

### **BE UNPREDICTABLE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS:**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught not to expect or provide consistency in relationships with partners, friends, family members, and others. Love and emotional connection with others are always tentative and very conditional. With this rule, you learn quickly that you can't count on others to be there for you unless you are the way they want you to be. You also learn that they can't count on you unless they live up to the unrealistic and perfectionistic expectations that you have for them. The implied threat here is that relationships are always in jeopardy and “up for grabs.” This can lead to a confusing and frightening roller coaster of mood swings, disrespectful behavior that seems “to come out of nowhere,” and emotional over-reactions where you and others repeatedly disappear from your emotional connections with absolutely no discussion or explanation. These interactions breed an intense and justifiable fear that there is always the possibility of being rejected and abandoned by those who are closest to you, a powerful fear for shame-based people. They also sometimes trigger frantic attempts to find ways to re-connect so you can experience some sense of attachment and belonging in your life. This can lead to co-dependency and “people-pleasing” behaviors where you and others become consumed by how others are feeling and literally end up living your lives through someone else (e.g. feeling happy when they feel good; feeling miserable when they feel bad).

- An example of this might mean sulking and withdrawing attention and affection from your partner for several days whenever he or she says or does something that you don't like. Other examples are "cutting people off" whenever they "cross" you or having a history of "feuds" with family and friends to punish the other person or sometimes, in your own mind, to "protect" yourself.

### **DON'T ADDRESS OR RESOLVE ISSUES THAT ARISE:**

If you are a shame-based person, you are taught to avoid completing interpersonal transactions with others and to avoid any meaningful sense of resolution whenever conflicts or issues do arise. The message is either to completely avoid disagreement or to endlessly engage in arguments that go absolutely nowhere. Thus, issues that were seen as a crisis the day before may not even be felt to be a problem in the present because they have been dropped or forgotten by one or most of those involved. Unfortunately, however, these situations are usually not really forgotten but are merely "shoved under the rug," and live on, especially in those who are being victimized by the more powerful shamers in the system. This process builds a reservoir of resentment and mistrust that only creates more emotional distance and a profound lack of safety and trust in the relationship and the family.

- An example of this might mean becoming verbally abusive with your partner about an issue between the two of you and then not getting back to talk about the issue or the interaction because you are telling yourself that it has been "taken care of" since you now feel less tense about it as a result of "dumping" your stress, anger, and disrespect on that other person (i.e. they've become your "scapegoat"). It is "completely over" for you, in your mind, so it should be "over" for them as well and they should just "move on" (which, generally, they don't). This could also mean having a significant disagreement with a partner or someone else and never returning to discuss it again but still feeling anxious or resentful about whatever the issue happens to be and this then creating a "wall" and emotional distance between the two of you.

### **DON'T TRUST YOURSELF OR ANYONE ELSE**

If you have grown up in a shame-based family, your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs are constantly discounted and disqualified. You don't really ever have the opportunity to develop an internal sense of what feels "okay" and "not okay" to you. In short, you don't develop the ability to truly trust yourself. If you have grown up in a shame-based family, the very people who are supposed to be there to validate, nurture, and love you (and teach you how to exist in the world) have betrayed and lied to you about who you are as a person and about the world around you. Other people become your adversaries and enemies rather than becoming your friends and supporters. This all too often gets transformed into the belief as an adult that no one, not even a life partner, can be trusted because they will undoubtedly eventually hurt and betray you and lie to you in the same way that your parents or others did to you in your childhood and thus you can't really trust them either. Other people and the world around you become dangerous, threatening, and scary.

- An example of this might be feeling sad, hurt, or discouraged and then doubting and questioning whether you "should" feel the way you are feeling because you don't know if it's actually okay to feel that way. This would also include not being willing to share these feelings with anyone else because you believe that they would probably ridicule or demean you for feeling the way you do as well.

## **MAINTAIN A RIGID (AND FALSE) FACADE THAT YOU PRESENT TO THE WORLD AROUND YOU**

If you are a shame-based person, the culmination of all the above rules results in this final rule. It says that you and everyone else need to hide your true selves---thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs---and present an “acceptable” (i.e. “false”) image about who you are to the rest of the world. This rule means that you don’t even get to know who you actually are as you live out the destructive “life script” that someone else produced and wrote for you. You believe that you need to act and be the way others (whoever this happens to be) think you are supposed to act and be. And others need to be and act the way you think they are supposed to be and act. You need to pretend and “live a lie” rather than getting to know yourself and being genuine, real, authentic, and true to yourself. The facade is a mask that you present to the world to try to “survive” and to get the approval and “respect” of those around you. Sadly, this never works effectively to help you lead a happy, satisfying, and healthy life, but, for many shame-based people, this is the person they end up living and dying with.

- An example of this might be learning when you were young that you are expected to be quiet, polite, and passive and to seek to please and placate others. This becomes your facade and you strive hard to maintain it in your adult life even if you start to feel anxious, depressed, or angry about never speaking up for yourself or getting what you really want out of life.