

MOVING YOURSELF TOWARD EMPOWERMENT: Taking Some Steps To Overcome The Pain And Dysfunction From Your Past And Grow Into The Person You Truly Wish To Become

The path to overcoming your shame involves a lifelong commitment to regularly work at and practice a variety of strategies that can lead you to healing, growth, and fulfillment in your life. The following suggestions form a blueprint that you can use to look at and actually change your shame-based attitudes, thoughts, and actions. Remember, however, that the change process is a slow one and don't expect too much of yourself all at once. The "bottom line" in overcoming shame is conscious awareness and sustained effort on a daily basis to move your life forward in a positive way.

STEP 1) Face your shame directly, acknowledge that it is there within you, and learn to accept it as an important part of who you have been in the past and who you are as you function in the present at times. In other words, stop the denial about the existence of shame in your life. Then, begin to search for the thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs underneath the shame that you have had to deny as part of the process of experiencing a shame-based childhood and having to live as a shame-based person. Shame is always a "cover-up" that serves to hide our genuine humanness in all its glory and imperfection.

Watch out for feeling shameful about still experiencing your shame at times. Avoid thinking you should be "perfect" and "just get over it," which can be just another manifestation that shame is occurring within you. Instead, use your shame as a "warning signal" or a cue that something important is happening within or around you at a particular time. Then look at how this relates to your past, what you need to learn about the circumstances that are triggering your shameful feelings in the present, and finally what you can do differently in the current situation to handle it more effectively.

STEP 2) Begin to work to understand what shame is and how it differs from empowerment and a lifestyle based on accepting your humanness and taking responsibility for yourself in everything that you do. Identify the destructive and unhealthy "life script" (e.g. the good little girl or boy, the hard-working super-achiever, the self-sacrificing and long-suffering martyr, the arrogant rebel, the perpetual victim, the underachieving loser) that someone else produced, directed, and wrote for you when you were young. Then start to believe that there truly is an alternative way to live your life and make the conscious and clear decision that you do not wish to continue to live out this unhealthy script in your as you move forward. See more about "life scripts" in the questions that follow this article.

STEP 3) Recognize and stop the denial about your current acting-out behaviors and begin to intervene in the ongoing activities and thought patterns that you do which perpetuate and add to your shame in the present (your "sustained shame"). Shame-based actions involve anything that you do that undermines your own self-respect and the respect and dignity of others around you. These can include behaviors like:

- emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse of others;
- workaholic and compulsively trying to be "productive" at all times;

- sexual acting-out (e.g. having affairs, using prostitutes, compulsive use of pornography or masturbation);
- compulsive use of TV, online or video games, the internet, your computer, tablet, and cell phone;
- compulsive over-eating, gambling, and spending; and
- alcohol and drug abuse

This can also include those negative and destructive attitudes and thought patterns, e.g.

- a cynical, hostile, and vengeful mindset
- a victimized, self-pitying, and “martyr” mindset
- a hopeless, despairing, and depressed mindset
- a fearful, panicky, and anxious mindset

The only way to accomplish this is by beginning to make conscious choices that allow you to interrupt these self-destructive and self-defeating behavior and thought patterns. There is no “magic” to making this happen. But if these patterns continue to be a ongoing part of your daily life, you can make little or no real progress at addressing the places where your shame originated nor in learning to focus on yourself rather than continually blaming outside people and circumstances for what happens in your life. These patterns also need to be interrupted in order to allow you to get in touch with the real feelings underlying your shame (e.g. fear, sadness, hurt, disappointment, anger), which are effectively hidden from your consciousness by the shame and the defenses these behaviors generate on a regular basis. People use these sorts of irresponsible and compulsive behaviors to “medicate” the shame and emotional pain that is a part of who you have been in the past. These kinds of “quick fixes,” however, are never helpful in truly healing your pain and moving on with your life and, instead, keep you “stuck” in your shame and can even increase the shame that you end up carrying around with you in the present. Remember that shame is always a “cover-up” for what is really going on with you in your soul and your heart and at your very core.

You also need to identify and start to attempt to intervene in your remaining and more subtle controlling, manipulative, and self-defeating attitudes and behaviors. This is a time to tune into and exert more conscious control over the psychological defenses (e.g. blaming, justifying, minimizing, denial) that you learned and used in childhood to protect yourself and keep you safe and that you use in the present to avoid your feelings and your responsibility to take care of yourself.

STEP 4) Look at and start to understand your “attachment” to your shame in the present. Begin to clearly define the payoffs and benefits from your being willing to continue to experience shame in your current life. You wouldn’t hang onto the shame if there weren’t some real payoffs that you have been getting from what you have been doing. Start to ask yourself and look at: *“How is my shame ‘helpful’ or ‘useful’ to me at this point in my life?”* Human behavior, whether destructive or productive, is always purposeful (i.e. we do what we do for a reason). These payoffs might include things like:

- it’s easier and more comfortable to stay stuck in your old habits and patterns that you know so well and avoid taking the emotional and behavioral risks necessary to make important changes in your life;
- you can try to “stay safe” and protect yourself from being hurt in relationships by avoiding genuine emotional connection and intimacy with others;

- you can continue to blame other people or your “circumstances” for your problems and use the shame as an excuse to avoid taking full and complete responsibility for who you are and how you are living your life in the present;
...i.e. you can continue to think and to say to yourself, *“This actually isn’t my fault; Bad things ‘just happen’ to me; I’m the real victim here”*
- you can avoid your “fear of the unknown” (i.e. *“What would my life be like without the shame that has been such an important part of me and how I have functioned up until now?”*);
- you can maintain and/or gain acceptance and approval from other unhealthy people around you (e.g. family of origin members; long-term friends and acquaintances) who might otherwise reject and abandon you if they see you changing this shame-based part of who you have been;
- you can cling to child-like “magical thinking” (e.g. *“If I just wish and hope hard enough, everything in my life will change all by itself”*); and
- you can avoid the very real hard work that is necessary to actually change, heal, and grow as a human being.

STEP 5) Identify and talk or write about the original and ongoing sources of your shame. These are called **“GOVERNING SCENES”** and are most often found in your family of origin and childhood experiences but may also be found in your adult life. Governing scenes are the powerful and traumatic shaming experiences where your thought and behavior patterns related to the world around you were and are developed (e.g. scenes where you were neglected, abused, ridiculed, or victimized by caretakers, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, or other important people when you were a child or an adult or significant “losses” or “failures” that you have experienced in your life). Think about the messages you internalized from these times and how they have affected the way you look at yourself, other people, and the world around you (e.g. that the world is a scary place, that you can not trust other people, that you have no right to have your feelings and to stand up for yourself with others). Work to translate your shame into emotional pain and allow yourself to get in touch with the feelings that you had to deny at the time of the original shaming scenes (e.g. the confusion, fear, hurt, sadness, disappointment, and anger you may have felt when you were being abused by a parent or peers or when you yourself made a significant mistake at some later point in your life). Journaling about the past and present on a regular basis can be very helpful in gaining a better understanding of your shame, where it comes from, and how it operates in your life.

A second part of getting in touch with and expressing your pain from the past is to find a safe way to confront the person or people who were shaming with you in some way. This can be done through letters you write (sent or not sent), role-plays in group or individual therapy or with close friends, actual face-to-face meetings with the person himself or herself (if this can be done safely for you), or even visiting a gravesite to say what you need to say to someone who has already died. A final option is to “go back in time,” through meditation, imagery, or visualization, to re-visit the reality of a governing scene that once existed and actually work to re-structure the incident in a way where you are able to see yourself empowered and responding in a different and more effective way. This re-structuring process can actually alter the way that you look at and feel about the painful and shaming situation from the past in the

present. It can also assist you in dealing more effectively with situations that mirror the traumatic event from the past that are occurring in your current life.

- For example, this might involve visualizing yourself actually being assertive with a past abuser and/or effectively removing yourself from that situation to protect yourself.

Finding some way to these develop “confrontation rituals” is an important part of healing shame and assists you in acting and actually becoming more empowered in your current interactions with shaming people or anyone else in the present who evokes the same kind of shameful response in you that the original shamers did in the past.

Part of directly addressing the original shamers also involves working hard to forgive them for what they did to you in the past. Forgiving does not mean forgetting about what happened, but, if you are not willing to work at forgiving, you end up carrying the thoughts and memories around as if they are still happening to you today. Continuing to focus on, think about, and even “hate” that other person takes you out of living in the present moment and often means that you are still allowing that other person to exert significant control over you and your current life. Be patient with yourself in this endeavor and remember that forgiveness is generally a “process” that ebbs and flows and is not just one discrete event that “takes care of everything that happened to me.” For more about “governing scenes” and how to transform them, see the questions that follow this article.

STEP 6) Develop and actively use an emotional support system to build back the “interpersonal bridge” that was ruptured and sometimes even destroyed when you were young and were hurt by those important people in your childhood (and in your adult life) when your self-respect, trust, and safety was violated by the shamers. You now need to find nurturing and helpful people in your current life with whom you can feel safe. This safety in the present is absolutely critical if you are going to be able to be vulnerable and openly express your emotions and your pain from the past and the present in order to begin to let go of the emotional burden and baggage that you have carried by yourself all these years. This can happen:

- with friends,
- with a partner,
- with parents or siblings who are supportive,
- with clergy or spiritual advisors,
- in support or therapy groups, or
- with a counselor or therapist.

Part of this process of self-disclosure about your past emotional pain involves being sure to address and deal with your unhealthy loyalty to your family of origin that is represented by that “no talk” rule from your shame-based childhood. Your learned desire to “protect” your parents or others who were hurtful, shaming, neglectful, and abusive with you and your unwillingness or inability to go beyond this stance can be the single most hindering factor in truly effectively moving beyond your shame. It is critical to be able to talk about who you are and how you became the person you are in the present. Having friends and confidant(e)s can help you do just that. In addition, having and using supportive people in your life can protect you from illness and even help you live longer.

Be in tune with and begin to trust the emotions you experience and start to get in touch with your “intuition” about what feels “okay” and “not okay” for you in your ongoing life. If you were shamed or traumatized in your childhood, you were generally given powerful messages that what you thought, felt, wanted, and needed were “not okay” and that you had no right to have them validated by anyone else. You need to figure out what makes sense to you in your life by tapping into that inner part of you which is strong, healthy, and wise (it is still there no matter how much trauma you have experienced). Part of this means allowing yourself to learn how to experience genuine emotional pain (e.g. sadness and fear) and to suffer in a healthy way instead of lapsing into self-pity and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, powerlessness, and victimization.

Work at actively and consciously choosing to be vulnerable and to share your thoughts and feelings in an ongoing way with the people whom you choose to trust in the present. Overcoming the shame in your day-to-day life cannot be done “in a vacuum” by you alone simply through gaining insight, reading self-help books, journaling, meditating, or praying. Just as developing your shame was an interpersonal experience involving those who originally shamed and wounded you as a child, so too overcoming your shame is an interpersonal process and **must** involve other people who can be there for you in a caring, healthy, and healing way. This means that others must be willing to listen (being listened to is often useful and therapeutic in and of itself), be affirming, and offer helpful (and, at times, direct, honest, and difficult) feedback to you rather than judging and condemning you for who you are or who you have been. But you are the one who needs to “open the door” to others and take the risk to share who you really are in order for this emotional connection and support from others to occur.

Use your “normal and natural” need for nurturance and emotional connection in a positive way and take the initiative to spend time with people who accept and are supportive of your recovery process. You do not need to be around people who continue to attempt to shame, judge, and condemn you in the present. Begin to make the assumption that the people with whom you choose to spend time in the present can be trusted and have positive and caring intentions toward you. This is the point where you need to intervene in your negative and cynical tendency to view everyone around you as a competitor, an adversary, or an “enemy” who is “just out to get me.”

STEP 7) Work hard to become aware of and actively re-claim the previously disowned and discarded parts of yourself. This means learning to appreciate, embrace and re-parent both the spontaneous and playful “inner child” and the hurt and wounded “inner child” in order to become more connected with your thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, and zest for living in the present.

- For example, if you withdrew to protect yourself and became passive and fearful as a result of growing up in a shame-based family, it means recognizing the need to become more assertive in your current life and then actually taking the risk to do this in situations wherever this is necessary.

You might want to actually write a letter to this “inner child” to help begin this “re-parenting” process (see the question section at the end of this article for more about a writing a letter like this).

Part of this process often involves working to forgive yourself for not being able to stand up for and take care of yourself as a child. Many people have the unrealistic expectation that they “should have been able to do something” when the original shaming or trauma was occurring (i.e. if they had just been

a “better”/”stronger”/”more capable” person) and they now use this idea as an excuse to be demeaning and shaming with themselves in the present.

- e.g. thinking to yourself: *“The only reason that happened to me when I was a kid was because I was such a loser and a weakling”*

This also involves recognizing and reuniting with your “shadow side,” those “hidden” aspects of your character like your fear about connecting with others, viewing yourself as “fragile” or as a “victim,” your “temper,” your desire for revenge, or your tendency to become controlling. These are the parts of you that you often don’t want to admit to yourself or anyone else in the present and generally these were parts of you that you were taught to deny or suppress these as a child. If you are unwilling to recognize and assert control over these “hidden” parts of who you are, they will take over and control you and your current thoughts and behaviors with others. Recognizing and acknowledging this “shadow side” is a way to re-assert your own personal power over how you think and act with others in the present.

Becoming aware of and looking at the dreams you experience as you sleep can be one important way to get in touch with these hidden aspects of who you are. This process of embracing your “shadow side” allows you to get to know who you really are as a human being, with all your foibles, flaws, character defects, and shortcomings. This is a part of understanding and claiming your uniqueness and “specialness,” along with how you are similar to other people.

This is also a way to connect with your “true self,” who you actually are and want to be at your very core. This “true self” is the end result of rewriting your “life script” to become the person you were meant to be, not the person who was created by the shaming “life script” foisted on you by those who shamed and wounded you as a child.

Finally, work hard to identify, acknowledge, and respect the goals and “dreams” that you have and will continue to develop for yourself as you get to know yourself even better. These include the hopes, desires, wishes, and aspirations that are part of your “true self” and can give meaning and purpose to your life (shame often saps any sense of purpose that we might have about who we are). These dreams often relate to things that were “missing” in your childhood experience, although they can also relate to important values that were actually present or modeled for you when you were a child. Some examples could include:

- a desire for safety and security
- a desire for adventure
- a desire for personal power
- a desire for respect
- a desire for spontaneity
- a desire for fairness and justice
- a desire to travel and “see and experience the world” around you
- a desire to be creative
- a desire to heal your pain from the past and create personal growth for yourself in the present
- a desire to take time for yourself, slow down, and truly relax
- a desire to get in touch with spirituality (however you define it)
- a desire to create order in your life
- a desire to be productive, accomplish things, and be “successful”

- a desire to be competent and capable
- a desire to leave a personal legacy to those whose lives you touch and to the world in general

STEP 8) Learn to become aware of and then replace your critical, hostile, judgmental, and abusive inner dialogue with more positive and affirming thoughts and self-talk about yourself and others. What you say to yourself is who you are and what you will become. Think about and tap into nurturing voices from the past and present (e.g. relatives, teachers, coaches, friends, counselors who were/are helpful, encouraging, supportive, and positive with you) and start to use what they said or would say to you when you make mistakes and when you do something well in the present. Shift from a shame-based to an empowerment-based system by beginning to see that, while your (and others’) actions or behaviors may need to change, you (and they) are still “okay,” worthwhile, capable, and lovable. Open yourself to the positive and affirming statements people say to you in the present and work hard to actually take those compliments into the way you are thinking about yourself. Start to consistently view yourself and others with empathy and compassion. For more about the impact of negative and positive self-talk on shame and empowerment, see *The Cycles of Shame and Empowerment* on this website.

STEP 9) Another absolutely critical interpersonal skill to develop during this recovery process is to learn to become more assertive with others whenever the need arises in your current life. You have to be able to identify and “voice” your truth in order to truly “feel comfortable in your own skin.” Being assertive and finding and using your “voice” involves:

- identifying and respectfully stating your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs
...without having the expectation that others will necessarily respond exactly the way you want or you think they “should” respond
- seeking approval, attention, support, and assistance directly, taking the risk to ask for what you want or need from others, and accepting and appreciating what others are willing to give you
...even if it is not exactly what you wanted or expected
- learning and putting into practice the difference between useful and productive anger, which involves setting limits and maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself, and hostile and abusive thoughts and behaviors, which involve trying to hurt, punish, demean, humiliate, intimidate, or control other people
- using “behavioral assertiveness” (see the article *Styles of Communicating With Others* on this website for more about this step) to take the ultimate responsibility for yourself if your verbal assertiveness is not helpful in a particular situation

STEP 10) Slow down your moment-to-moment process and become more aware of and make conscious your patterns of responding to the world around you. This means stopping to observe your internal “workings” and your reactions to situations and other people in a friendly, non-judgmental, and

gentle manner. Start to notice what you're doing and why you're doing it and start to clearly realize that you are continually making choices.

Learn to take charge of how you react to and behave in everyday situations by slowing down and increasing your mindfulness and making conscious decisions rather than reverting to the naive notion that *“bad things just keep happening to me and there's nothing I can do about it.”* In an ongoing fashion, consciously monitor your interactions and patterns, staying alert for situations and issues, people, places, and self-talk which can activate old shaming scenes from the past that end up triggering shame and negative self-talk for you in the present. Shame can often be activated in you even when the other person does not intend to do so and is completely unaware that this has even happened.

- Learn to directly confront those who are critical, judgmental, and shaming with you in the present and spend less time with or avoid completely people who continue to be harsh, disrespectful, controlling, and abusive with you.
- Become aware of feeling powerless and victimized in your daily life and develop the skills necessary to assess the reality of the situation and to tap into your own “personal power” (rather than trying to assume “power and control over others”) when you need to do so in order to effectively address issues that do arise.
- Learn to set clear short-term and long-term goals to move you in the directions you wish to go in your life. Then **TAKE ACTION** and actually follow through and **GO FOR THESE GOALS** that you have set for yourself!

This can be described as a process of becoming proactive rather than reactive, taking positive initiative to address your life issues rather than simply waiting for something bad to happen and then reacting in an unproductive and unhelpful way. Start to take healthy risks as a way to push yourself to heal and grow. Also remember, however, to have compassion for and patience with yourself and others as you go through your day. You and others will make mistakes at times. There is no way to be “perfect” in an empowerment-based system either.

STEP 11) Learn to take healthy personal responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, actions, and your inaction (which is also a choice you make!) in past situations and in your current life. This allows you to feel guilt, a more healthy response than shame, when you look back at mistakes you have made in the past or say or do something in the present that you regret. Strive hard to actually live the by the values that you believe in and espouse. Learn to recognize clearly what your responsibility was in the past or is in the present and make amends or apologize whenever possible when you feel uncomfortable about something you have done. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways including:

- face-to-face contacts with other people,
- in a letter you write (sent or not sent),
- in a role-play,
- at a gravesite, or
- using visualization and imagery to create “healing rituals” for yourself related to mistakes you have made in the past.

In addition, don't continue to carry personal burdens from the past (e.g. quitting school, being fired from a job, getting divorced, taking medication or having to go the hospital for depression or other mental health issues, filing bankruptcy, being arrested for domestic assault or some other legal infraction). Find a few people with whom you can share these secrets that keep you locked in your shame. And don't continue to add to the shame in your life by being unwilling to address and change your current unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that build and maintain your shame today. Begin to view your past and present experiences and mistakes as part of being human rather than an wholesale indictment of you as a person and view and start to use them as opportunities to learn, grow, and "stretch yourself." Part of this involves actively working to forgive yourself for the hurtful and shaming things you have done to others.

STEP 12) Get in touch with and work diligently on your spiritual life and use it regularly in your daily living to develop a sense of inner safety, security, and peace within you. Use quiet time, prayer, and meditation in an ongoing way to create a peaceful space within yourself where you can feel "centered" and "grounded" no matter what is occurring around you. With a connection to God or a "Higher Power" (however you define this for yourself), you are never really alone. Start to see yourself as part of a larger universe and also connected to other people through their humanity, which includes both their pain and their joy. Notice the commonalities that link you and all members of the human race (including the people closest to you).

As part of this connection to the larger universe, work hard on forgiveness and developing empathy and compassion for others and yourself.

- Work to forgive others who hurt you in the past and present;
- Work to forgive yourself for not being able to protect and nurture yourself during your childhood (and at later times as well) if you were shamed and abused during these times; and
- Work to forgive yourself for your past and current mistakes and for hurting and shaming others at times in your life.

And keep in mind that forgiveness is not necessarily a single discrete episode that occurs at one moment but is rather an ongoing process that ebbs and flows as you continue on your life journey. There may be times when you fall back into being harsh and punishing with yourself and others. At those times, it is important to remind yourself that, ultimately, forgiveness in your life is the real goal you are pursuing and then strive to move back toward that. For more about the process of forgiveness, see the questions that follow this article.

STEP 13) Cultivate ongoing ways to nurture and take care of yourself as you go through your day-to-day life. These can include:

- reducing the "clutter" in your life, both physical (i.e. the material "things" that surround you) and emotional (i.e. old hurts and resentments) and working to decrease or completely eliminate your negative and destructive "habits;" in general, this means working to "simplify" your life
- staying busy with activities that are stimulating, satisfying, and fulfilling for you
...self-esteem is more than just "positive thinking" and "happy thoughts"

...it also involves making a commitment to make a real difference and leave the world a better place than you found it

...i.e. look for and find purpose and meaning in your life

...use your life to make a difference in your own and others' lives

- noticing and intervening in your internal comparisons to others, which often leads to feelings of shame, defectiveness, and inferiority or to arrogance, grandiosity, and a sense of superiority
- keeping your worth and adequacy separated in a healthy way from what happens in the outside world
 - ...e.g. from “ups and downs” in your finances and the stock market; the contentiousness of the political process; crime in the streets; the destruction of hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, and other natural catastrophes; wars and genocide all over the globe
 - ...this does not mean that you cannot work to actually do something positive about what is happening around you but don't allow that negativity to take over your thoughts and your daily living
- focusing on positive experiences and feelings, storing them in your consciousness, learning to affirm yourself from within, openly appreciating who you are and how you live your life, and experiencing a sense of **GRATITUDE** about who you are and what you have in your life
- identifying and actually living by the values that you say are important to you
- staying aware of what you are doing well and giving yourself ongoing credit for doing these things
- consistently reaching out to other people and the world around you and offering assistance to those less fortunate than you are and using your talents to make a difference in life for yourself and others
 - ...raising your children in a positive and affirming way
 - ...serving as a teacher and mentor by sharing your knowledge to help others with their life struggles (e.g. teaching anger classes in the community; teaching English as a second language at a social service agency; “12-stepping” if you are a member of Alcoholics Anonymous or other support group programs)
 - ...volunteering your time and energy to offer assistance to others in a practical way (e.g. serving meals at a homeless shelter, volunteering to visit seniors in a nursing home, helping to build a “Habitat for Humanity” home)
 - ...taking mission trips to different parts of the world to help others with medical, housing, or other pressing needs they may have
- building in tangible rewards for yourself on a regular basis
 - ...reading a special book, getting an ice cream cone, going for a walk, spending time with a good friend, working in your garden, developing and doing hobbies that you enjoy, watching a favorite movie
- developing and maintaining a warm and nurturing sense of humor about yourself and others and developing and using the ability to laugh in a non-shaming way at your own and others' foibles, inconsistencies, and idiosyncrasies (we all have them!)
- being gentle with yourself and others in an ongoing fashion which means learning to like and accept yourself and the others whom you choose to have in your life

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT AND WRITE ABOUT RELATED TO THE ARTICLE ABOVE

- 1) Think and write about the hurtful and destructive “life script(s)” you were given and about the “parts” and roles you were taught and expected to play by others in your childhood and in your adult life (be specific in identifying these). How have you played out this script(s) in your daily living (i.e. what have you done to maintain and actually build on this original script so it has become an even stronger and more important part of who you have been and who you are)?
 - Think about the each of the areas noted below and identify what you have learned about yourself, other people, and the world around you from each of them and how they have contributed or related to the “life script(s)” you have identified for yourself?
...Your self-image and self-esteem; your destructive thought and behavior patterns; your relationships with your family of origin members, extended family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers; your relationships with partners; your relationships with your own and other children; your relationship with the world-at-large; your school and work life; the successes, achievements, and accomplishments in your life; the significant mistakes, disappointments, and “failures” in your life
- 2) Think and write about an example of a shaming and traumatic “**governing scene**” from your childhood.
 - What happened (describe the situation)?
 - How were you feeling during and after this incident?
 - What did you tell yourself about this experience? What was the message about yourself that you took from this event (what did you think about yourself at that time and later)?
 - How did this experience affect or change you or your behavior at that time and even up until the present?
- 3) Go back through the “**governing scene**” that you have thought and written about above.
 - Imagine or visualize ways you or others could have nurtured or protected you in that situation (with what you know now about the effect the “governing scene” has had on you and with the options and choices that you are now aware that you do have in the present).
...What would you or the others say or do with the shaming person or in that traumatic incident (remember that anything is possible in looking back at this situation in the present)?
 - After visualizing a different outcome, what are you thinking and feeling about yourself right now and how can you use what you have done here to address potentially shaming or difficult situations that are similar to this past “governing scene” in the present?
- 4) Write a letter to your “inner child.”
 - What would you want to say to him or her about what happened in the past regarding shaming experiences and about what you want him or her to know about the present and the future?
 - E.G. *“I’m truly sorry for the way you were treated,” “You didn’t deserve to be treated that way,” “I’ll be there for you when you need me,” “It’s okay to make mistakes (and learn from them),” “What happened wasn’t your fault,” “You can trust yourself now,” “You no longer have to live according to someone else’s ‘plan’ for you,” “Don’t continue to believe their lies about you,” “You deserve respect and love,” “You’re safe now; you can learn to take care of yourself”*
- 5) Identify at least one person in your life whom you need or want to forgive for what they have done to you in the past.
 - When did this happen and what did they say or do that was hurtful or shaming for you in that situation?
 - Have you tried to forgive them in the past?
...If so, what have you already done?

...If not, why have you chosen to hold onto your anger and resentment toward them up until now and how has this affected your life?

- What interferes with your willingness to forgive them at this point (if you have not already done so)?
- What are the potential payoffs and consequences for you if you decide not to work at forgiving them for what they did?
- What are the potential payoffs and consequences for you if you decide to actively work at forgiving them for what they did?
- What could you do (be specific) to move yourself toward forgiving this person at this point in your life?

6) Identify a situation in your life where you want or need to forgive yourself for something that you have done in the past.

- When did this happen and what did you do that was hurtful or damaging to you or to someone else?
- Have you tried to forgive yourself in the past?
...If so, what have you already done?
...If not, why have you chosen to hold on to your anger and resentment toward yourself up to now?
- What interferes with your willingness to work at forgiving yourself at this point?
- What are the payoffs and consequences for you if you decide not to work at forgiving yourself for what you did?
- What are the payoffs and consequences for you if you decide to actively work at forgiving yourself for what you did?
- What specific things could you do to move toward forgiving yourself at this point in your life?

7) Think of a situation from the past where you would like to make amends or apologize to a person you hurt or shamed at that time.

- Describe what happened in the situation. How was what you did harmful to the other person? How did the other person react to you at the time?
- In looking back at this situation, what did you do or say that you now regret?
- What would you like to say or do now to make amends for what you did to that other person?
- How will it affect your life if you do not, in some way, make amends for what you said or did to this person?
- How will it affect your life if you do, in some way, make amends for what you said or did to this person?

8) What do you want (or did you wish you had the chance) to say to your father, your mother, or other important people from your childhood about your “growing-up” experience?

- **Write each parent or important caretaker a letter** discussing what you thought about your childhood, what you would have liked to be different and why, how your childhood has affected your adult life and relationships, and how you felt/feel about your parents in the past and in the present.
- You can also write letters to other people who were important to you (in either a positive or negative sense) from your childhood (or your adult years), if you wish.

9) Imagine, for a moment, that you have the ability to be present at the memorial service that is being held for you shortly after you have died.

- What would you want the speakers at this gathering to say about you and the life that you have lived?
- How do you want to be remembered by the people who are most important to you?
- What do you want your legacy to be: in your family, in your community, and in the larger world?

This can serve as an opportunity for you to think and write about how you want to rewrite the “life script” that you have been living up to the present time and what you need to do at this point in your life to change the things that interfere with your vision of who you truly want and hope to be.