

## **Does Feeling Ashamed Help Kick a Bad Habit?**

It has been said that if you do something wrong but nobody else knows, you may feel guilty; but if you do something wrong and others find out, you will surely feel ashamed. In fact public shaming has historically been used as a means to punish bad behavior, from Hester Prynne's scarlet letter to marking license plates of persons convicted of drunk driving. One might argue that teachers putting the names of students who misbehave on the classroom board and therapy group leaders who require participants to reveal their relapses to the group are using shame for educational or therapeutic purposes.

But does invoking shame lead to better behavior? A group of psychologists at the University of British Columbia recently set out to answer that question by recruiting 105 adults (58% women) from Alcoholics Anonymous groups in the Vancouver, B.C. area to be interviewed about their feelings about having previously relapsed in drinking. The interesting thing about this study is that not only did the participants rate themselves on measures of shame but they were also video recorded while discussing their relapses. These recordings were then coded for nonverbal displays of shame. It turns out that people who feel ashamed slightly narrow their chests and slump their shoulders, which can be reliably coded by trained observers. To make sure the observers were not being influenced by what the participants were saying, the sound was turned off while they listened to them talk about their relapses. After this initial interview and observation, participants were invited back for a second session 4 months later to report on their sobriety and relapse rate.

Results. Unfortunately less than half of the original participants returned for the second visit, but shame displays were no different for those who returned and those who didn't. Of the participants who returned for Visit #2 those who had displayed shame at the first interview not only relapsed more often than those who displayed little shame but they also consumed more alcohol when they did relapse. Interestingly, other variables, such as feelings of guilt, negative feelings in general, personality, age, education, ethnicity, gender, and severity of alcohol dependence, did not predict who would relapse.

The researchers conclude that shame "is a core emotion underlying addiction" and suggest that it may contribute to relapse by causing addicts to view their addiction as enduring and unchangeable, which in turn causes them to feel demoralized and hopeless about their addiction, which results in a tendency to give up rather than try harder. It is the giving up that leads to relapse. They distinguish shame from guilt, which is a more private emotion and may motivate people to try harder to change.

The study certainly raises some interesting questions. Should treatment providers focus much attention on their clients' mistakes? How does one move forward after feeling shame? Is a private confession to a trusted confidant more motivating than a more public confession? Are there circumstances under which a public confession does produce positive behavior change? Should we encourage people to feel bad about their mistakes, or does the motivation to change only come from within? If invoking shame doesn't motivate change, does it serve some other purpose?

Randles, D. & Tracy, J.L. (2012) Nonverbal displays of shame predict relapse and declining health in recovering alcoholics. *Clinical Psychological Science*, Vol. 1, Pages 149-155.