WHY IS SHAME SUCH A CENTRAL EXPERIENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

by Carolyn Spring

'It's not your shame,' says the therapist.

'No,' I say. 'I get that. It's not my shame.'

But still the feeling persists. Always the feeling persists.

Shame has many flavours and right now I'm tasting 'hiddenness' with a hint of 'withdrawal'. Sometimes I gulp down whole mouthfuls of self-disgust – that sense that I am toxic, bad, evil and corrupt. A green-slimed festering soul, a ceaseless chasm of ungoodness.

And right now the shame is a shrinking-down within myself. I don't want to see myself. I don't want to be seen. I barely want to exist. I want to minify myself, to get into the smallest place possible. It's a familiar feeling. I've had it since childhood. I've had it since I was abused.

'It's not your shame,' says the therapist, again.

I sigh, frustrated.

One of the great conundrums of child sexual abuse is why, as blameless victims – as mere children – we feel so much shame for acts forced unwillingly upon us. After all, it really wasn't our fault. The blame for child sexual abuse lies only and always with the perpetrator. My very first memory – of being abused in a toddler cot by my grandad when I was just 2 or 3 years old – reveals the ridiculousness of shame: how could that ever possibly be my fault, my guilt, my wrongdoing, my bad?

And yet shame and child sexual abuse are eternal bed-fellows. As survivors, shame consumes us so totally that our beliefs adapt to accommodate it: 'It was my fault,'

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I said, many times, during therapy. 'I did cause it to happen.' Fruitless, endless arguments against the illogic of it all: I could just about see, when my front brain was online, that it wasn't my fault. Just about. Mostly I could only see it because I knew that I wouldn't ever blame another victim, another child, for being abused – so logically I could see that that impunity applied also to me. But still I couldn't shake off the bone-deep conviction, the immersed-in-it, shudder-and-shake feeling, that the shame was mine: that I caused the abuse, deserved it, invited it, even wanted it. I knew technically it wasn't true. But it felt true. Oh, it felt so true.

But why? Why as survivors do we universally struggle so much to put the shame back where it belongs: on the perpetrator? Why does it seep into every cell of our body, and contradict every logical thought we have ever had on the matter?

Doubtless there are numerous thoughts on this matter. Here are a few of mine.

1. GROOMING

Grooming induces the transfer of shame from perpetrator to victim. This is no accident. For the abuser to continue to abuse, they need ongoing access to the victim, for their crimes not to be uncovered. The abuser therefore grooms both the child, the family and society at large. We are led, insidiously and persuasively, to believe that they would never do – could never do! – what they are doing. Because they're the good guys. They deflect suspicion. They are pillars of the community, loving parents, faithful friends, trustworthy employees. 'Not him!' people cry when his crimes are – so rarely – revealed. Less commonly, so even more forcefully: 'Not her!'

Abusers lower the child's defences by inviting closeness, intimacy, trust and reward. They inveigle us into secrets and lies, trapping us perhaps with our own wrongdoing – I knew I shouldn't have sat on the tractor or eaten those sweets; no-one must find out; my new 'friend' held the secret for me willingly; later my new and not-so-friendly 'friend' held it as a threat. What starts with sweets and attention may segue into threats and manipulation. There's more than one way to groom a child.

Grooming is the way that we fall victim to the perpetrator, whilst believing that we willingly participated or even initiated the abuse. It's a set-up, an intentional reversal. We are tricked. And so the shame that the abuser ought to bear is borne instead by us as the victim. There is a sleight of hand, a switch, an exchange: and instead of the abuser feeling bad for what they are doing, we as victims end up feeling bad for what they are doing, believing somehow (we're never quite sure how) that it's our fault. The whole thing is a trap. We fall for it, because we

are children. And we fall for it, because the abuser stands to gain everything if we do so, and to lose everything if we don't. The subterfuge is planned with precision; we simply don't stand a chance – not least because as children it simply doesn't occur to us what's going on.

2. THE COLLUSION OF SOCIETY

It's hard not to feel ashamed – excluded from the group, different, stigmatised – when the group never talks about your experiences. Until I started writing and speaking in this field, I'd never spoken to anyone who 'admitted' to having been sexually abused. Even in that word – 'admitted' – is the inference that the guilt is mine, and I am uncovering my own shameful secret. Never having heard anyone speak about abuse, I thought it was only me. It never seemed to occur to anyone that my mental health struggles were due to trauma. No-one ever asked me if I'd been abused. It was an unspoken unreality in my mind – a secret known only to myself, and then only to dissociative parts of myself: my main consciousness reflected the denial and splitting of society around me. What else can we do but feel that we are unspeakable, when our experiences are unspeakable? Shame seeps in from society around us. 'You're different,' it says. 'You're weird. You're wrong.' So we keep the secret that our abuser so desperately wants us to keep, and even though one in four girls and one in six boys are abused in childhood, no-one quite believes it.

3. REACTIONS TO DISCLOSURE

I sat at a conference table with a young man from Fraserburgh. We were strangers, randomly seated together at an event (ironically, so it would turn out) on 'How to communicate'. We were instructed to pair off and introduce ourselves. 'What do you do?' he dutifully asked. 'I'm a writer,' I replied. His face brightened and his eyebrows puckered in interest. 'Oh really!' he said, eager and excitable. 'What do you write?'

Here now was the moment. Do I gulp down the truth, or do I speak it without shame?

'I write about trauma,' I said, slowly, steadily. 'I write about my own experiences of recovering from trauma, especially child sexual abuse.'

The change was instant. He literally turned pale. He broke eye contact, and his entire face clouded over with a mixture of anger and disgust. 'Excuse me,' he said, swallowing his words into his throat as he stood up. And that was that. He turned away and walked off to the toilets, not returning until the next session had begun. He didn't speak to me for the rest of the day. How is that possible? I thought to myself, burning hot with shame. How is that reaction even possible for a grown adult?

Perhaps I'd triggered his own trauma; perhaps he himself was a perpetrator; perhaps he had ulcerative colitis that flared coincidentally just at the exact wrong moment. I'll never know. That was the first time I'd had a reaction like that, but it certainly has not been the last. I've been quizzed, and disbelieved, and challenged, and lectured. People have told me – simply in response to me saying what I do in my work – that I need to stop being a victim, that I need to move on, even that it's impossible for me to be sure I was abused ('because false memories are a thing, aren't they? – people think they've been abused when they haven't. I saw it on telly.') It's the minority response, of course. But so too is empathy and compassion.

The sad truth is that by far the majority response I've had is silence, withdrawal, a quiet discomfort, and an immediate change of subject. I've learned over the years that I can avoid a reaction if I talk about 'helping other people to recover from trauma and adversity' – because it's abstract and it's over there ('How nice!' people say.) It's not as immediate, not as slap-you-in-the-face, as saying 'child sexual abuse' and referring to it in the first person. Sometimes I take the easier option. Sometimes I do not.

4. THE TABOO AROUND SEXUALITY

Some people simply aren't comfortable with the words 'sex' or 'sexual', whatever the context. They may disapprove of the concept of sex; or they may disapprove of it being talked about. They erroneously equate child sexual abuse with 'sex'. It's not 'sex'. It's abuse. 'Sex' is an activity between consenting adults or at least consenting adolescent peers. Anything else is abusive and criminal. Sometimes people in their ignorance assume that a child is engaging in 'sex', and they disapprove of the child for doing this. That's the disapproval we then face when we say that we were sexually abused as children. They don't see the crime, the hurt, the pain, the terror, the confusion, the exploitation, the manipulation, the abuse. They shame us by crediting the criminality of the perpetrator to us as their victims. Children do not have sex with adults. Adults abuse children. Sex and abuse are entirely different activities. They just happen to use the same physiology.

The taboo around sex and sexuality though stops people thinking about the difference between sex and abuse. It stops the conversation, the discussion, the thinking-it-through. A single, simple, and very, very wrong framework is imposed: child sexual abuse is sex; we don't want to talk about sex; children shouldn't be having sex; we don't approve. And hence the shame. It's all based on a false premise, but the shame sticks to us. Ugh.

5. THE PROJECTION OF DISGUST

More widely, we feel shame because it is projected onto us via disgust. The responsibility that should be placed on the invisible perpetrator falls instead, in their absence, on us as the visible victim. We become a lightning rod for the horror and disgust, the visceral reaction to child sexual abuse, that is a natural reaction in those of us who cannot conceptualise sexual activity with a child. The wrongness of it, the perversion, the sickening revulsion – this is the reaction that most people have when their minds try to grasp the concept of child sexual abuse. But instead of containing that reaction or dumping it on the perpetrator – the only worthy, deserving recipient of it – instead it boils over too easily onto us as the victim, simply because we are there. People react. They recoil. They retch. And their revulsion is projected onto us – perhaps unintentionally, perhaps unconsciously, but as survivors of child sexual abuse we are exquisitely sensitive to the reactions of others, and we see it, and we feel it, and we take it into ourselves.

Sometimes, shamelessly, the disgust is projected directly onto us. 'Ugh, that's disgusting! That's horrible! Ugh! Yuk!' – often followed immediately by, 'I don't want to know. I don't want to hear. I don't want that in my head. Don't tell me any more.' There, on a plate for us, served up with an extra serving of fries, is our main course of shame. You are disgusting, is what we hear and feel, even though that may not be their intention. But it's hard not to feel disgusting when someone reacts to what you've just said with disgust.

6. THE FREEZE RESPONSE

The most common response in the moment of abuse – especially for a child – is to freeze. It is a neurobiological default, an ancient evolutionary instinct when fight and flight fail. With activation of the dorsal vagal nerve, there is a cascade of sensation-numbing chemicals into our bloodstream; our attention narrows; our body goes still; and we freeze in submission to the predator, in the hopeless expectation of defeat. To freeze is to dissociate. And to freeze is to feel shame. Not because there is anything to be ashamed of – again, it's not our shame – but because evolutionarily shame is an instinctive response: avert the gaze, slump the shoulders, submit to a greater power, take the fall, don't provoke the predator. It keeps us alive. Shame and freeze have the same neurobiological fingerprint. In that moment, especially with our front brain shut down, it's not about what we think of ourselves. It's simply a gut thing, a bodily reaction to threat – and shame resides forever in our guts, sub-diaphragmatically, in full dorsal vagal collapse.

Freezing and shame go hand-in-hand. They are both our best attempts to survive. We extrapolate meaning afterwards: 'I'm bad; it was my fault; I deserved it; I'm unloveable; I'm unworthy; I'm toxic.' But that, I believe, is our brain in retrospect making sense of our experience, matching our beliefs to our experience. We saw ourselves conquered. We saw ourselves freeze. We saw ourselves small. We add all of that together and assume our place in the pecking-order of our band: grovelling in the dirt. We take the lowest position, of the wrong one, the bad one, in order not to provoke the predator further. We know our place. And this neurobiological response becomes an unconscious neurochemical habit for us – burned hard into us through the ineffability of trauma. Shame is the natural outcome of being made small, of our wishes and desires and feelings and comfort being obliterated by the criminal desires of a ravenous predator. It lives on. It's hard to shift.

'It's not your shame,' says the therapist, and I know, again, that what she is saying is true. No, of course not. Of course it's not my shame. My intellect agrees. But my body remembers all of this and it still feels like it's my shame. I know my place. And so it persists. It's not fair, and it's not right, but also – at so many levels – it makes perfect sense. The perpetrator and the society which births them – a society which does so little to reduce their opportunities for predation, which does so little to hold them to account for the harm that they inflict – together pass the blame onto us, and we accept it, because it's what we've been trained to do. It allows the abuser to keep on abusing, and it allows society to blame us for it and therefore not to have to act.

This is why shame is such an integral part of the experience of child sexual abuse and why it's so hard to work through. And that's not our fault. It really isn't our shame. •