

These three exercises will help you understand shame

Shame is a really tricky subject for therapists, because none of us are without shame, and very few of us have confronted our own head on.

Our recent training day with Chrissie Sanderson was designed to give techniques for working with shame in the counselling environment, how to broach the issue of shame without triggering it, and what is needed to counteract it when it overwhelms. As an experiential day—it was highly interactive and included some exercises which have been described below.

Chrissie began the day by promoting self-care in a thoroughly empathic way – by asking participants to select from a large collection of soft toys an item which was to become their transitional object for the day. Transitional objects are those toys or objects which a child associates with the safety and security of home—an object which can represent running back to mum when she isn't available, and thus soothe the worried child within. In a room full of adult psychotherapists, the opportunity to legitimately carry a cuddly toy for the day sent a ripple of excitement through the room accompanied by a lot of grinning and pride in showing off our choices.



A transitional object offers security and safety, plus everyone loves a cuddly owl!

Why is shame so shameful?

Shame is something we rarely admit to. We will say we feel guilty, or embarrassed because somehow these are more acceptable, yet our society is an inherently shaming one—social media tricks us into believing that everyone else is doing better

than us, we present a perfect version of ourselves for the world to see, whilst internally questioning 'why has everyone else got it sorted when I don't?'

This constant state of comparison leads us to find ourselves lacking. And this isn't just confined to clients—often therapists will avoid directly dealing with the shame their clients bring, as a way of avoiding their own insecurities and difficult feelings. But we don't want to eradicate shame. Without shame the world would have no morals. Instead, we want to build its counterpart – pride.

Pride over shame

Pride comes in two forms:

- **Hubristic Pride** – is excessive, exaggerated, and a negative trait.
- **Authentic Pride** – is about achievement and gaining mastery. This pride is positive, and can overcome shame.

In working with shame we see hubristic pride as a cover for shame, and restoration of authentic pride as a way to build shame resilience. Thus, when tackling shame, our focus is split into uncovering and working with the root of the shame, and at the same time building authentic pride to allow the client to cope with shame in a healthy way.

Shame's role in life

Shame is a primary emotion which is universally experienced. And it serves a positive role in society – as social animals, it promotes pro-social behaviour, social bonds and adherence to societal norms and boundaries. Healthy shame teaches children what is expected and acceptable within their society as well as instilling compassion for fellow humans. Unhealthy shame can fester, developing deeper issues.

Although shame is often avoided, expressing it garners acceptance – if, for example, when you mess up you say 'I'm sorry, I feel dreadful' then it is likely you will be forgiven and therefore accepted. However if you show a lack of regard for the consequences of your actions the other is likely to feel violated by your lack of shame which leads to a distancing of the relationship between you. It is therefore very important within society and relationships for you to be able to own your shame and act accordingly.

The same can be said for mistakes in therapy. If for instance the client accuses you of being tired or not listening it might feel natural to hide the shame you feel by batting it back – 'No I'm not, I wonder what's going on for you to make you think that', but if you're truthful 'I am tired today, and I'm sorry you feel I haven't been listening, please go on' then the client learns that the therapeutic space is one in which mistakes are safe to make, and that there is acceptance of their lack of perfection.

In this way, when shame is owned it can be said to be healthy shame – short lived and serving a societal purpose. Yet if no space is given to allow an opportunity for

repair then it can't be processed and may become chronic shame – lingering and entwining its way throughout your sense of self.

Exercises for Working with Shame

A majority of the day was spent in 30 minute blocks trying out the various exercises Chrissie recommends for working with shame from a right brained perspective (as shame is thought of as right-brained, it can be harder to access via traditional left-brained talking therapies). People were encouraged to work at their own pace and in their own style either in groups, pairs or alone, whichever they felt was most conducive for their own learning style.

1. Nesting Dolls

Chrissie brought with her a fascinating selection of nesting dolls, from traditional Russian designs, to more modern and fanciful styles. These Russian dolls were then used to explore the question 'Who am I?'. Starting with the outermost doll representing the 'You' that everyone sees, the idea was to slowly explore the different layers that make up the self, including:

- The you that everyone sees
- The you that people see when they get to meet you
- The you that your friends see
- The you that only your best friend or family sees
- The you that only you see
- The you that is still hidden (things about yourself that you don't yet know)
- The deepest part of you



The nesting dolls represent different layers of the self, and thus which layers we hide from others.

In slowly exploring these layers the client was then able to see what elements of the self they hid and to what extent, thereby exploring elements of the self which may be shameful to them.

2. Masks

On the most popular table of the day was a pile of plain white masks, surrounded by a large selection of paints, sequins, baubles, ribbons, nails, feathers and other decorative items. For this exercise we were asked to think about the invisible mask we wear to hide our shame, and to make a representation of it.



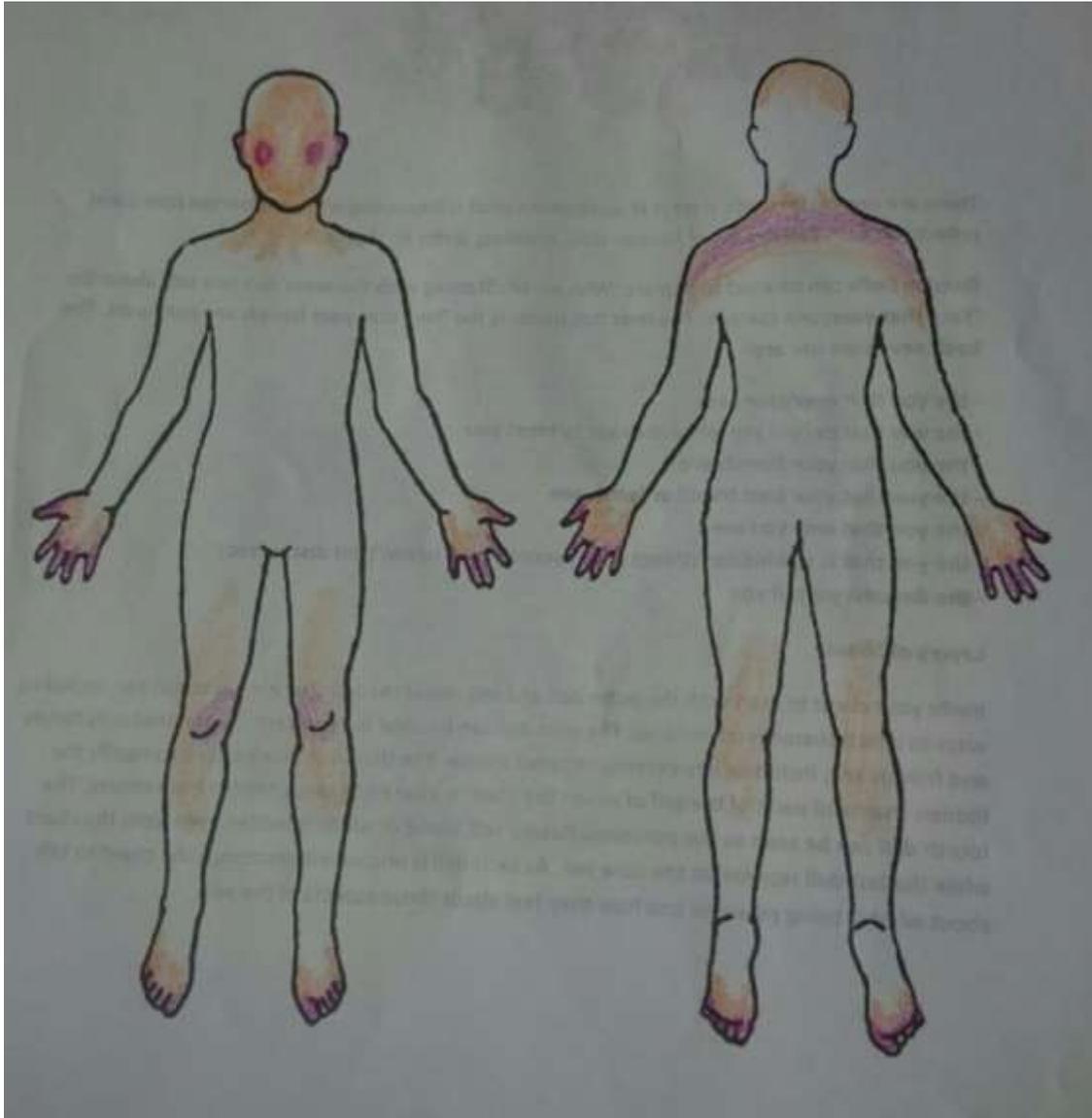
Creating a mask allows people to think about how they hide shame. Make up or beauty products were used by some, whilst others used armour plating or aggression to ward others off.

The discussions around the table saw some people with a clear idea of what they wanted to portray, and others finding their way as they went. Some people make pretty masks, representing make up and adornments we hide behind to pretend everything is well. Others made dark, angry masks with war paint streaks, and some like armour with nails sticking outwards as if to ward off anyone straying too near.

3. Embodiment of Shame

In a series of written exercises designed to make us think about the different aspects of shame, participants found new ways of thinking about themselves and their own shame.

In an exercise entitled the Embodiment of Shame, Chrissie had supplied a blank outline of a human form on which we were invited to identify where on our body we felt shame – using different colours and shades we were encouraged to show the intensity of the feeling. This inevitably led to mental conjuring of the feeling of shame, and of a scrutiny of this feeling which isn't usually afforded to it.



An exercise to show the embodiment of shame. Colouring a human form, we can show where shame manifests itself physically, through blushing or other sensations.

Exercises to support your understanding of shame

Overall, all of these and the other exercises of the day were a fascinating exploration of a much denied feeling which it was unanimously agreed had been incredibly helpful to each of us. More details of these and other exercises on working with shame can be found in Christiane Sanderson's 2015 book *Counselling Skills for Working with Shame*.