



Shame and Self-forgiveness Stabilisation Pack



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Shame and Self-forgiveness

As if facing the trauma was not enough in itself, many trauma survivors blame themselves for the awful things that have happened to them and as a result, feel ashamed and guilty. For many people, recovery from trauma will involve overcoming these feelings.

Here are some common statements from people who blame themselves for their trauma:-

'It is my fault because I didn't try to stop it.'

Many people who survive traumas such as sexual abuse or domestic violence are told that the trauma is their fault, and that it happened because they were bad or deserved it or were in some way responsible for it. For example, people who sexually abuse children plan their words and actions very carefully. If they can persuade the child that awful things will happen if anyone knows what is going on, or that this is a special secret, or that the child somehow wanted this to happen, they will be able to carry on the abuse. The child will feel too confused or frightened to confide in anyone, and will believe that the abuse is their fault in some way. Later on in life, they may look back and blame themselves for not stopping it.

A similar situation happens in domestic violence, where the man (or occasionally the woman) blames their violence and controlling behaviour on their partner. The partner begins to believe that they have somehow caused or deserve the abuse by being inadequate or worthless. They may conceal what is going on out of a sense of shame. This allows the abuser to continue their behaviour.

'It is my fault because I didn't try to escape.'

In the section on 'How does trauma affect the mind and body?' we saw how when we are faced with a threat, our brains and bodies respond automatically in three main ways; fight, flight or freeze. These are automatic responses which have evolved to increase our chances of survival, and which we cannot control. For example, people who are assaulted will often 'freeze'. This is a normal response to an overwhelming threat such as rape. The legal system now acknowledges that even if rape victims did not fight back, this doesn't

mean they consented to what was done to them. The same ‘freeze’ response is often seen in other threatening situations, such as a child who witnesses domestic violence.

Sometimes the brain chooses another response – for example, people may run and hide under threat of a physical assault. Again, this is a normal inbuilt reaction to danger, and not a sign of being cowardly.

‘It is my fault because I enjoyed some of the attention from the abuser’

Trauma is especially confusing when it is inflicted by someone the person loved and was close to; for example, when a child was abused by a parent, relative or favourite teacher. It is natural for children to want affection and cuddles. Abusers know this, and will often use a child’s trust and vulnerability to get close to them. In fact, they often pick children who are already vulnerable because of loneliness or neglect. Once they have gained the child’s trust, the affection gradually turns to abuse. The child may then feel guilty because they welcomed the cuddles and attention at first. In fact, what has happened is that the abuser has taken advantage of their innocence and trust and their natural need for affection. The child has no need to feel guilty at all.

Trauma and abuse are never the fault of the victim

It is important to remember that nobody deserves to be abused. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and other forms of abuse are crimes. Whatever the circumstances, these actions are the responsibility of the abuser, not the person who has been abused.

It can be difficult to accept that you were not able to predict or prevent the trauma from happening. In fact, it may be easier to blame yourself than to accept the awful feelings of powerlessness. However, as we have noted, in reality, traumatic events are out of our control and very often there wasn’t anything that you could have done. Children are often the least powerful and most vulnerable victims of abuse and are not able to stop the terrible things that happen to them, because they are dependent on others for their survival. If you look back with the help of a friend, counsellor or mental health worker, you will be able to see that ***you did the only things that you felt able to do at the time, in order to survive and reduce the danger.*** You coped as well as you possibly could at the time. In fact, you may be able to see that you and your body used some very clever and creative ways to survive.

Sometimes it is helpful to imagine how you would react if someone told you that they had been through a similar experience, or if you heard that a child had been hurt in the same way you were. It is unlikely that you would blame them in the same way that you blame yourself. Perhaps you need to learn to be kinder and more forgiving to yourself. Read the section on 'Compassion' for some ideas about how to do this.

Putting the responsibility back on the abuser

An important part of recovery is placing the guilt and shame back where they belong – with the person or people who abused and hurt you. We all feel shame and guilt at times, and this can be a useful way of guiding our behaviour. Unfortunately, perpetrators of abuse often deny any sense of shame or responsibility. Instead, their victims end up carrying the shame and guilt. You may not be able to get your abuser to admit their part in what they did. *However, you do not have to continue to carry the feelings that really belong to them, not to you.*

Reading and Resources

Safer Wales can provide help and advice on safety, information on possible court options, advice on benefits and housing, and support services, such as counselling or refuge provision. **Tel:** 029 2022 2022 (Monday to Friday between 9 and 5pm).

There is also the **24/7 All Wales Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Helpline**.
Tel: 0808 80 10 800.

In any emergency don't delay, dial 999.

This **book** has useful chapters on shame: '**Breaking Free: help for survivors of child sexual abuse**', by Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon (2000), Sheldon Press

A useful **leaflet** on domestic violence can be downloaded from Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust <http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp/>

Apps – These can be located and downloaded from the iPhone store and GooglePlay.

'*Breaking Free – Keeping Safe*' is an app that provides strategies to help people stay safe while working through their difficulties, including managing harmful coping strategies, recognising triggers, coping with intense feelings and taking control of panic attacks.

'*Breaking Free – Feeling Guilty*' is an app that is designed for people with a history of abuse to help the user to overcome any thoughts or feelings of blame for being abused.