



---

Shame is about  
**the Self**

How I see and work with shame.  
A Gestalt therapeutic approach.  
Erik B. Smith.

## **Shame**

### **- and a little bit about Guilt.**

### **To go from the concrete to the general.<sup>1</sup>**

I think everybody knows what shame and guilt is about and know the sensation in the body identified as "I have done something wrong" or "I have done something terrible wrong".

For sure we don't like it.

If we feel guilt, we can say "Sorry" and we can compensate and if it is accepted - the feeling of guilt will disappear.

Guilt is about the action - doing something wrong. Next time be more aware what and how you behave.

It is otherwise about the sensation of shame. It is more complicated.

Before I go further I will explain how I see the concepts of Self, Field, Figure and Ground.- all components in Gestalt therapy

The Self is a virtual object I bring in, in order to understand the structure of my thinking, my feelings and my senses. The Self refers to me, to my awareness - my experience of my consciousness.

If I'm thirsty I will probably be aware of I need to drink water. The Self creates the figure The Figure for me will be thirst. Now I must look for some water I can drink.

The Field is everything in the world - it includes water of course. The Figure is clear, but where are the water? It is somewhere in the Field. The Self is now organizing or reading the closer Field - the ground (my surroundings) -so I can fulfil my needs to drink. I see a water tap in the room - and I drink. I drink as much as I need and the figure about thirst will disappear.

The Self is organizing the Ground and the Figure and if you can't do that you will try and try and hopefully you will succeed - if not you are in trouble - probably you will die if the need is important enough.

Some old people have difficulties about thirst. The body doesn't register so well if the figure is not clear. It involves organizing the field. The need is not clear, so why looking for water in the field. You can hear old people say " I'm old so I have to drink water even though I'm not thirsty. The brain tells him to drink water - not his body. His Self doesn't work well in this situation. It is I - I'm not okay any more.

Age is weakening the Self - both in creating the figure and to organize the field. The self-regulation becomes weaker and weaker - until you die.

---

<sup>1</sup> Induktion.

Most old people know this, so they ask for help - and most people know they need help so they do this without blaming. In these situations you don't feel shame. You don't try to hide something wrong with you - you are just old.

A simulated situation in organizing the field. Old people have difficulties in new unknown areas. A new airport - where to go? To organize the field so you find the right gate in time seems to be more difficult for a person over 70 than is for young people - and again you will help old people without blame.

Otherwise if you bring yourself in a situation everybody condemns. You have done something unacceptable - and you know it. The healthy part will be to reorganize the field so you never will have this experience again and hope your blossom face will bring forgiveness in the group you belong to. The Self has failed - what a terrible sensation in the body, and what a risk. I'll never do this again.

If you are shameless it doesn't matter you will not reorganize the ground and the figure - you will continue doing what you do.

If you know what you did was wrong and accept this was absolutely far out, the shame will help you to reorganize the field and the figure contact in a healthy process. If you don't know what you have done wrong and feel shame you can only think "something is wrong with me". You believe the Self is damaged. You translate this as: "not good enough, unworthy, not loveable" or even something worse.

Here you have some stories where the reaction and the consequences are different.

#### 1. The story about Tine. (Deflection)

Tine was member of a training group in the Gestalt institute. Her behaviour in a concrete situation was completely unacceptable for everybody in the group. They were angry - almost furious. They didn't want to be in such situation again - a situation Tine was responsible for. When Tine met the group, she was smiling and laughing - just as nothing had happened. Her shameless behaviour has the result she was asked to leave the group she was a part of. Her behaviour and lack of shame gave the signal to the group - "maybe I'll do it again".

#### 2. The story about a mother and her 5 years old child.

She was my client. She came to me because she knew her behaviour against her daughter was not acceptable for her and for the daughter. She wanted to change it and nevertheless she continued behaving in a way she - and her little daughter - didn't like. She told me how she was behaving, when she came tired home in the evening. The child was begging her to read fairy tales and she was climbing on her mother. She wants her mother's full attention. The mother was not able to fulfil the child's needs and in the end she was scolding and sometimes send the daughter in bed before dinner and without food. I must

confess I didn't like her behaviour and I told her. My words resulted in a strong reaction from my client - she was hidden by the shame, she cried, was looking away and her head was read. After stop crying she told me, she never would do this again against her daughter. Now-when the shame has left her- she new how to act defiantly.

This is how I understood the situation:

She didn't dare to go in contact with her shame, my reaction pushed her - and when she did, she was able to see and change the future situations for her and her daughter. She reorganized the Field.

### 3. The story about my father and the Nazi- party. (Retroflection)

When I was 14 years old I was told my father has been member of the Danish Nazi Party the first two years of the last world war. I was in deep shame. I knew there was a secret in the family - now I knew what it was about. I lived alone with my father. I was not able to confront him or to talk about it. The shame injured our relationship. The attachment became crippled. It's not healthy for a 14 years old boy who has admired his father.

The shame has to be accepted in order to avoid a similar situation in the future.

In my situation it was taboo even to talk about. To talk about is the first step in the healing process. The next will - maybe to understand - and then to forgive.

### 4.

In front of me was sitting a young girl. She was crying silent. She didn't look at me. Obvious she felt uncomfortable in the situation.

She told me about a situation with her mother. She has told the mother about her uncle - the mothers brother - he has sexual abused her. The mother didn't believe her and now she want to bring it up in a therapy session with me.

Obvious she was in shame.

This shame was different. She hasn't done anything wrong. She was forced to do something she didn't want - and no one believed her when she told about it in order to stop these violations.

I believed her. I supported her. I stayed with her and her shame. Now comes the grief and anger. She realized "I am right my mother and my uncle are wrong" - they were to blame. "I'm okay - they are not" was her conclusion.

She was ready to speak open about the behaviour from the uncle. It has to stop.

I have had no doubt about she was now strong enough to change the situation.

These different stories are telling about behaviour. If you know you have done something wrong, shame can help you to change behaviour. I call it healthy shame.

If you don't know you will believe something is wrong with you. I call it unhealthy shame.

In contact with healthy shame two different processes starts.

**One** is obvious a signal for the environment.

- a. Read head.
- b. Looking away - down in the floor.
- c. Crying (sometimes)
- d. Want to run away.
- e. Dropping the head.
- f. Denial - This is not how I am. I haven't done it.
- g. Covering shame with anger.

All this signals from a. to e. has a purpose. " I know I'm wrong. I should never have done it. Please let me still be accepted".

Sometimes the social group will say "Okay. Let go for this time, but never do it again".

Sometimes they will say: "No way. Get out of our social group. We will never see you again"

If f. and g. are a part of the process, the result will almost be: "Get out".

**The second one** is an inside process. The person will desperately try to reorganize the field in order to avoid a similar situation or/and to avoid this terrible feeling in the body in the future. The Self creates the figure and the ground in an on going process.

Meaning is the relationship between figure and ground.

If f. and g. is a part of the process for the environment the inside process will stop - there will be no meaning in the relationship between figure and ground.

Shame is about the Self. It is the person's system of contact in a process that occurs at the boundary from the organism/environment field.

The outer zone. *The senses.*

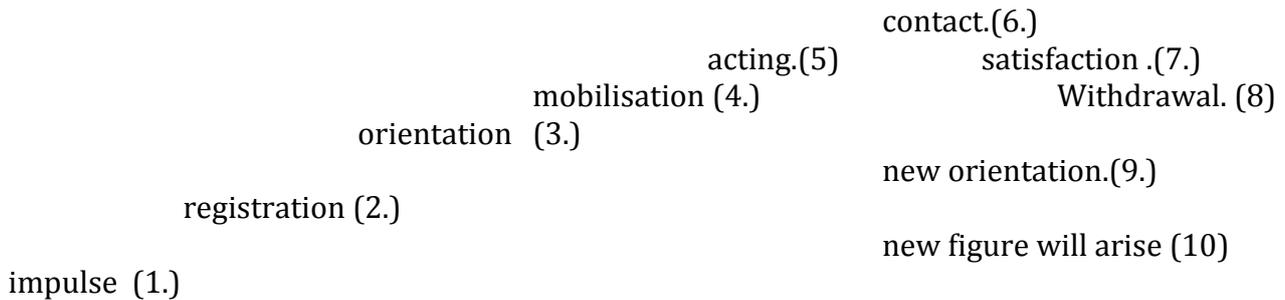
You are using all 3 zones in contact with the environment to create a meaningful figure from a meaningful ground.

The middle zone. *The thoughts/phantasy.*

The inner zone *The emotions and sensations.*

-----

The process for creation of the figure - arise from the ground.



-----ooo000- **The ground.** -000ooo-----

In Gestalt therapy we see human being as self-regulating organism of the organismic/ environmental field create meaning via their phenomenological organisations at the boundary.<sup>2</sup>

When we fulfil the figure process we can feel it in our body - calm and peaceful - and a new figure arise. - from a reorganized ground if necessary.

The Gestalt psychology is a theory about perception, but Fritz Perls saw the meaningful figure just as well could be thoughts or emotions - everything what arise from the field in contact with the organism.

Some of the rules from gestalt theory - to complete and meaning - are the same.

We want to complete and we want to have meaning in creating the gestalt. It is a need.

If you don't fulfil the process from 1 to 9 you will be frustrated. Maybe you interrupt the process without awareness using one or some of the contact disturbances.

We want to fulfil our needs - we want to create a complete and meaningful figure from the ground.

If we can't - we are in trouble. We try and we try and the frustration will arise. Here comes the contact disturbances - projection, retroflection, deflection, confluence - all together with interjects. (It's me, I'm wrong - not my Dad.)

If you (the SELF) can't create a meaningful figure from the ground or you can't organize a meaningful ground from the Field you believe something is wrong with you - the Self is damaged and it create ideas such as:

--To be useless, having no values, not deserving love.

You try to hide this damage from the environment and special for persons you love.

It's all about creating meanings-full figures from the ground or organizing a meaningful ground from the field.

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Resnick, Ph.D. Gestalt Review, 1 (3):256-269,1997

If you can't: The questions for the therapist will be: How do you do, and when are you doing it. Never ask why - your explanation will be an excuse to continue.

---

**Shame** is healthy if you go from 1 to 9 in the figure process. From point 9 you are able to reorganize the ground from the Field, if you are aware of, and accept, what was wrong - if you are not aware or not accept what you have done- you are in trouble.

Shame is the strongest unpleasant emotion in order to change behaviour- you never want to experience this again.

**Guilt.**

1. You can say "Sorry". "I will not do it again".
  2. And you can compensate.
- If so everything will be okay special if it accepted.

The purpose about Guilt and Shame is changing your behaviour.  
You can only change your behaviour, if you know what you have to change.

Here you have two examples about devastation the Self via Shame.

1. The child has been naughty in the morning. The mother says. " When Dad comes home he will punish you".

In the afternoon the father is coming home. The mother tells what the child has done. The father becomes upset and angry. He is running to the child's room and starts to beat him. The child has no idea what it is about. He knows now obvious his father don't like him since he beats him. He doesn't know why and he doesn't know how he can avoid this situation again. The Self can't reorganize the field. He is left back with the impression: "Something is wrong with me". "I'm not okay". The Self is damaged.  
It's not possible for a little child to understand something is wrong with the fathers behaviour. Introjection -I don't love you- is an instinct in this age.

2. The father promised his child to go to the Zoo next Sunday.  
Next Sunday: The father is not in a good mood and the weather doesn't look special inviting in order to go to Zoo - maybe it will soon be raining.  
The father says to the child: "We will not go to the Zoo today".  
The child starts to cry. The father gets a feeling of guilt. He don't like it. He tries to avoid it. "Stop this ridicules crying. Why is there always problems with you". Go to your room and come out, when you are okay again."

Now the feeling of guilt is disappearing from the father. (My son is the problem - not me.) The message from the father is clear: I don't like you when you cry. Sadness is not acceptable. The child knows he is sad and now he has notice sadness is not acceptable. "No one likes me or loves me, if they know I am sad. The figure of sadness is forbidden. There is something wrong with me because I know I have this sad emotion. The Self is damaged. The Self can't create a meaningful relationship between the figure and the ground.

Shame and guilt are protecting you against the emotion "anger" and "grief" - at least this is what I see, when I work with Shame and guilt with my clients. From my opinion these two emotions is a kind of "unfinished business" from the childhood. The child hasn't had any change to complete the figure contact process in the childhood. Probably they tried with the result more shame or guilt was given from the parents - then they retroflected. They grow up with the knowledge " I'm not okay", or I'm worthless. I was recalling two of the rules from Gestalt psychology - meaningful and completing and remember the human being is a self-regulating organism of the organismic/environmental field creating meaning via their phenomenological organisations at the boundary, and now I got an idea about witch kind of special behaviour I saw in front of me. Here you have one example - I have endless of examples from my couple therapy sessions.

In front of me is sitting a client. He is 42 years old, quite successful, a lot of money and a fine job. He has an academic education, beautiful wife and two children in the university. Everything is going well for him. "I can see I'm successful, but inside me - in my body- I have a feeling of "not being okay". In fact I'm waiting my boss will come and tell me "I know you are pretending you are good, but I know better **you are cheating**. It makes no sense. My boss always tells me how proud he is about my work - and never the less this is how I feel. He is telling me about his marriage. My wife is often telling me I'm not okay, he said. I asked him to talk about a specific situation. Yes he said. This morning I was looking for the milk in the fridge. It wasn't there. I called my wife. "You promised to buy milk, and there are no milk in the fridge". She replied, "The milk is where it has to be - look carefully." "There are no milk", was my - a little angry - answer. She came, took out the milk and gave it to me. "Look better next time". I got immediately angry. I don't like she is telling me I'm not okay. She - not me- has put the milk behind some other bottles. After some more questions from me, he saw what everybody could see from the beginning. His wife didn't tell him he was not okay. He did it to himself. He translate his wife's words in a way, he could come in contact with his unfinished business from the childhood. He is in contact with his shame and it comes out in anger and a projection "It's your fault - not mine. You put the milk behind some bottles".

If you believe there is something wrong with you - in spite of the facts - you believe you are not okay, not deserving love, are worthless and so on - you will sometimes bring you self in

situations where you can't organize the ground in a meaningful way. This is the result of the damage Self.

Immediately you will be in contact with shame, and without awareness your contact disturbances will "protect" you. "Why are you doing this to me?" (This is his victim role -poor me)

After this reaction the anger comes out. "You hide the milk behind the bottles" You say I'm not okay", he said. (Now he is abusive)

The organism tries to create a healthy field and finish "unfinished business". How to do so? The paradoxical theory of change is important in this process. You must accept the fact you believe there is something wrong with you, and you have to go through the figure process. In order to do this most clients need support.

I remember a lecture from Gary M. Yontef. He told about the only situation where he gave attention to the past time, was when he was working with shame. To understand the roots from shame makes it easier for the client to accept his idea about himself and go through the contact process and realize he is creating a healthy ground and healthy figures.

I see the behaviour from my client in this way.

Either (1.)

He tries to create a situation just as painful as it was in his childhood in order to finish "unfinished business". Mom and Dad cant be used anymore- he (or she) is using the person with the same value as his parents from the child perspective - the one he loves.

Or (2.)

He is bringing - without awareness- this "unfinished business" in the situation because His brain is recognizing every blaming from his wife as "you are not good enough" or anything like this. When you make a mistake, and the spouse correct you, you hear this correction in the same way as how your parents were blaming you.

The client has to accept he is the one who is telling himself he is not good enough, and to accept he brings himself in contact with "I'm not good enough" - shame -and go through all nine points in the contact process.

From this point, my experience is this, he is now able to see what his anger and grief is about: "not being seen as the child he was" and "not being accepted as he was". Now the grief and tears are coming.

The understanding and to reach the point "new orientation" gives him the possibility to realize he -as a child - was not able to create a healthy ground. He has had no idea about what was wrong. Now he knows - it was not I (my Self) it was Mom or Dad - and now he can trust himself " I can create a meaningful ground with a meaningful figure".

The idea about the damage Self will disappear.

The "unfinished business" about anger and grief in connection "not been seen in the childhood, as the child he/she was" is a new figure in the contact process from (1) to (10).

The fixed Gestalt in connection to the emotions will disappear at point 9. The gestalt is closed - and a new can be formed.

When I work with shame it comes to my mind. " You must support as little as possible and as much as necessary. (Laura Pearls)

Careful and caring support is necessary when you work with shame.

The support is to bring understanding for the little child's situation. He/she has not the possibility to reject Mom or Dads words or behaviour. In this age the introjection is a reflection. What Mom and Dad are doing will always be the best for the child. This is a fact for the child- and if you don't understand what they are doing against you - it's your problem. You are not okay - you believe. No! You know it!

Here and now you are a grown up man/woman being able to understand the child's situation and now you create a healthy ground in a meanings-full process with a healthy figure.

This is what the support is about.

Next time he/she makes a mistake, and the spouse is blaming, maybe the first reaction will be as usual. Anger and translation, but with awareness he/she will realize what he/she is doing. The words he/she can say to him/herself could be this: "Right now I'm using my spouse to come in contact with emotions from my childhood - I can feel the anger and maybe the sadness too". To stay with the emotions in the contact process is the healing process.

It can be necessary for the person to go through this process several times, but my experience is this, it will be less and less - and in the end he/she can make mistakes, listen to blaming without anger and translations. The reaction will normally be this: " You are right - it was a mistake -sorry

Healthy shame is about changing behaviour by accepting the shame and stay there until you are able to create a new and healthy ground.

Unhealthy shame is about healing the SELF, by understanding and accepting this is how I believe about my self and stay there until you feel the shame disappear. A new figure will come up - this time about the emotion grief and anger and sometimes with the memory about being abused, or not being met in your basic needs for contact, caring and love in your childhood. Stay in the contact process until you reach "satisfaction", " Withdrawal". The last point "new orientation" means you realize you are fine - nothing wrong with you. Your Self has had no change in your childhood to create a healthy ground and healthy figure.

Healthy guilt is about changing behaviour - to be more aware. You can compensate your mistakes and say "sorry". Everything will be okay again.

Unhealthy guilt. You are afraid you make a mistake - you believe you missed something in the ground. Accept this is what you are afraid of. Be aware and use your experience - and you see your ground formation is fine.

I know there are different kinds of shame - Vernon Van De Riet mention in a lecture in The Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles' Summer Residential 1997 three different kinds of shame.

Social shame occurs when a person introjects a prevalent bias or prejudice from the culture. Character logical and situational shame occurs in a situation where there are a huge difference between my ideal self- image and how I perceive myself.

In my description Vernon Van De Riet is talking about unhealthy shame.

Some shame patterns are more easy to work with than others, but for all of them the therapist must support the client to take responsibility for his/her thoughts about the self and go through the figure contact process in order to be able to create a new healthy ground or figure - or in unhealthy shame support the client to stay in the contact process until he/she realize my figure and my ground are now a healthy creation from my Self.

---

There is one good thing about unhealthy shame:

You want to prove for everybody you are good and clever in almost everything. You do your utmost to bring compliments and admiration from other people in to your life. You can make a lot of money and you can climb to the top of the society.

The only problem is this: You expect they some day will find out you are not so clever, not so lovable, not so fine and you don't believe in all these compliments.

You remember even the smallest remark you can translate into criticism.

In this way you can take "care" of - and keep- your false opinion about yourself.

We call it a fixed Gestalt.

Erik B. Smith 9. July 2017.

GATLA 2017.