

## Oh, the shame!

**It is possible to move through the shame, and be a dignified, responsible person again**

By **Beth Jones** | Staff Writer | Story updated at 8:17 PM on Saturday, September 29, 2007

A day rarely passes without some celebrity or politician getting branded with a scarlet headline for doing something petty, dumb or downright reprehensible.

Michael Vick's dogfighting and token'.

Faith Hill pitching a fit on camera as Carrie Underwood wins the Country Music Association's female vocalist award.

Sen. Larry Craig and the Rev. Ted Haggard looking for love in all the wrong places. O.J. Simpson.

Lindsay Lohan.

Paris Hilton.

And, poor, bald Britney.

But do any of us really have room to smirk at the idiotic celebrity exploits captured in the pages of OK! Magazine? True, your average citizen probably won't pull an elaborate sting to get back the suit he wore when he was acquitted of murder. And your next door neighbor isn't likely to be caught pantie-less by the paparazzi. We've all made mistakes, though. Things that cause our coworkers to roll their eyes, words that hurt a friend or embarrass a loved one.

"Shame is the most primitive emotion we feel," said Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, who spent six years researching the painful emotion. "Just talking about shame makes people ashamed."

"We've all got it," Brown explains in a video she made about her research. "No one wants to talk about it," she adds, noting silence isn't a solution to moving on. "The less we talk about it the more power we turn over to it."

Pastor Donald Hilliard found how strong that tendency is to avoid talking about shame when he discovered how little had been written about it. He was doing research in an effort to help his congregation deal with a church leader caught in a scandal. He went on to pen "After the Fall: Resurrecting Your Life from Shame, Disgrace and Guilt" for those so beaten down by a failure or dishonor that they find themselves paralyzed - or worse.

"I think this book will help people get through life without blowing their brains out," Hilliard said. In the text, Hilliard reassures readers who have experienced shame, that it's possible to return to dignity. "While there may not be reinstatement to an office or position of power, there can be restitution and renewal in one's own heart and soul," he wrote.

## Why shame hurts

Over the course of conducting hundreds of interviews with ordinary folk, Brown, author of "I Thought It Was Just Me: Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame," found that shame frequently lies at the root of problems like addiction, depression, perfectionism and eating disorders.

"Shame can control our lives," she said. "Not having resilience to shame is not an option if we want loving, healthy lives."

One woman Brown interviewed told a story of feeling disgraced when her credit card was declined at a gas station. When she got back in her car, utterly humiliated, the woman screamed at her toddler with a frightening rage.

"Some of our worst moments as people are fueled by shame," Brown said. "Shame corrodes the part of us that believes we can be better and do better."

## Surviving shame helps us grow

It's not something we want to hear when we utterly flub sales presentations or get caught gossiping about friends. But getting through shameful situations can make us better people. Too often, Brown said, our culture equates making a mistake with being inadequate. "There's a lot of gifts that come with being imperfect," she said.

For one thing, according to Hilliard, personal failures can bring the religious closer to God. It can also give us the kick we need to work on a personality flaw. "Guilt leads you to a sense of correction," Hilliard said. Experiencing the pain of shame can also make us more compassionate, more understanding of the Britney Spearses of the world and the Britney Spears inside us all.

### How to recover

Over the course of her interviews, Brown found that the people who dealt with shame the best were the ones cognizant that being human means sometimes messing up. That's different, she said, than thinking you are a mistake.

To find redemption after disgrace, Hilliard said, you also have to ask God for help facing the thing or action that brought you shame. "Even if you don't have a faith system," he said, "Turn and face yourself." After accepting you did something wrong, come up with a plan to change the offending behavior or a strategy to keep the same thing from happening again.

Here's an important step: Apologize to anyone you've hurt. "Acknowledge, understand and accept the destructive or embarrassing behavior," Florida-based self-image consultant Jamie Yasko-Mangum said. "Don't deflect or make excuses." Then move on.

"Be conscious and responsible in your choices," Yasko-Mangum advised. "Involve yourself in a positive community, and build positive self-esteem."

Surround yourself with people who love you unconditionally because you'll probably mess up again before you take your exit from the world. It's hard to move past your mistakes, Hilliard said, if you're surrounded by people who keep reminding you of them. "You cannot fly with mud on your wings," he said.

## No one deserves to be shamed

Shame should never be used as a tool to control the behavior of others, both Hilliard and Brown maintained.

"The habit of dispensing human judgment rather than divine mercy produces a harvest of destruction, hypocrisy and bitterness," Hilliard wrote.

Constantly wagging our fingers at Britney won't make her a better parent. Instead, Brown argued, as a society, we're pretty much guaranteeing unhappy childhoods for her children. "It's driving her deeper into addiction and depression."

Trying to change a loved one's behavior by shaming them, Brown said, is like hitting a plastic thumbtack with an anvil. "You may drive it in, but you're going to crush it in the process," she said. No matter how badly someone hurts us, no matter what evil thing they did, we should not respond by shunning the person, Hilliard emphasized.

Everyone, he said, has the potential to grow into a better person. Even O.J. Simpson. If he met Simpson on the street, Hilliard said, he would greet him with open arms. "I would tell him God loves him. Tell him he can become remorseful and repent," Hilliard said. "Even O.J. has a future. God loves us all." Hilliard added that O.J. Simpson's future might be in prison. But even there, he emphasized, it's possible to do good works, to love one's neighbor, to be a better person. As he sees it, there are fates worse than being behind bars.

"There are many people locked in jail in their own minds," Hilliard said. "They're wearing shame like a tailor-made garment."