

THE VALUE OF *shame*

Far from this feeling being entirely negative, it helps us develop, says
Dr Joseph Burgo

We all remember the sensation – hot, burning cheeks; lowered eyes; a longing to escape as quickly as possible... Whether it's a childhood memory of being chosen last in team games, a joke falling on deaf ears at the office party or receiving a polite decline after plucking up the courage to ask a colleague on a date, the sense of humiliation that comes from feeling rejected or separate from your social group often feels extremely uncomfortable.

But, far from shame being a confined to a one-off traumatic experience, it's an emotion we feel in varying degrees throughout the day, according to Dr Joseph Burgo. In his new book, *Shame: Free Yourself, Find Joy & Build True Self-Esteem* (Watkins, £14.99), the psychotherapist unravels our perceptions of the emotion and concludes it's not so much a toxic experience, but a family of feelings – including embarrassment, guilt and self-consciousness – that can be transformed into a positive outcome.

NAMING THE BEAST

There's a common misconception that shame inevitably has a negative impact. But for Burgo, it has a valuable place in our experience. 'In my 35 years of practicing psychotherapy, the most important lesson I have learned is the road to authentic self-esteem passes through the land of shame and never entirely leaves it,' he says. How? Our encounters with shame



provide us with opportunities for growth, development and self-fulfilment. Indeed, Burgo believes shame has a central role in our everyday lives; we just disguise it with other names such as anxiety, low self-esteem or depression. But, however it reveals itself, avoiding shame has a price...

WHY SHAME MATTERS

From an evolutionary point of view, shame evolved to prevent antisocial behaviour and promote the survival of the tribe. On a personal level, however, 'our sense of shame may hold us accountable, encouraging us to behave in ways that conform to our own ideals and to those of society,' says Burgo. Ignore the lessons it has to teach us and we are in danger of forgetting our own internal values. Shame has the potential to remind us of who we are and who we want to become.

BUILDING PRIDE

Take your mind back to the last time you felt a sense of embarrassment or humiliation. Perhaps you re-gifted an unwanted Christmas present to a friend

only to discover she gave you something really thoughtful, or maybe you rushed a work job because you wanted to go to the gym before it got really busy. Feeling shame, and the accompanying guilt that comes with it, helps pave the way for an alternative scenario – next time buying a gift from the heart or committing to do your best at work. 'When you fulfil your goals, even small ones, you usually feel good about yourself,' says Burgo. 'You develop self-respect by living up to your own values and expectations, and self-respect is the antidote to feelings of shame.'

SHARING JOY

The development of self-esteem has three elements according to Burgo: purposeful behaviour; pride in achievement; and shared joy. This latter aspect is particularly important. When we share positive feelings, our self-regard, the antidote to shame, increases. As Burgo says: 'Our pride in our achievement goes deeper when we share our joy with the people who matter most to us.' Something to bear in mind when making plans for the new year?

WORDS: Eve Baggiposei PHOTOGRAPHY: Lisbeth



SHELF HELP

Each issue, we bring you the best advice from the latest self-help books

This month we look at *Oneness With All Life* by Eckhart Tolle (Michael Joseph, £8.99).
In a nutshell: In this bite-sized intro to the spiritual teachings of the best-selling author of *The Power of*

Now, Tolle distilled 200 life-changing quotes from his 2005 publication *A New Earth* and created a thought-provoking, inspirational companion to your inner journey. Dip in and find more space in your life for being.

A nugget: 'Give up defining yourself – to yourself and to others. You won't die. You will come to life. And don't be concerned with how others define you. When they define you, they are limiting themselves.'