

Thriving Beyond Complex Trauma

Many slides are adaptations from
the work of traumatologist, Tim
Fletcher.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNKnQqs3Mo4>

Understanding the Impact on Brain and Behavior

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Recovery

Defining Trauma

Origin:

- Greek word meaning "wound."

Perspectives:

- Trauma shapes behaviors, social habits, and self-perception.
- Gabor Maté: "Trauma is an inner injury... a lasting rupture."

Key Insights:

- Trauma is what happens *within* us due to hurtful events.
- Trauma is a psychic injury lodged in the nervous system.

Limbic Brain vs Cerebral Cortex



Limbic Brain (Child Brain, Emotional Brain):

- Decisions based on feelings and survival
- Focuses on immediate gratification and safety

Cerebral Cortex (Wise Brain, Adult Brain):

- Decisions based on long-term consequences
- Focuses on health and balance

Complex Trauma and Limbic Brain

Issues include:

- Instant Gratification Focus
- Emotional Reasoning ('Feels true, so it must be true')
- Distorted Thinking ('All or nothing')
- Memory Gaps and Emotional Flashbacks

Brain Chemicals and Trauma

Healthy Brain:

- Dopamine, Serotonin, Oxytocin promote love and happiness

Trauma Response:

- Cortisol and fear-based Oxytocin dominate, leading to pain

- Persistent cortisol triggers inflammation and autoimmune issues

Brain States

Tim Fletcher

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNKnQgs3Mo4>

"STATE"	Calm	Alert	Alarm	Fear	Terror
Dominant Brain Area	Cortex	Cortex and Limbic	Limbic	Limbic and Brain Stem	Brain Stem
Adaptive Option – Arousal	Reflect – create	Flock - hypervigilance	Freeze – Resistance	Flight – Cortisol; Defiance	Fight
Adaptive Option – Dissociation	Reflect – Daydream	Avoid	Freeze – Comply	Dissociate – Opioids; Catatonia	Freeze – faint, collapse
Cognition	Abstract	Concrete – routine	Emotional	Reactive	Reflexive
Functional IQ	120-100	110-90	100-80	90-70	80-60

Trauma Response and Cortisol

Cortisol is key in trauma response:

One-time trauma burns into memory with adrenaline

Chronic trauma alters the brain (Corpus Callosum)

Symptoms:

Emotional flashbacks and addiction to chaos

Inflammation leads to health issues

Oxytocin's Role in Connection

- Released during birth, nursing, and bonding activities

- Trauma disrupts oxytocin pathways, leading to detachment

- Issues:

- Disrupted bonding leads to difficulty forming connections

- May lead to sex or relationship addiction



Cortisol and Mobilization

Opioids and Dissociation



Fight/Flight Response:



Cortisol and adrenaline mobilize the body



Freeze Response:



Brain releases opioids, dissociation occurs



Emotional regulation disrupted, addiction risk increases

ANNUAL COST OF TRAUMA



#1 Cause of Death
(Age 1-46)

The Cost of Trauma in nothing short of shocking
Per Tim Fletcher

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lxEwPMqB-c>

Impact of Trauma

- Key statistics:
 - Over 90% of addicts have Complex PTSD (CPTSD).
 - Over 90% of people in prison and those experiencing homelessness have CPTSD.
- Areas impacted by trauma:
 - Domestic violence
 - Mothers with children in Child Protective Services (CAS)
 - Eating disorders and self-harm
 - Hoarding

The Experts Speak

John Briere (Renowned Traumatologist):

“If Complex PTSD were ever given its due... the DSM would shrink to the size of a thin pamphlet.”

Peter Levine (Trauma Expert):

“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering.”



Big “T” Trauma

Definition:

- The most well-known type of trauma, leading to PTSD.

Key Characteristics:

1. Flashbacks, nightmares, memories.
2. Avoidance of places/events or discussing the trauma.
3. Trouble sleeping or concentrating.
4. Hypervigilance.
5. Mood swings, depression, and anxiety.
6. Triggers activating stress responses (e.g., fight, flight, freeze).

Little 't' Trauma

Prevalence:

- About 75% of society experiences “little t” trauma, leading to CPTSD.
- Up to 60 ongoing negative characteristics can result.

Symptoms and behaviors:

- Self-esteem issues, depression, anxiety, BPD, ADHD, anger, trust issues, authority issues, and control issues

Behavioral indicators:

- Wearing “masks,” not knowing oneself, perfectionism, people-pleasing, trouble saying “no,” boundary issues, and manipulation.

Little “t” Trauma

Additional Traits:

- Fear of intimacy or conflict, hypersensitivity to criticism.
- Impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, poor stress management.
- Fear of failure, abandonment, or being a burden.
- Many relationship issues stem from unresolved trauma.

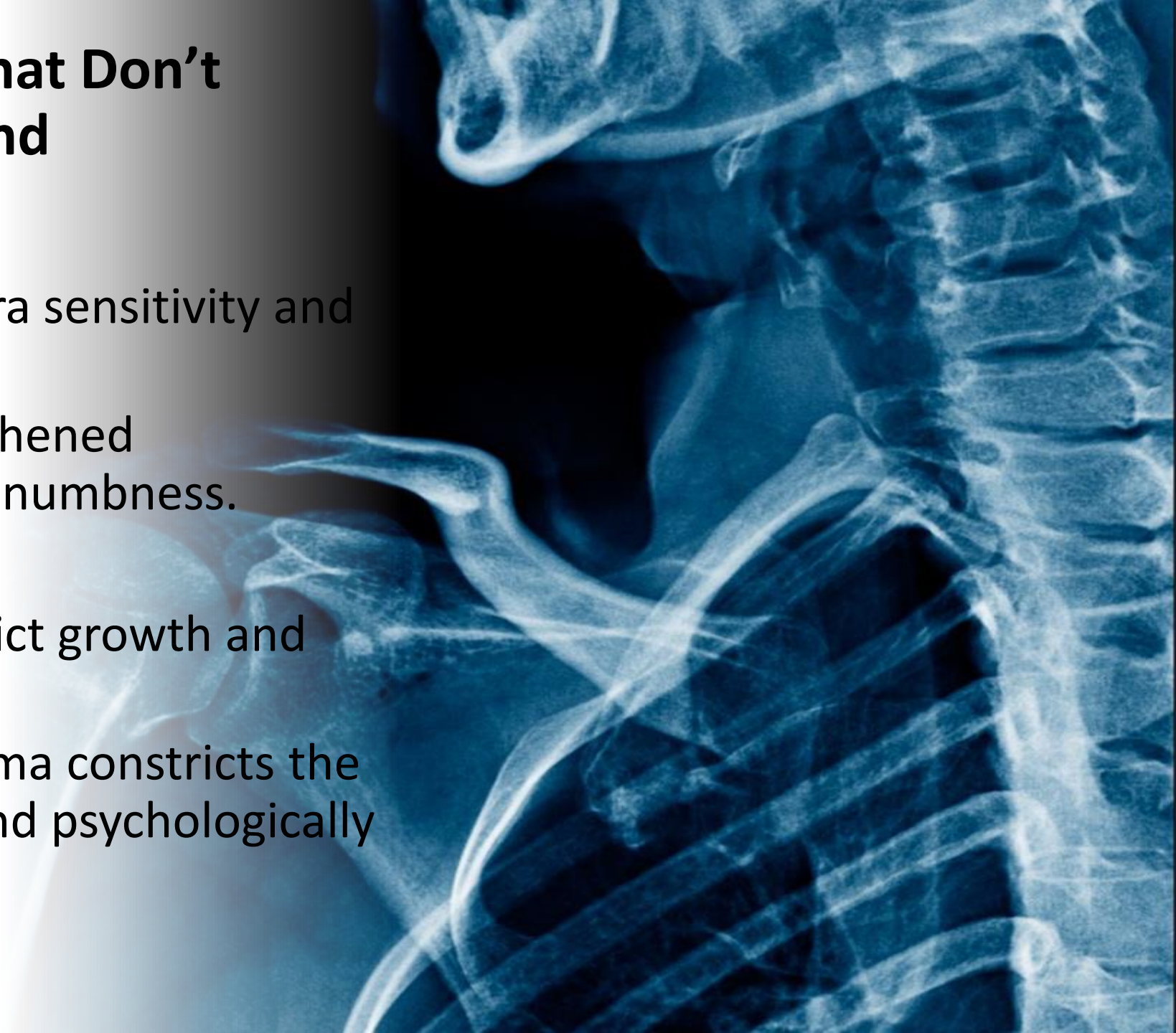
Wounds That Don't Mend

Outcomes:

- Remain raw: Extra sensitivity and hypervigilance.
- Scar tissue: Toughened insensitivity and numbness.

Note:

- Both forms restrict growth and flexibility.
- Unresolved trauma constricts the self, physically and psychologically



Impact of Trauma

Effects of Unresolved Trauma:

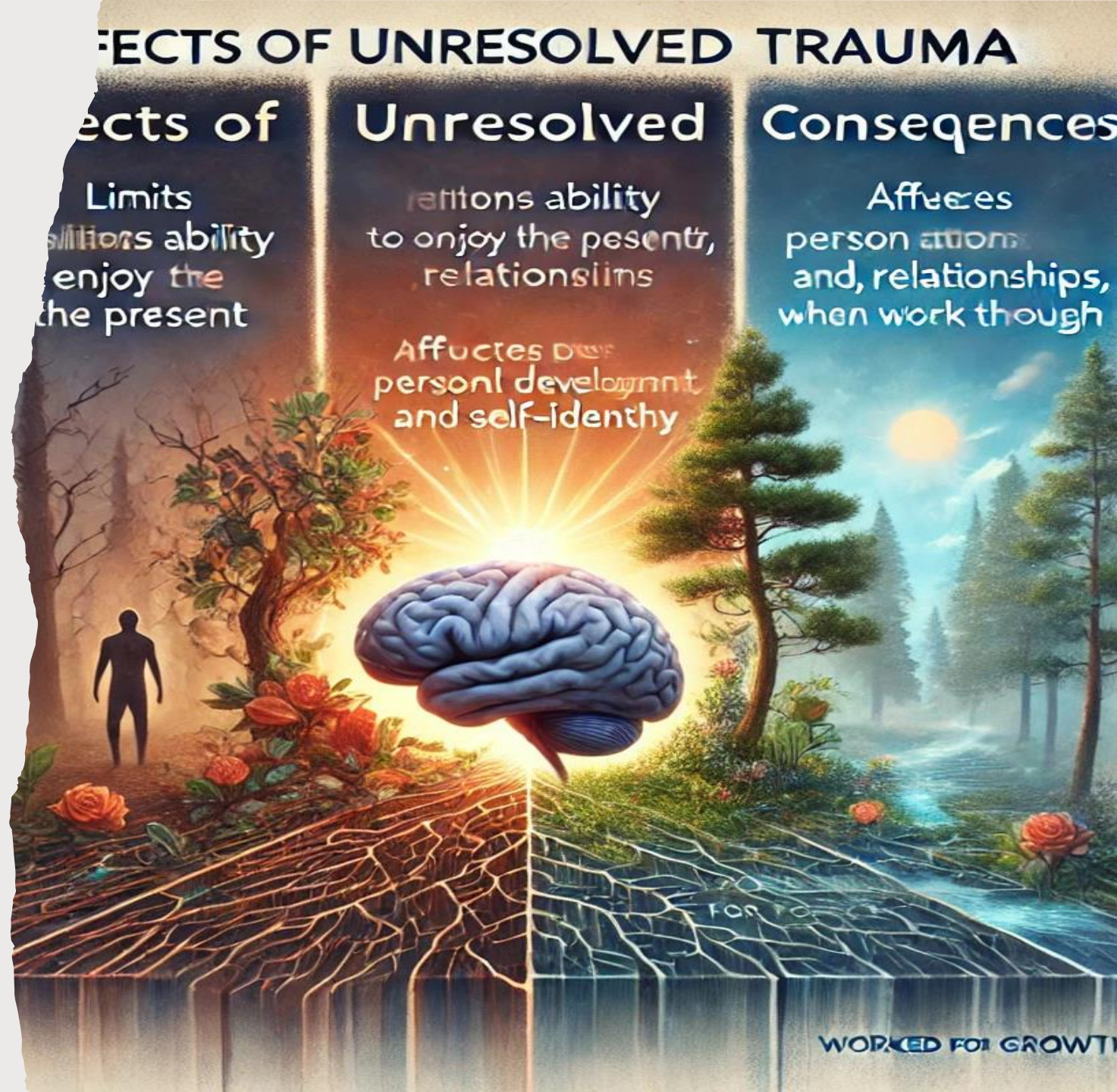
- Limits ability to enjoy the present.
- Restricts personal growth and self-identity.

Consequences:

- Affects brain development, emotions, relationships, and health.

Potential for Growth:

- Trauma can become a positive force when worked through.



Adrenaline Release: Immediate Survival Mode

Adrenaline, also known as epinephrine, is released during the initial moments of a perceived threat. It triggers the 'fight or flight' response, preparing the body for immediate action.

Effects:

Increases heart rate and blood pressure.

Dilates airways for enhanced oxygen intake.

Sharpens focus and reflexes.

Context:

This response helps individuals confront or escape a threat.



Cortisol Release: Sustained Stress Response

Cortisol is released to maintain heightened alertness in prolonged stress.

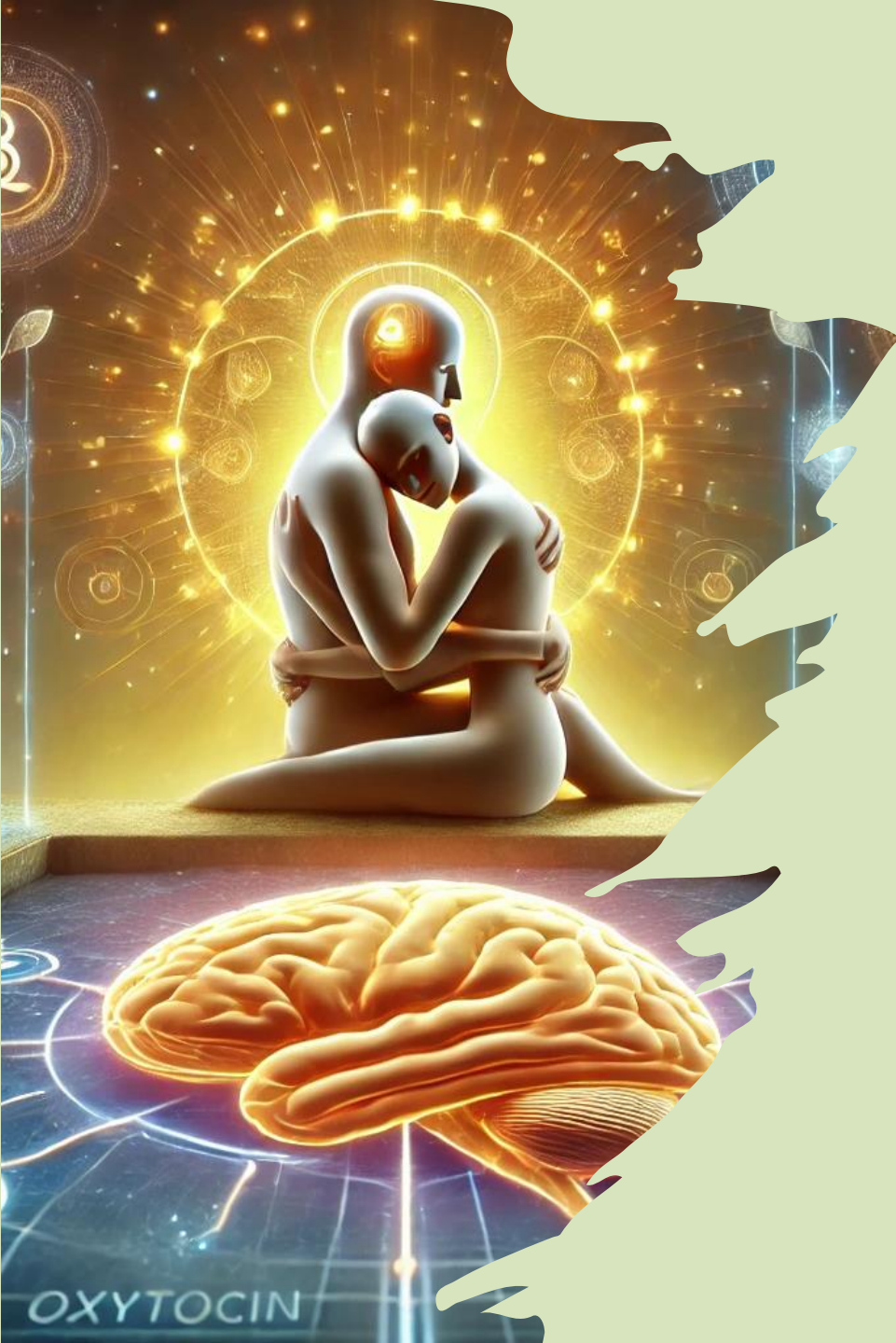
Effects:

- Increases glucose levels for sustained energy.
- Suppresses non-essential functions like digestion.
- Affects mood and cognition to prioritize survival tasks.

Context:

- Chronic trauma leads to excessive cortisol, contributing to anxiety and depression.





Oxytocin Release: Seeking Support

Oxytocin, the 'bonding hormone,' encourages seeking connection and comfort.

Effects:

Promotes social bonding and reduces fear.

Encourages individuals to seek help or protection.

Context:

In interpersonal trauma, this response may be disrupted, affecting trust.

Opioid Release: Coping with Pain

Endogenous opioids are released to numb pain when escape is impossible.

Effects:

Reduces physical pain by dulling sensations.

Decreases emotional response, allowing dissociation.

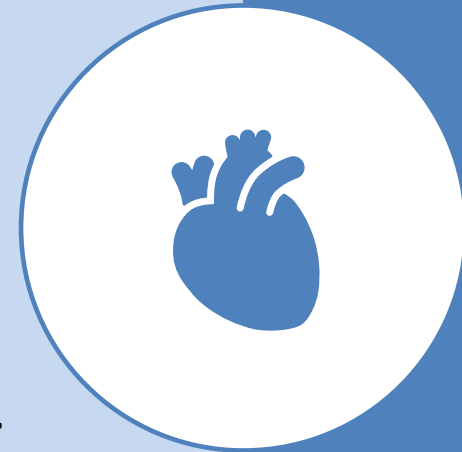
Context:

numbness. Critical in extreme situations but can lead to emotional



Integration of the Responses

- **Adrenaline and cortisol** prepare the body for immediate and sustained danger responses.
- **Oxytocin** facilitates resilience through connection and support.
- **Opioids** allow survival in the face of inescapable pain, enabling endurance.





Trauma from Neglect and Unmet Needs

Neglect occurs when caregivers fail to consistently meet the emotional needs of a child. It often stems from:

Emotional unavailability.

- Workaholic tendencies.
- Parental mental or physical illness.
- Little T trauma arises when legitimate needs go unmet, forcing a child into Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn responses.

Little T Trauma and Safety

Little T trauma occurs when a child feels unsafe in their environment, leading to:

- Inability to relax.

- Constant vigilance.

- Feeling alone in managing their safety.

Trauma develops when a child does not feel seen, known, or connected.

Simple vs Complex Trauma

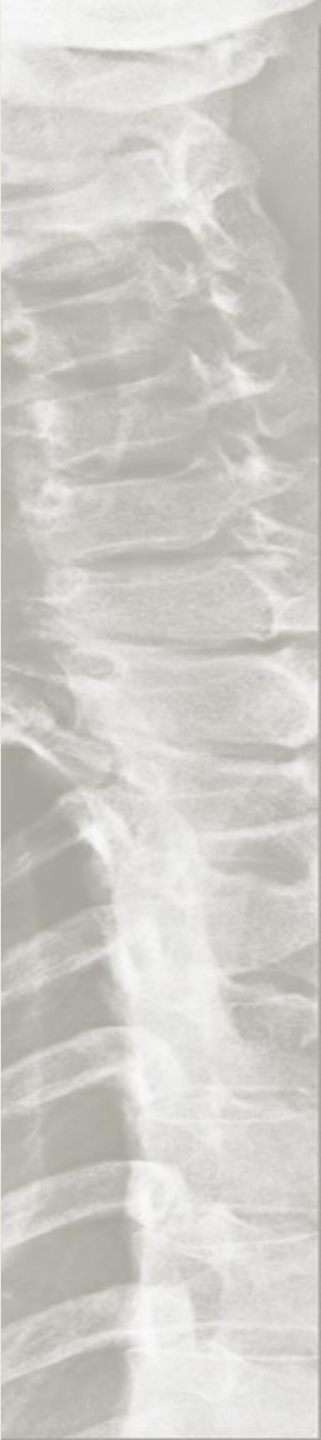
Simple Trauma:

A single, one-time event (e.g., Big T Trauma).
Results in PTSD with about 10 after-effects.

Complex Trauma:

Ongoing exposure to danger from Big T or Small T traumas.

Results in CPTSD with up to 60 after-effects.



Types of Childhood Trauma

Examples of childhood trauma include:

- - Bullying.
- - Community violence.
- - Disasters and terrorism.
- - Refugee trauma.
- - Intimate partner violence.
- - Medical trauma.
- - Traumatic grief.
- - Abuse: sexual, physical, verbal, emotional.
- - Neglect (biggest cause).

Shame as a Result of Trauma

Shame is one of the most misunderstood consequences of trauma:

- It is a core belief about one's identity, not just an emotion.

- Often confused with guilt but is deeper and unresolved.

- False guilt can feed shame, leading to identity fractures.

Guilt vs Shame

Guilt:

- - About actions: 'What I do.'
- - Motivates corrective behavior.

Shame:

- - About identity: 'Who I am.'
- - Feeds feelings of worthlessness and cannot be resolved.

False guilt intensifies shame and fractures identity.

Child Development Questions

Key questions children ask to form identity:

- 'Do I have value?'

- 'Am I lovable?'

How caregivers respond
determines whether children feel
seen, known, and connected.

Trauma's Greatest Impact

- Trauma's greatest damage lies in how it fractures identity and influences lives.
- Complex Trauma
Characteristic #1: Shame.
- Shame is poorly understood yet deeply impactful.

Shame as a Core Issue

Shame's Characteristics:

- Often unnoticed but pervasive.
- Influences identity and behavior in negative ways.

Misunderstanding Shame:

- Perceived as an emotion, yet it's core belief about identity.
- Commonly confused with guilt.



Guilt and Shame

Guilt:

- Linked to actions ('What I do').
- Resolvable through corrective behavior.

Shame:

- Linked to identity ('Who I am').
- Cannot be resolved, leading to feelings of worthlessness.

False Guilt:

- Guilt for things not done.
- Feeds unresolved shame.



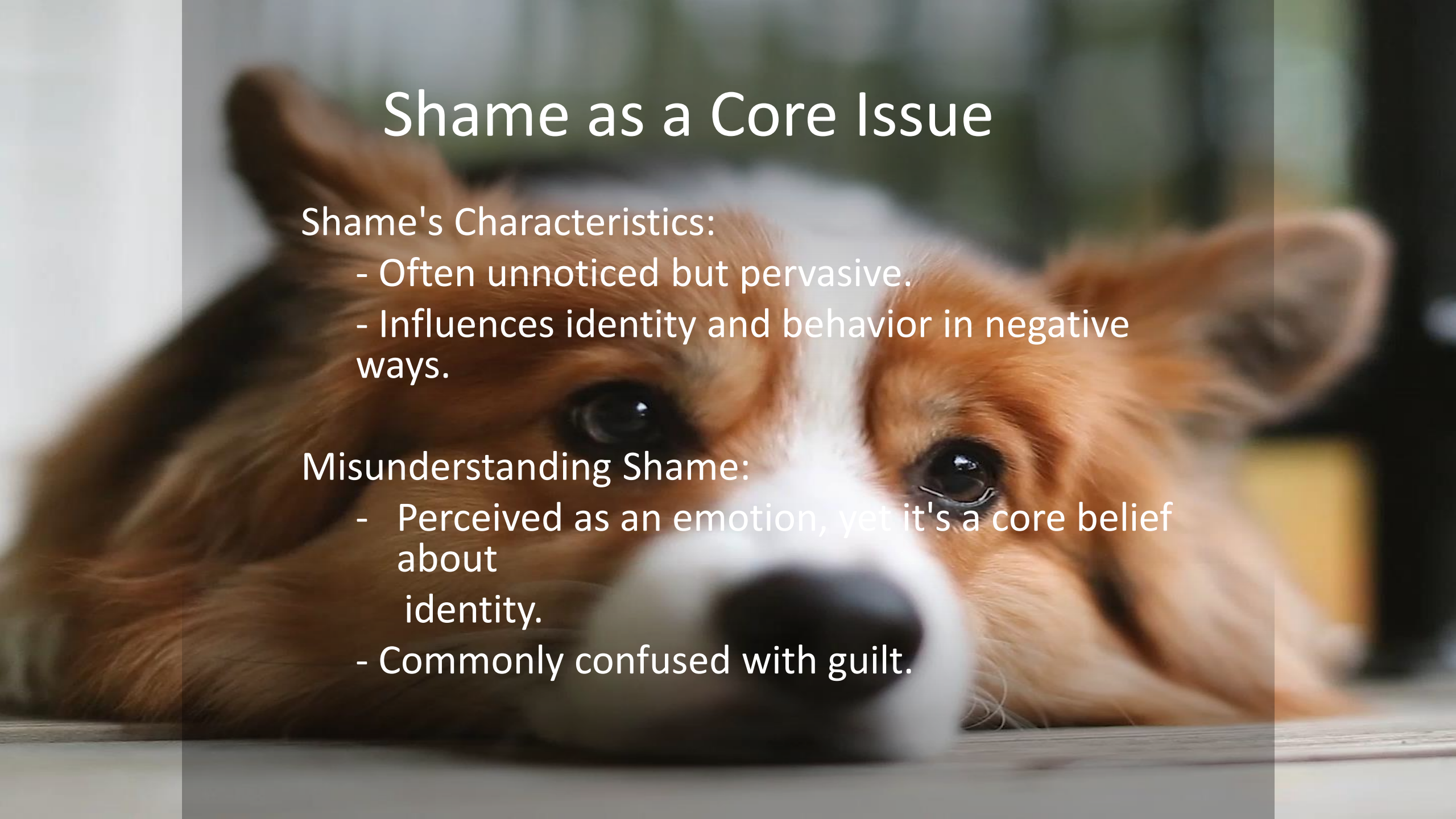
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Questions on Value and Identity

Key Questions Children Ask:

- 'Do I have value?'
- 'Do I matter?'
- 'Am I lovable?'

How these questions are answered shapes their sense of self and determines their life path.



The Role of Mirrors in Identity Formation

Mirrors of Identity:

- Family interactions reflect a child's sense of value.
- Responses to the child's needs influence their belief in 'mattering.'

Core Reflection:

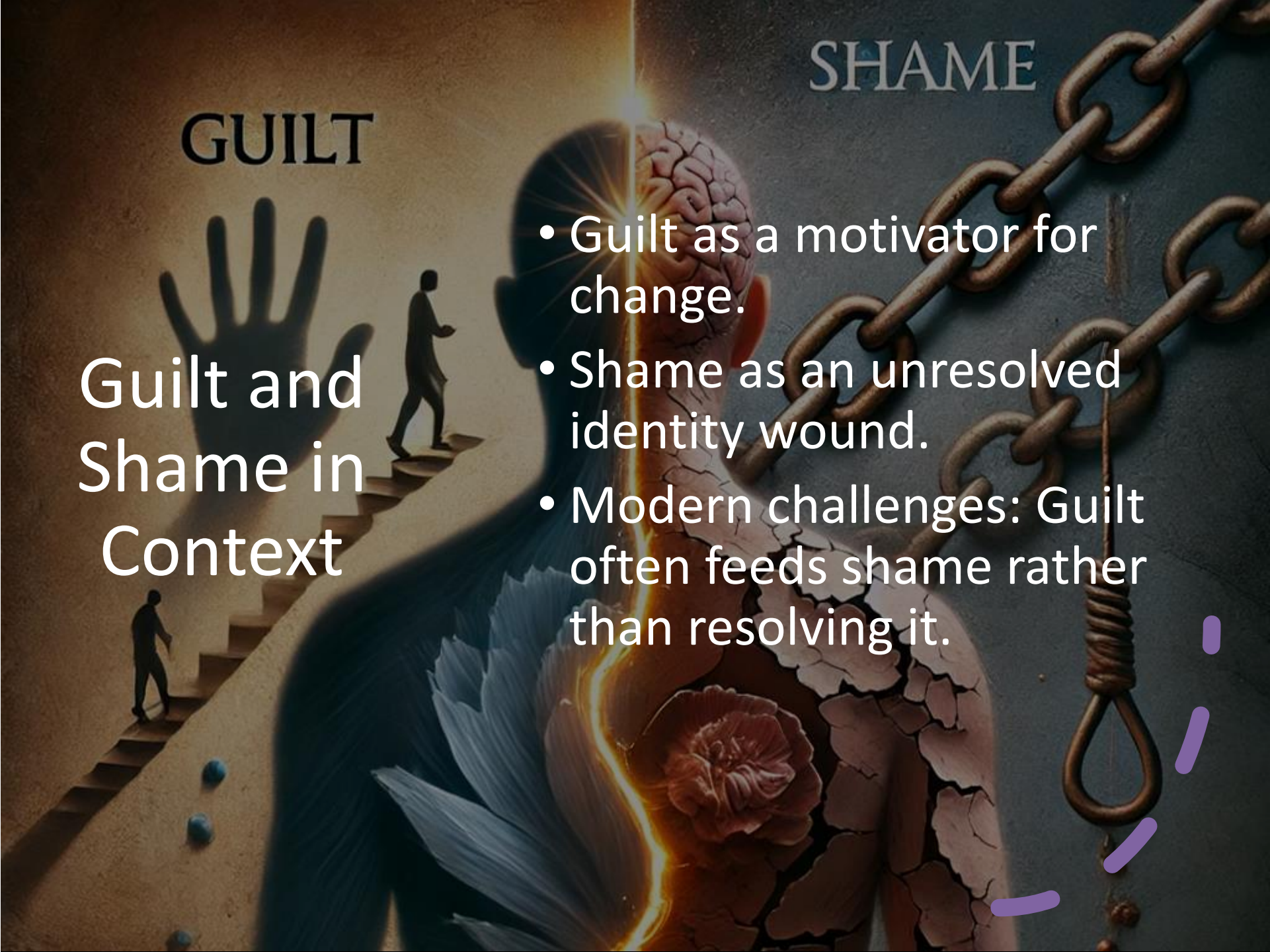
- 'Do I matter?' becomes central to self-worth.

GUILT

SHAME

Guilt and Shame in Context

- Guilt as a motivator for change.
- Shame as an unresolved identity wound.
- Modern challenges: Guilt often feeds shame rather than resolving it.



Trauma/Shame and Trust

- Trusting people, which feels so right and natural (and necessary) to a child, results in being let down/hurt. So, kill that instinct.
- How can you surrender to an intimate relationship after you've been violated?
- This means destroying the possibility of a healthy intimate relationship.

Trauma/Shame and Truth

- If telling the truth results in being punished or hurt, lies are more necessary to survive.
- If nobody in the family is concerned about truth, or refuses to talk about what is happening, lies and distortions become more valuable.
- If the truth of our life is too painful to live with, and it can't be resolved, then use our brain, not to discover truth, but to find ways to deny truth.
- The greatest sources of our suffering are the lies we tell ourselves.

Trauma/Shame and Needs

- When one lives with unmet needs, and no way to resolve that problem, it is easy to conclude that the best way to resolve it is to have no needs - 'I don't need people, love, etc. to survive.' Denial of important needs.
- Decide it's best not to be attuned to their body or emotions to be aware of what they need. If they can't meet those needs, there's no point. So, disconnect.
- Attuned to everybody else, but not to self.

Trauma/Shame and Empathy

- Possible to allow empathy to animals, but not people.
- Some shut it down to animals as well – damage property and hurt animals.
- Don't care about anyone or anything.
- Often replace empathy with anger and hatred.

Trauma/Shame and Creativity & Spirituality

- Creativity:
- One can't be too creative when they are in survival mode.
- Some use creativity (if they are allowed) as a way of escape.
- For some, escaping to a fantasy world is their way to be creative.
- Spirituality:
- If God doesn't answer their prayers to rescue them, or stop the bad stuff, then there seems to be no point in nurturing a spiritual life.

Trauma/Shame

Hope & Dreams

- Hope – of a better life:
- If every option has been explored to resolve the pain and to be loved, but nothing has worked, hope is crushed, and a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness becomes predominant.
- Don't ever get your hopes up again.
- Dreams:
- Every child has dreams, but if they are constantly in survival mode, they gradually begin to feel that their dreams will never be realized.

Trauma/Shame and Collateral Damage

- Innocence
- Confidence, vitality – greater insecurity.
- Existing vs living – destruction of the love of life.
- Joy and peace.
- Sense of value – feel like a failure, loser, no good, bad - identity changes from positive to negative - Shame.
- Self-respect.
- Victim mindset – feel helpless to help self.
- Trust of all authority - O.D.D. – Oppositional Defiance Disorder.

Healing of Trauma/Shame

- Recovery involves becoming human again – resilience – revitalizing the parts we had to murder to survive.
- Note: This is a very slow, gradual process.
- Trauma robs one of the feeling that they are in charge of themselves – self-leadership.
- The challenge of recovery is to re-establish ownership of one's body, mind, and emotions.

Shame

Core belief that I am not good enough – not lovable, not valuable, less than.



Conclusion:

'If people get to know me, they will abandon me.'

Fear of abandonment is the main motivator.

Change in priorities:
Hide, Compensate,
Still get love, Still get respect.

Solutions the Brain Proposes

Never be vulnerable or show weakness; never be authentic.

Roles of children – hero, invisible, jester.

Masks: Perfectionist, people pleaser.

Lie, keep secrets. Isolate, walls.

Focus on image – externals.

Control – to get needs met and to keep others from seeing my shame.

Self-sufficient; don't depend on anybody.

Shame and Connection

Brain wired for connection.

Lack of attachment – child feels they are to blame – shame.

Shame creates fear of connection – fear of being found out.

Rule: Never be vulnerable or authentic.

Get lonely but still desire connection.

Settle for pseudo connection – promiscuity, porn, barroom intimacy, addiction.

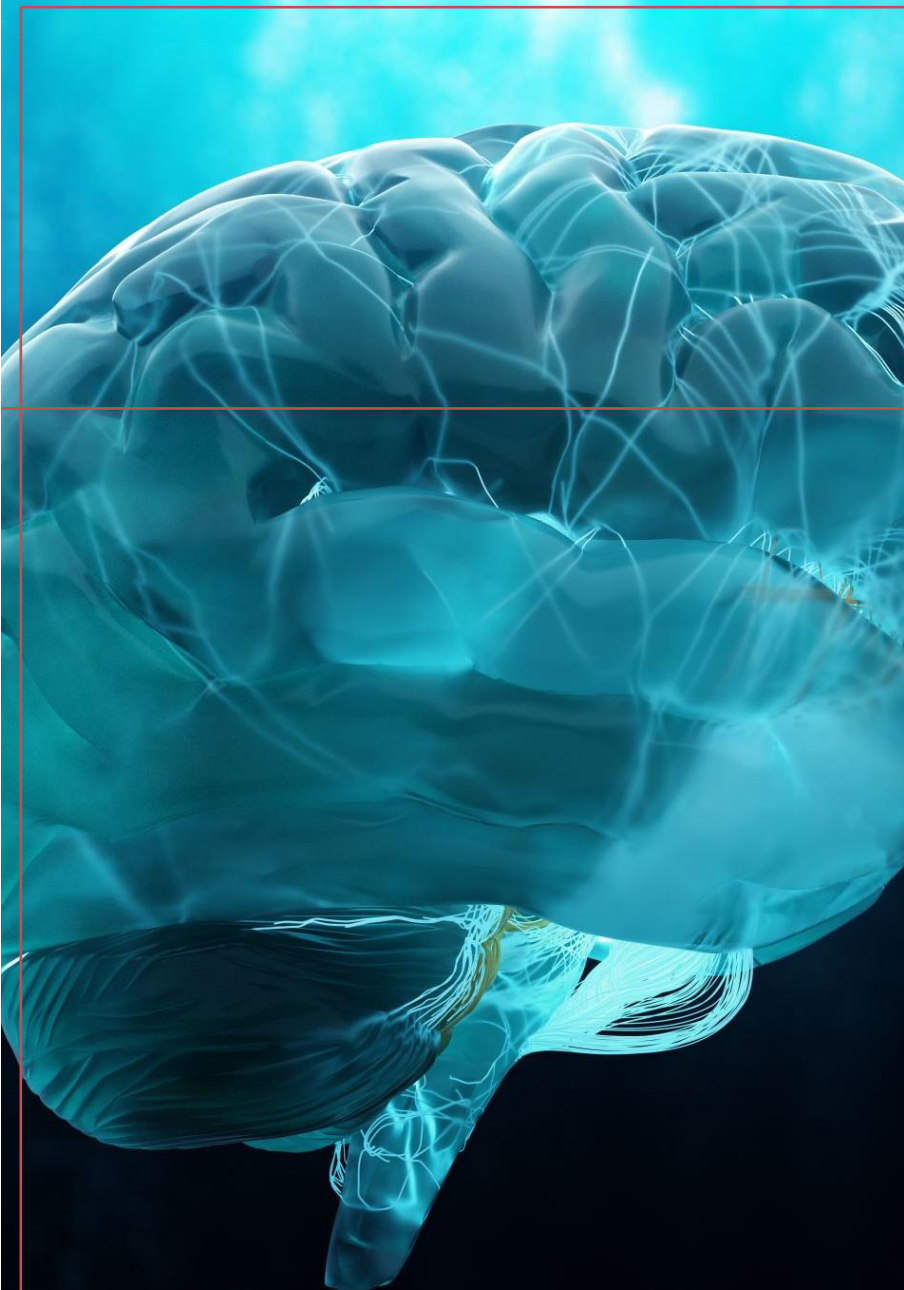
Loneliness and Opioid Addiction

Rachel Wurzman – 'How loneliness fuels opioid addiction':

The human brain uses naturally occurring opioids to maintain balance among important brain circuits.

Lack of strong social connection disrupts the balance, making experiences like deep social connection feel good.

Recovery requires treatment across all three categories: medical detox, counseling/therapy, and social connection.



Rewiring the Brain

- The striatum is a source of hope.
- It can be rewired by reprogramming with deep social connections it longed for initially.
- We need to practice social connective behaviors instead of compulsive behaviors.

Shame Dynamics

Initially – Honeymoon:

Superior compensates; helps and rescues.

Inferior adores and feeds the narcissist.

Superior makes Inferior the center of their universe and makes many sacrifices.

Shame Indicators

Having a rigid core belief: 'I am bad, weak, unlovable.'

Being excessively defensive or rigid.

Habitual self-centeredness and egotism.

Constant belittling, discounting, and criticizing.

Avoiding responsibilities excessively.

Additional Indicators of Shame

Excessive social isolation or a compulsion to socialize.

Having few or no real friends.

General suspicion and mistrust of others.

Excessive sensitivity and defensiveness to criticism.

Excessive concern with personal/social blame.

Further Indicators of Shame

Misperceiving feedback as criticism.

Feeling irrational guilt or anxiety about earned successes.

Obsessing about fairness or equality.

Focusing on past mistakes in private or publicly.

Habitually putting own needs last.

Healing Shame

Replace Lies with Truth

There is a cognitive aspect of healing; but it is not the only aspect.

Positive affirmations.

Act on truth (cortex), not emotions (limbic).

Treat yourself based on truth, not emotions.

Act your way to new feelings.



Scriptural Insights on Healing Shame



Romans 8:15-17 – 'So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children.'

Romans 15:7 – 'Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you.'

1 Peter 2:9 – 'You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own special possession.'

Responding to Shame



Competing priorities – hide, but still be respected and liked.



Shame's effect on connection, codependency.



Comparing to others:
Choosing an arena where I think I can surpass others.



Focus areas: Beauty, brains, talent, status, power, possessions, or religion.

Parenting and Validation

Problem: Child must need them for everything.
Any growth is a threat.

Don't let them grow.

Validation-seeking behaviors:

Spotlight seeking, sensationalized stories, and
regular mentions of accomplishments.

Respect and Shame

- Feelings of superiority, but unsatisfying.
- Four types of respect:
 - Inherent (as a baby, unearned).
 - Character-based (earned).
 - Service/contributions (earned).
 - Position of authority (unearned).
- Shame distorts every virtue, including respect, loyalty, and love.



Shame Triggers: Social Responses



Triggers include:



Disappointing someone, impatience, pity, being talked over, rolled eyes, and withheld attention.



Others doing better than you, ignoring advice, disrespect, conflict, or anger.



Body language like raised eyebrows, wagging fingers, or sighs.



Shame Triggers: Relationships



Partners throwing your past in your face, withholding love, or being self-righteous.

Parents putting you down.

Feeling rejected or abandoned.

Being around friends but feeling like an outsider.



Family and Personal Triggers



Stress, asking for help, or revealing a struggle.

Friends dropping by unannounced to a messy home.

Family get-togethers where everyone is 'successful' except you.

Kids getting into trouble or expressing hatred.



Negative Responses and Emotions



Justice-seeking behavior:
Withholding love or punishing oneself.

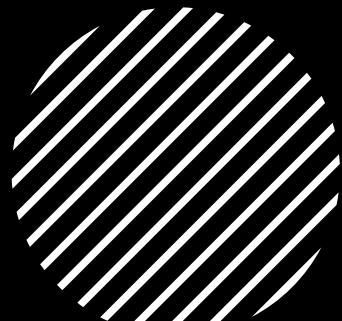
Negative emotions:

Anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, insecurity.

Depression, guilt, and hopelessness.



Introduction to Consequences of Shame



Title: Results of Trauma



Subtitle: Understanding the Biggest Issues Caused by
Trauma



Key Message: Trauma's greatest damage often
manifests as shame, profoundly affecting identity and
behavior.

Results of Shame

Conclusion:

“If people know the real me, they’ll reject or abandon me.”

Behavioral Adaptations:

- Hide true self to avoid rejection.
- Seek love and respect to meet needs.
- Compensate by adapting to gain approval.



**Complex
Trauma
Characteristic
#1 - Shame**

Definition:

Core belief: “I must not be good enough; something is wrong with me.”

Impact:

Little understood yet highly influential.

Key Insight:

Most people don't recognize its presence despite its profound effects.

Characteristic #2: Self- Criticism:

Self-Criticism:

- Harsh self-judgment.
- Belief in self-punishment as a path to improvement.
- Feeling undeserving of kindness.

Characteristic #3: Masks and Personas

Shame Lies:

Fear of rejection if authentic.

Behaviors:

Adopting roles (hero, comedian, scapegoat).

Becoming someone else to feel accepted.

Characteristic #4: People Pleasing

Behavior:

Always saying “yes” to avoid rejection.

Insight:

Driven by fear, not genuine love.

External validation becomes the basis of self-worth.

Characteristic #5: Unhealthy Value Systems

Behavior:

Always saying “yes” to avoid rejection.

Insight:

Driven by fear, not genuine love.

External validation becomes the basis of self-worth.

Characteristic #6: Codependency

Behavior:

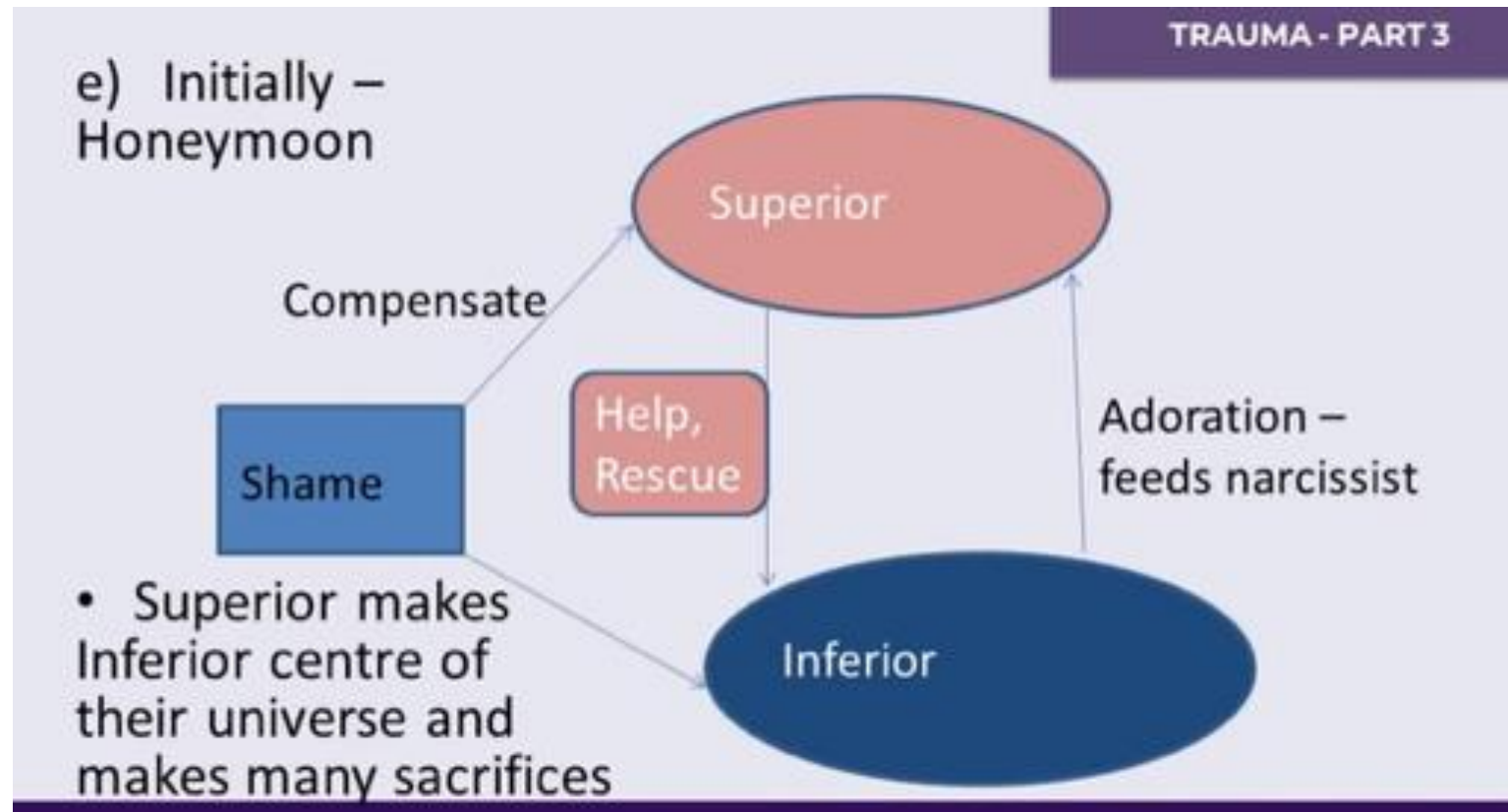
Always saying “yes” to avoid rejection.

Insight:

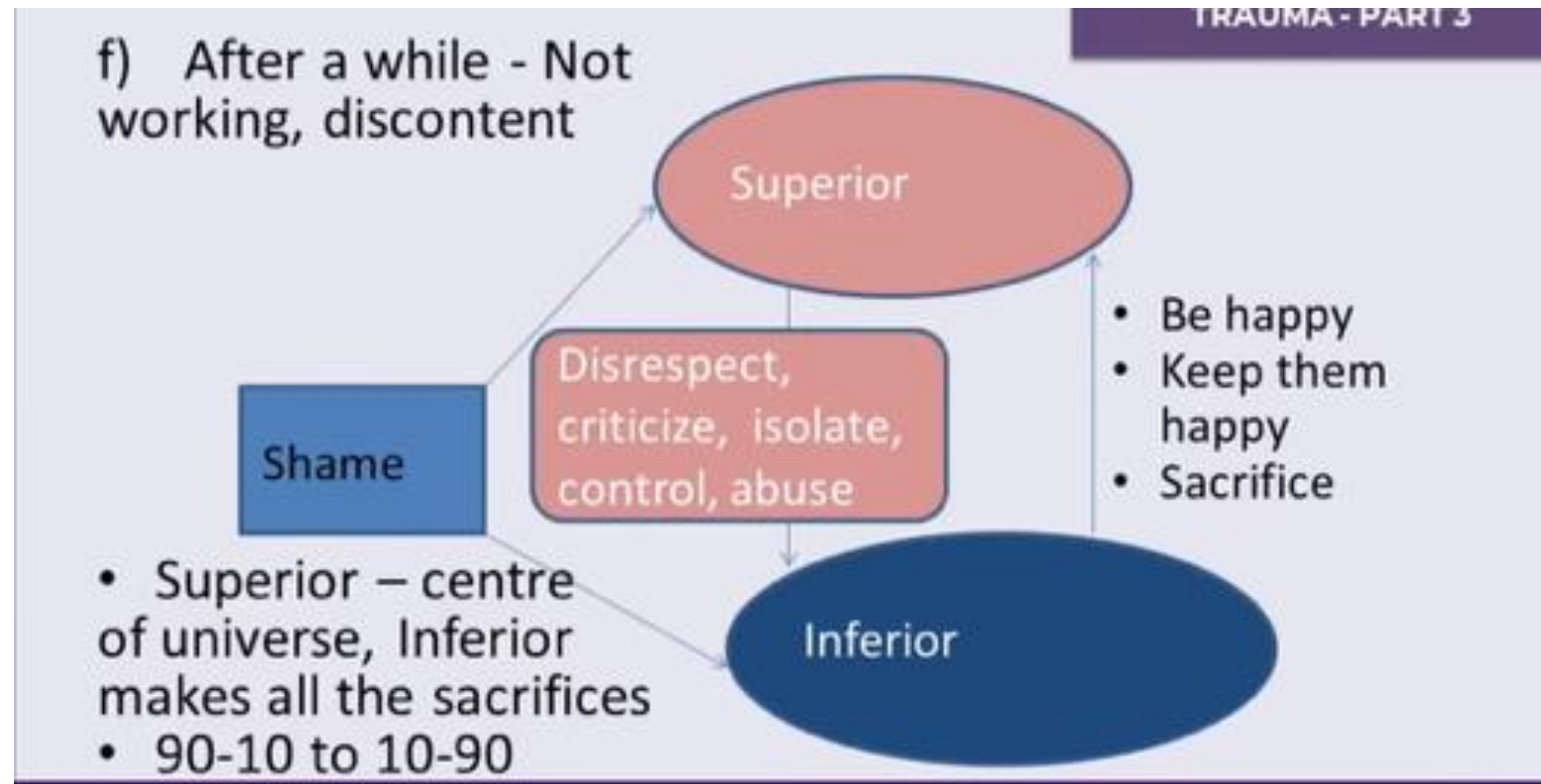
Driven by fear, not genuine love.

External validation becomes the basis of self-worth.

As noted below in Tim Fletcher's graphic below, in co-dependent relationships one partner takes the superior role and the other, the inferior role. This works well for a time as each partner's shame adaptations meets certain needs.



But in time the co-dependent and shame-based adaptation stops working. The inferior person begins to completely lose themselves and becomes resentful for always being the giving one. The superior one escalates control tactics, even becoming patently abusive if needed.





Healing Trauma-Based Shame

Step 1: Self-Awareness

- Understand how shame operates in your life.
- Understand how shame operates in your
- Understand your emotional triggers and recurring patterns that shame creates.
- Awareness is the first step to breaking shame's cycle.



Step 2: Replace Lies with Truth

Cognitive aspect of healing:

Engage the cortex to counter distorted limbic thoughts.

Practice positive affirmations.



Step 3: Develop a Healthy Value System



- Evaluate the value system you were raised with.
 - Reflect on the values you grew up with—are they healthy or harmful?
 - Discover what genuinely gives your life meaning and worth beyond accomplishments.
- Note:
 - Some value can come from accomplishments, but over-reliance leads to unhealthy self-worth.

Step 4: Treat Yourself with Respect

1. Recognize the limbic brain's emotional responses, but let the cortex guide actions.
2. Acknowledge the conflict between the limbic brain and cortex:
 - Limbic brain: Negative feelings lead to self-disrespect.
 - Cortex: Act based on truth—"I have value."
3. Respect yourself even when feelings suggest otherwise, fostering new, healthier emotions.
4. Act your way into new, accurate feelings (even if you don't fully feel them).

LOVE

HONOR

SELF-RESPECT

Step 5: Accept Yourself

1. Learn to appreciate your personality, body, and emotions as they are.
2. Shift negative self-perceptions into affirmations of your unique qualities.
3. Reframe negatives as positives (e.g., being shy as thoughtful).
4. Note: Acceptance is a choice, not necessarily a feeling.



A person is seen from behind, sitting on a wooden bench on a deck. They are looking out over a calm lake towards a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the water and the surrounding forested hills. The sky is filled with soft, golden light. In the foreground, there are some potted plants on the deck. The overall mood is peaceful and reflective.

Step 6: Accept Your Past

1. Acknowledge that while the past holds pain, it also offers lessons.
2. Use these lessons to grow and build a stronger self.
3. View past experiences as opportunities for growth.
4. Learn from them to become a better person.



Step 7: Embrace the Slow Journey of Growth

Growth isn't instant; it's a gradual process with setbacks.

Understand growth is gradual and often messy.

Resist the urge to give up.

Each undesired outcome offers insights—resilience comes from perseverance.



Step 8: Forgive Yourself

Release self-blame by recognizing you did the best you could with what you knew then.

Forgiveness is a choice that opens the door to self-compassion and healing.

Silence the internal critic:

Self-compassion for past survival efforts.

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling:

Cortex: "I will let go and learn from this."

Step 9: Choose Accurate Mirrors

- Surround yourself with people who reflect your worth and respect.
- Set boundaries with those who reinforce shame.



Step 10: Set Boundaries

- Protect yourself from harmful relationships or toxic behaviors.
- Boundaries are necessary for emotional safety and personal growth.
- Protect yourself from “shame mirrors.”
- Recognize that setting boundaries with family can be challenging but crucial.

