

Deepening Our Connections:

Leveraging Shame to Address Impasses and Improve
Psychotherapy Outcomes

Presented by Keren Sofer Psy.D.
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Reminders

Keren Sofer Psy.D. has not received any financial or commercial support for this program or its contents.

There are no conflicts of interest related to this program.

Today's Objectives

1. Identify three ways that shame can interfere with the development and maintenance of the therapeutic alliance and name ways that shame is necessary in all healthy relationships.
2. Analyze the phenomenon of shame from four lenses: as an affect, as part of a developmental/relational process, as a defense, and as a system.
3. Recognize common defensive strategies clients and therapists utilize to manage shame through the use of tools such as the Compass of Shame.
4. Select and apply strategies for identifying and effectively addressing shame to repair ruptures and impasses.

Today's Agenda

8:00 - 8:15 Welcome, Objectives

8:15 - 8:35 Therapeutic Alliance

- Research on TA and ruptures
- Ruptures as Shame-Event

8:35- 9:15 3A's: Awareness of Shame

- 4 Lenses of shame

9:15 - 10 Awareness of Shame:

Compass of Shame (breakout groups)

10 - 10: 25 3A's: Affirmation thru
Countershaming

- Shame - Pride Continuum;
Pendulation; Other strategies

10:25 - 10:55 3A's: Addressing Shame

- De-shaming the narrative
- Balancing responsibility

10:55 -11:00 Questions, Reflections

Definition of Shame by Keren Sofer Psy.D.

Shame is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. As an affect, it physiologically tells us to stop, withdraw and anchor into our place in the group. As part of a developmental and relational process, it functions to help us manage closeness and distance with others and assess who we can be vulnerable with. As a protection or defense, shame functions as an alarm bell to warn us of relational danger and pushes us to seek out safety. As a system and part of a system, it moves through groups, organizations, society and generations, seeking to share implicit lessons on danger and safety - but it can also be a tool of power, control and subjugation.

Definition of Shame

Shame presents a profound paradox as it compels a desperate attempt to preserve connection that drives us into isolation. It can tempt us to compromise our integrity in futile efforts to maintain a facade of ethical or approved behavior. We can become trapped in a cycle of self-loathing, yet simultaneously feel unable to seek the very connection that could alleviate our sense of unworthiness.

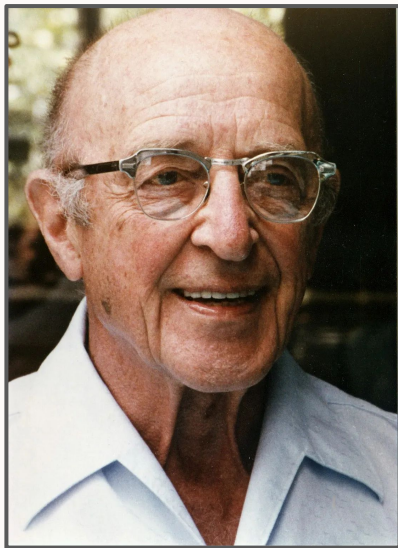
By acknowledging shame's presence, understanding its origins, and approaching it with compassion, we, as individuals and in the collective, can learn from it, fortify bonds and withstand setbacks to grow.

Today's Roadmap: 3 A's of Shame-Sensitive Practice



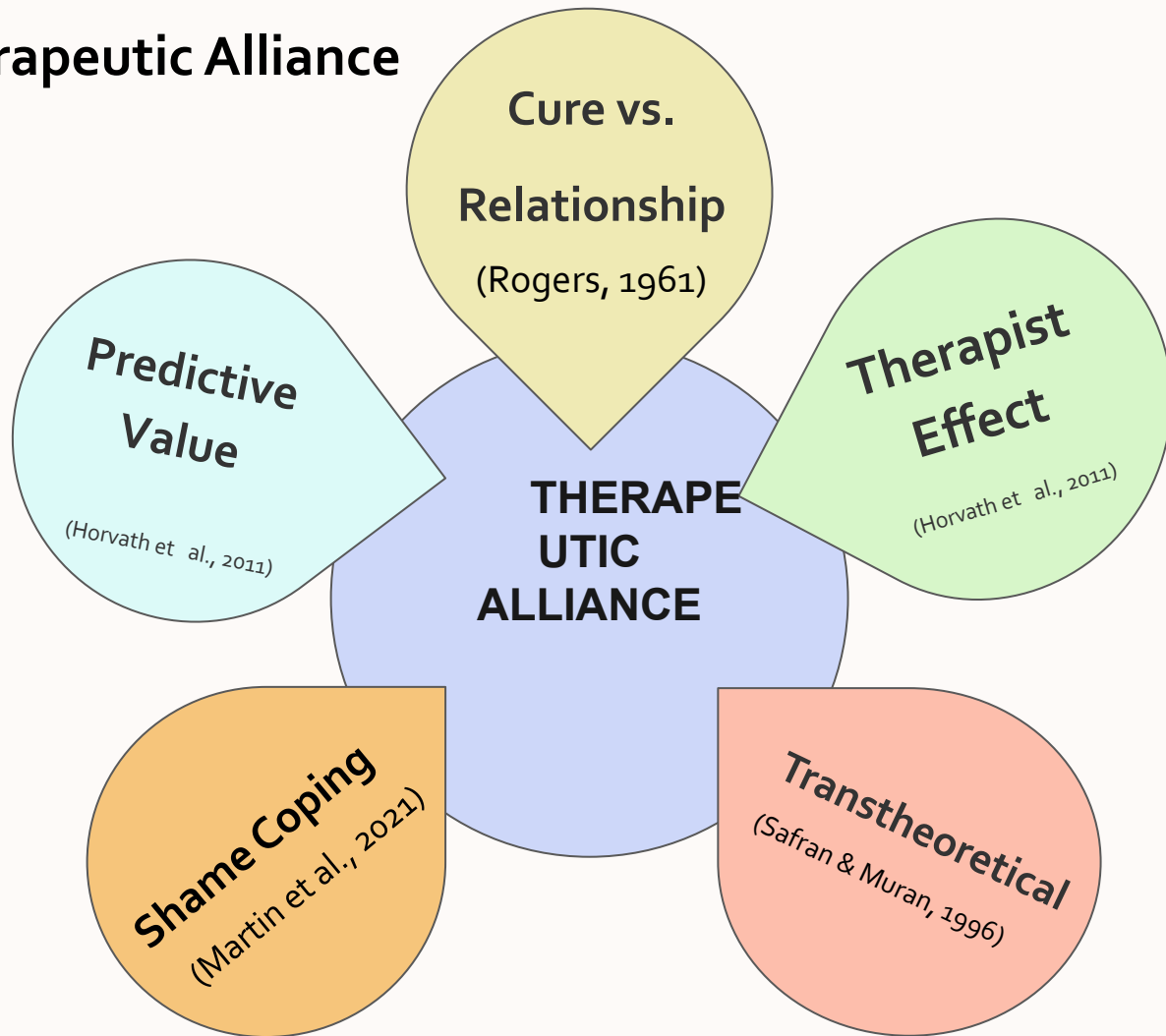
(Dolezal & Gibson, 2022)

The Centrality of the Therapeutic Alliance

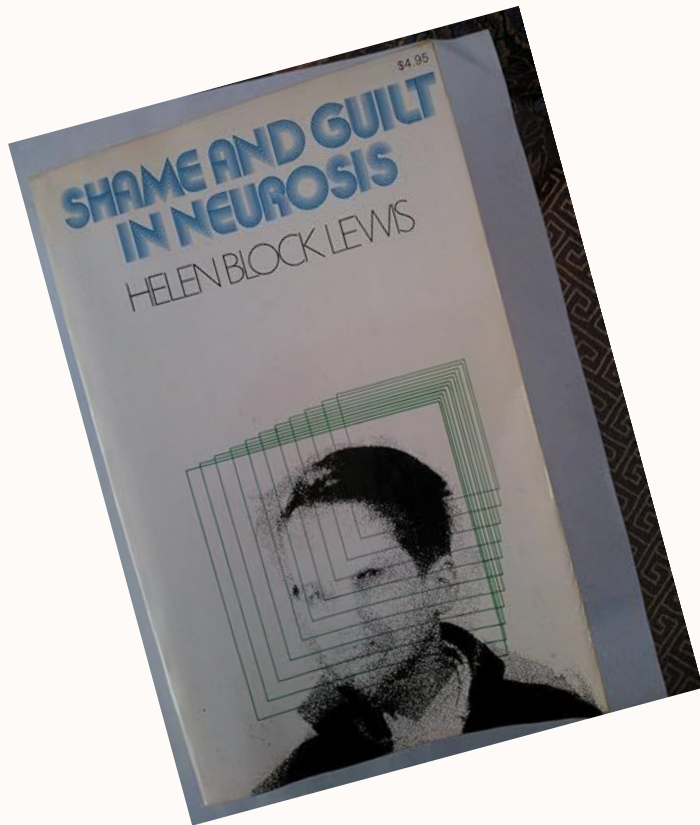


"How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth?"

- Carl Rogers



The Therapeutic Alliance and Shame



Painstaking study analyzing verbal transcripts

- Shame > all other affects combined
- Overt vs. Bypassed Shame

A Shift in Perspective to Address Ruptures



(Safran et al. 2011)

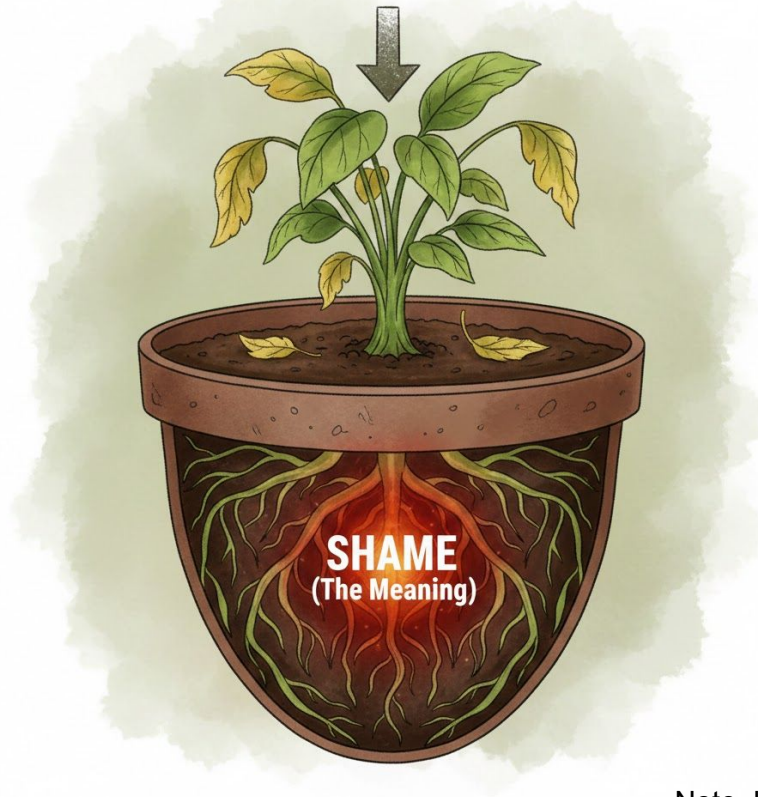
A Shift in Perspective to Address Ruptures

- Awareness vs. Action (Kullgard et al. 2022)
 - 76% of therapists suspected dropout/ only 23% discussed it.
- Reasons for Relational Disconnects (Krause et al. 2011)
 - Differences between Clt and Therapist explanations
- Expectations differ, lead to rupture or “failure” (Gold & Stricker, 2011)



Ruptures as Shame-Events

Rupture = Behavior | Shame = Meaning



(Werbart et al., 2023)

Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

Ruptures as Shame-Events



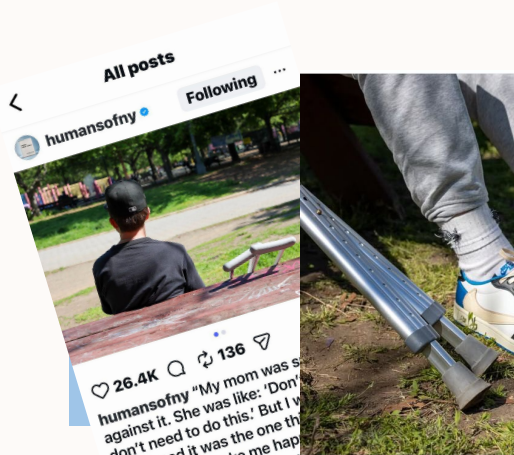
PARADOX OF THERAPIST COMPETENCE

(Lavik et al., 2022)

Note. Image adapted from
Google Gemini (2026).

3 A's in Working with Shame





**Witnessing other
being demeaned**

Addiction

Being the

OTHER WALKS OF SHAME

Just found out he
has gingivitis.



Didn't pick up
call from mother.



Lunch was jar
of Nutella.



By Roz Chast

**ing that makes
e ferent**

ment

Rejection

Depression

**Learning
Differences**

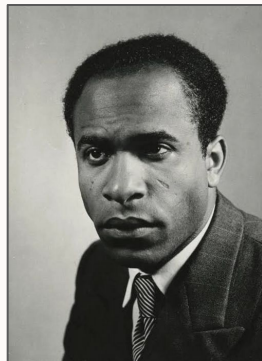
Success

uality

Shame Within Systems: Recognizing Role of Stigma

“Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.”

– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

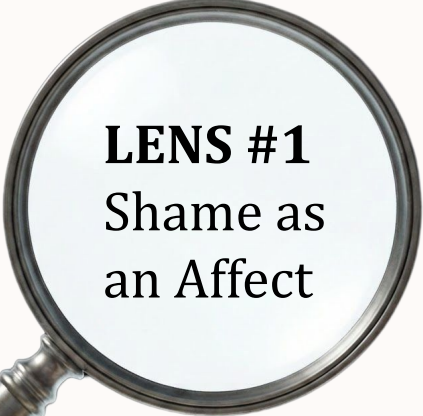


“Psychologists say shame developed as an evolutionary function to curb bad individual behavior that could harm the group. But modern society has a way of shaming some people for no crime other than being born. Your original sin, the one I know well, would have been being born in need of economic help.”

- Sarah Smarsh, *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*

Moral Injury: [Ehren Tool, Iraqi War Vet, Clay as Care](#): “Cups as opportunity to “speak about unspeakable things”

Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses



LENS #1 Shame as an Affect

- Affect = inborn, automatic, immediate and usually visible physiological response
- Arises from the interruption of positive affect
- Shame as an affect that binds to other affects

(Tomkins, 1963)



Norbert Shamimuriya, Zimbabwe "How Can I Rise"



Birch, A., & O'Rowe, M. (Writers), & Macdonald, H. (Director). (2020, April 26). Episode 10 (Season 1, Episode 10) [TV series episode]. In E. Guiney, A. Lowe, L. Abramson, & S. Rooney (Executive Producers), *Normal People*. Element Pictures. ***

Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses



LENS #2 Shame as a Defense

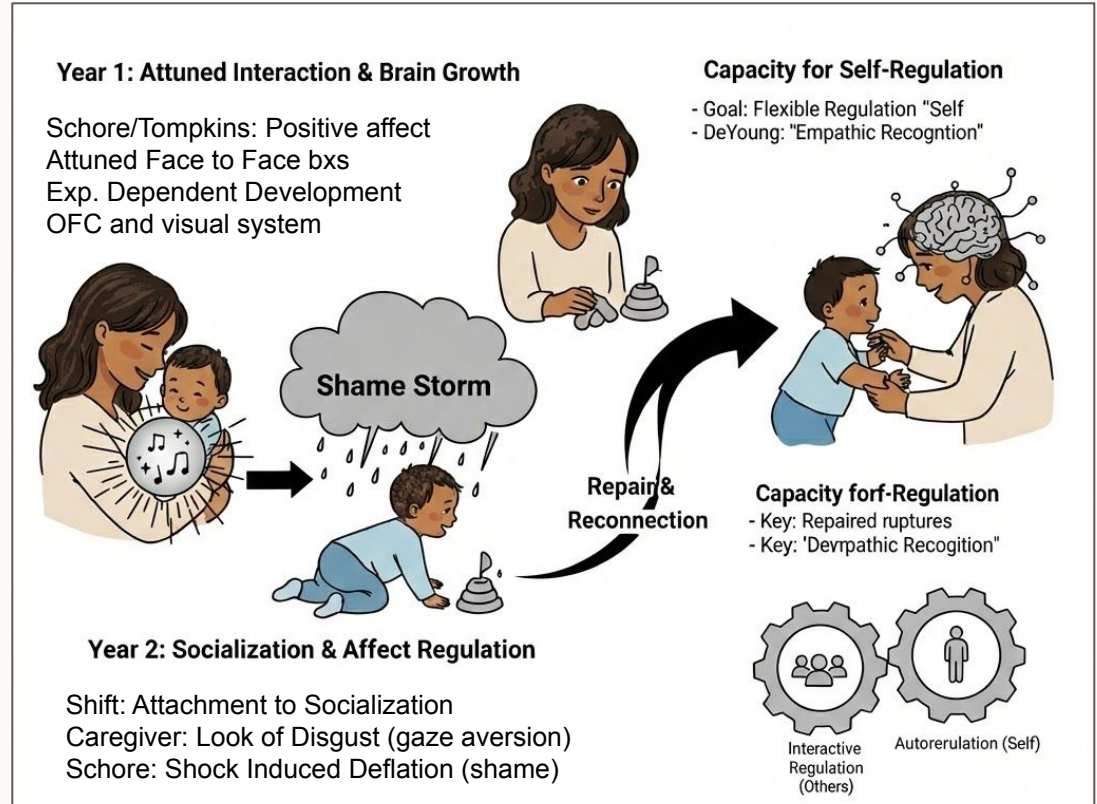
- Tamps down intensity
- Freeze response as protection
- Recruits care from others

(Schoore, 1998)

Awareness of Shame: Lens #3

LENS #3

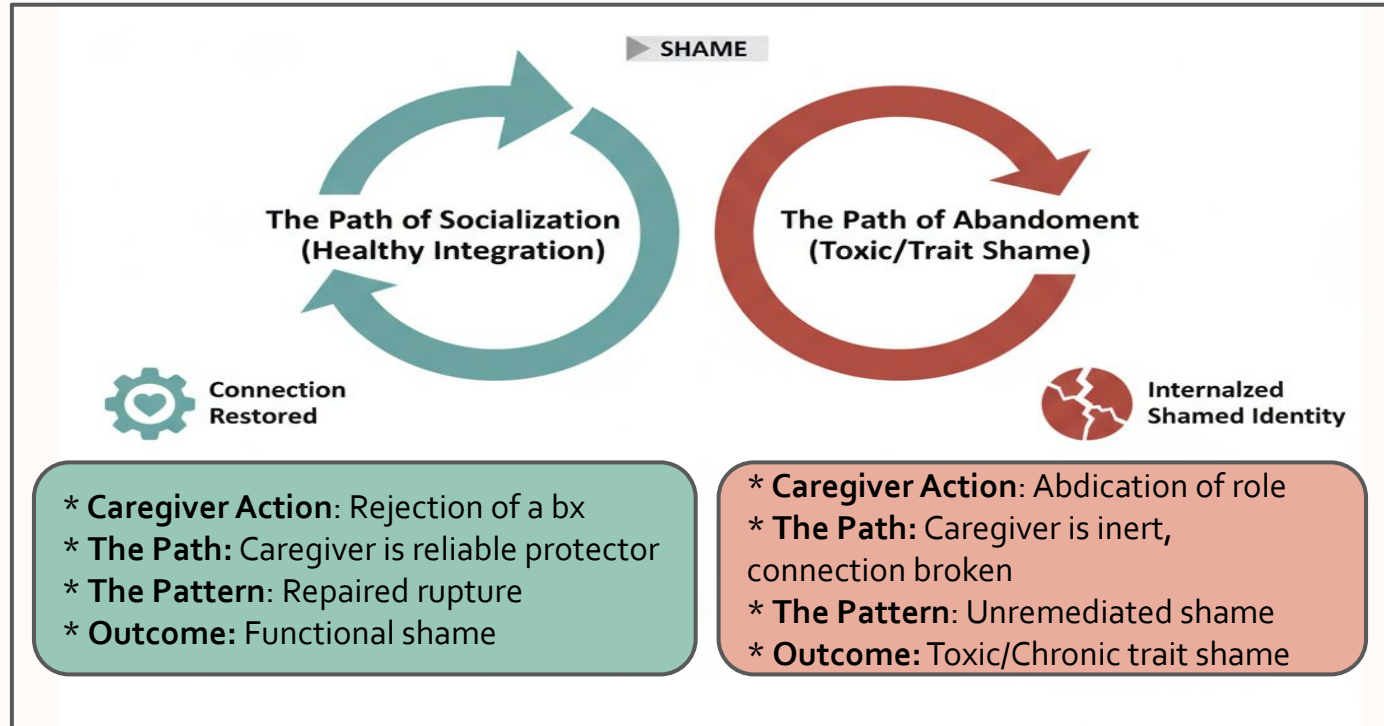
Shame as part of a developmental/relational process



Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

(Schore, 1998)

Awareness of Shame: Lens #3



Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

(Schorre, 1998), (George, 2005), (Matos & Gouveia, 2014)

Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses



LENS #3
Shame as part of a developmental/
relational process



Yinka Orifidiya, "All or Nothing" 2012
exhibit, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia PA

Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses



LENS #3
Shame as part of a developmental/
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Yinka Orifidiya, "All or Nothing" 2012
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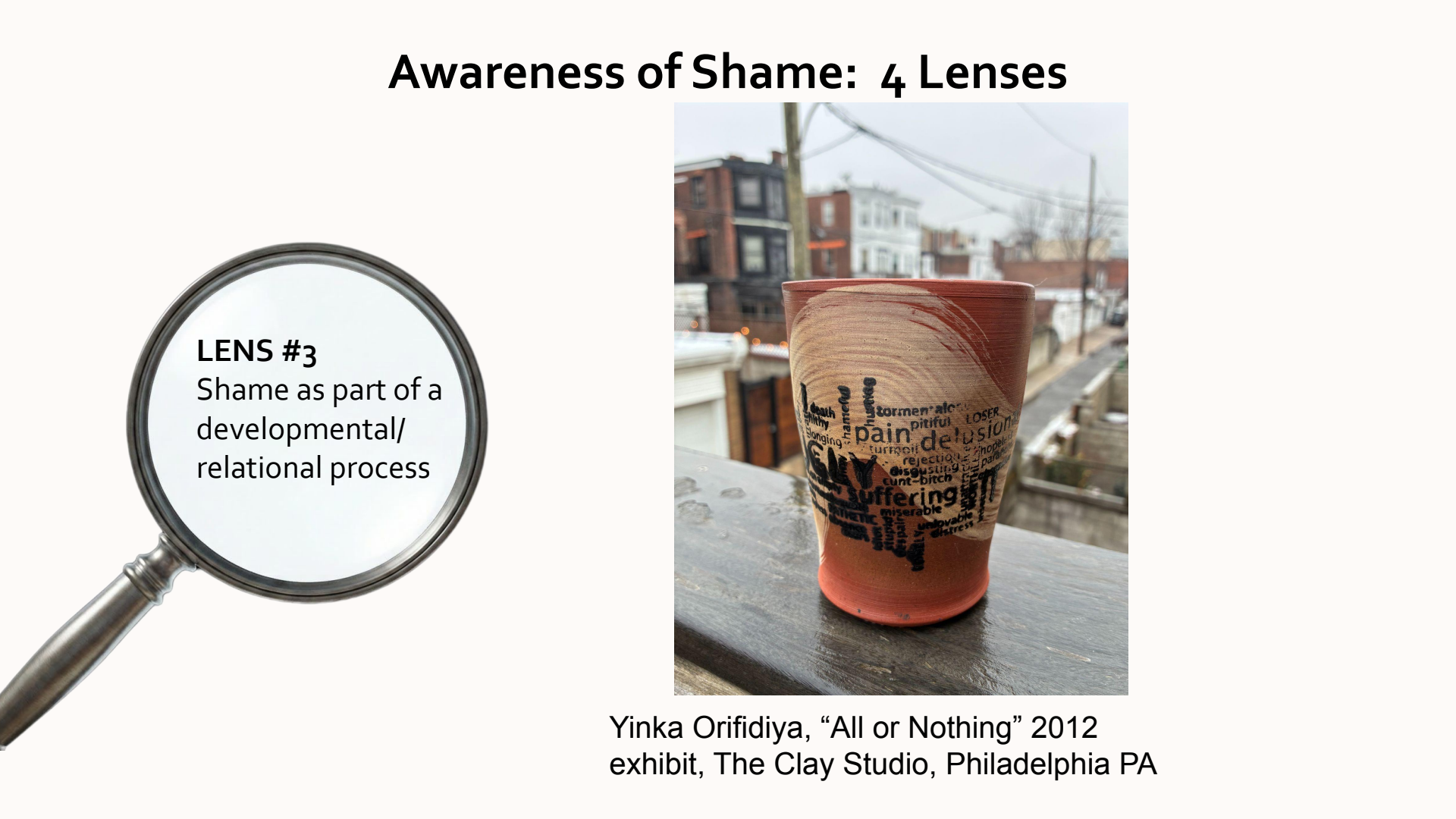
Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses



LENS #3
Shame as part of a developmental/
relational process



Yinka Orifidiya, "All or Nothing" 2012
exhibit, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia PA



Awareness of Shame: 4 Lenses

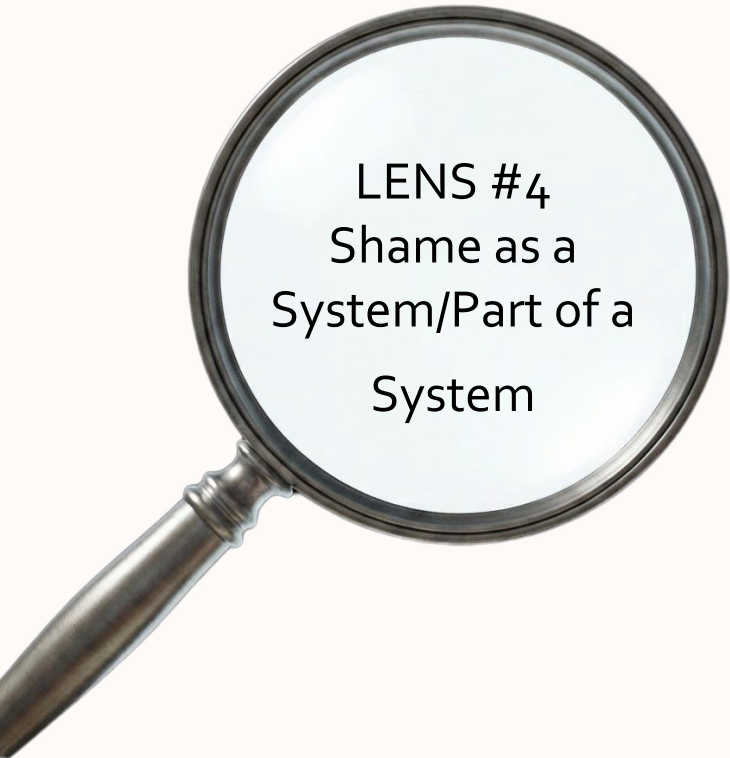


LENS #3
Shame as part of a developmental/
relational process



Yinka Orifidiya, "All or Nothing" 2012
exhibit, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia PA

Awareness of Shame: 3 Lenses



LENS #4
Shame as a
System/Part of a
System

- Behavioral system = set of behaviors that seek to accomplish a goal
 - Attachment system: proximity & safety, secure base
 - Shame system: acceptance & belonging within community
- System activated: behaviors to minimize exclusion and maximize acceptance
 - Attachment styles: pattern of how we foster connection *and* manage disconnection/shame

Awareness of Shame: Shame as Part of a System



The Two Childhoods
by Sarah Detweiler

Awareness of Shame: Guilt Vs. Shame

DIMENSION	SHAME	GUILT
Focus	I am defective, damaged, bad	My behavior was bad
Action Tendency	Hide, move away, protect self	Motivation to confess, fix, bx “not me”; desire to realign bx with values.
Impact	Defensive ; accommodate to avoid shame; and/or reassess, develop self-acceptance/learn	Cognitive dissonance, thinking about impact on others, problem-solving/amends
Relationship	Shame transformed to guilt	Guilt leads to shame or co-occurs

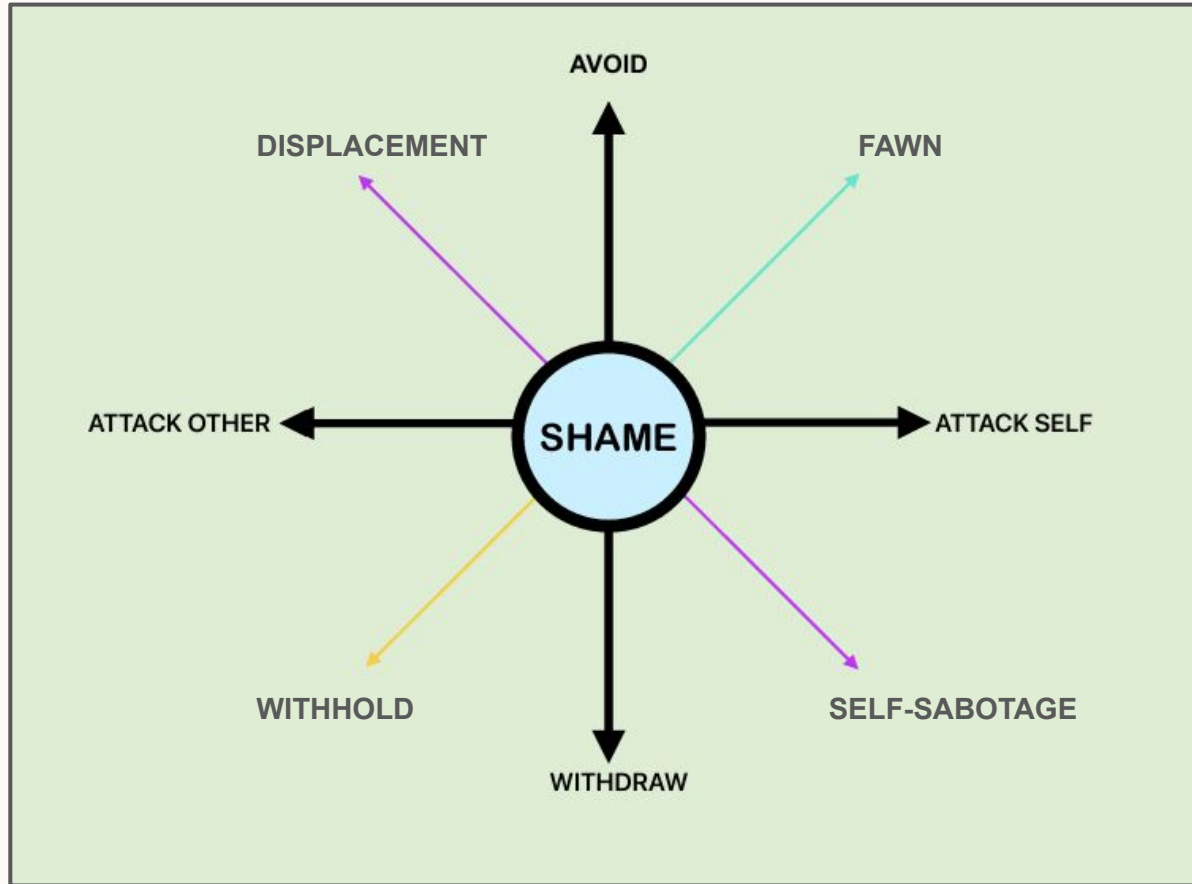
(Leach, 2017)



"After all these years, you still feel guilt? You should be ashamed of yourself."

J. B. Handelsman January 29, 1972

Awareness of Shame: The Compass of Shame

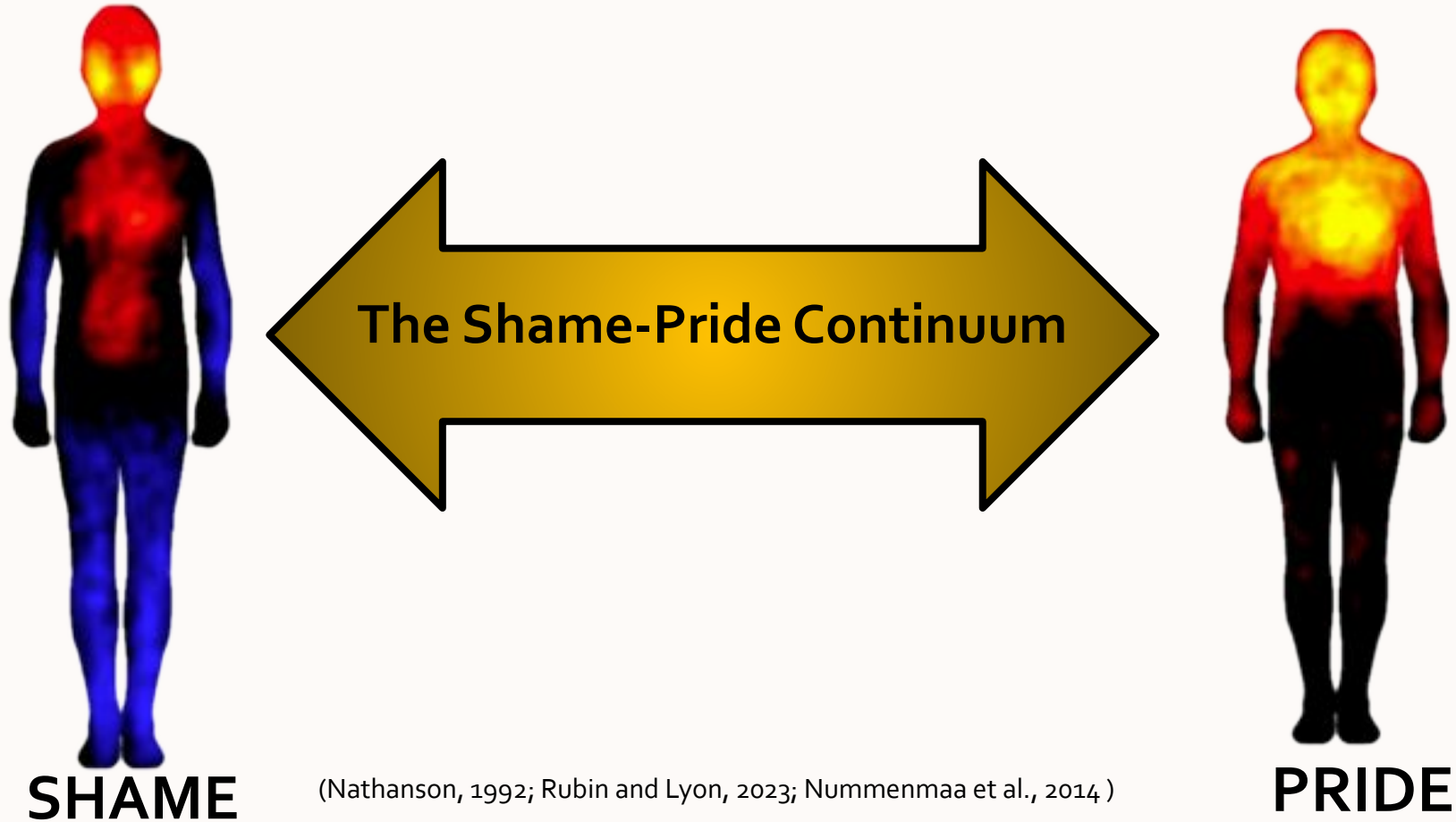


Nathanson, D. Compass of Shame (1992); Rubin, S. and Lyon B. (2023), Fawn and Withhold; Sofer, K. (2025) Displacement and Self-sabotage



Bos, H., & Thureen, P. (Creators). (2022, January 23). Knick-knacks and doodads (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In B. Everett, C. Strauss, M. Duplass, & J. Duplass (Executive Producers), *Somebody Somewhere*. Element Pictures; HBO. ***

Affirmation Through Countershaming



Affirmation Through Countershaming: Pendulation



Affirmation Through Countershaming: Pendulation



Finding the Pride Exception



Trivial Point of Connection: Curiosity;
Access to other parts of the self



Leveraging Healthy Attachments

Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

Affirmation Through Countershaming: **Evaluating Readiness**

**PIER 1:
Personal Anchor**

Check: Do I feel
settled in my body?
Can I find my shame
spots?

Signal: Shift from
expert to human

**PIER 2:
Client's Anchor**

Check: Is client's
shame tolerable to
them?

Signal: Some signs
of curiosity, open to
invitation to engage

**PIER 3:
Connection with
Good Enough
Sturdiness**

Check: Does our
connection have
resilience?

Signal: pendulate,
accept validation,
recognition

Addressing Shame Through Shame-Sensitive Practice

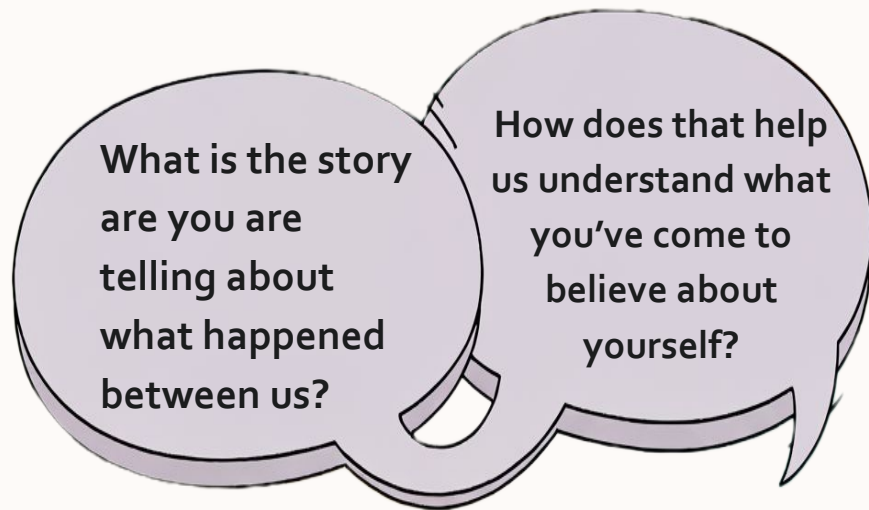


Shelter in Place by Sarah Detweiler

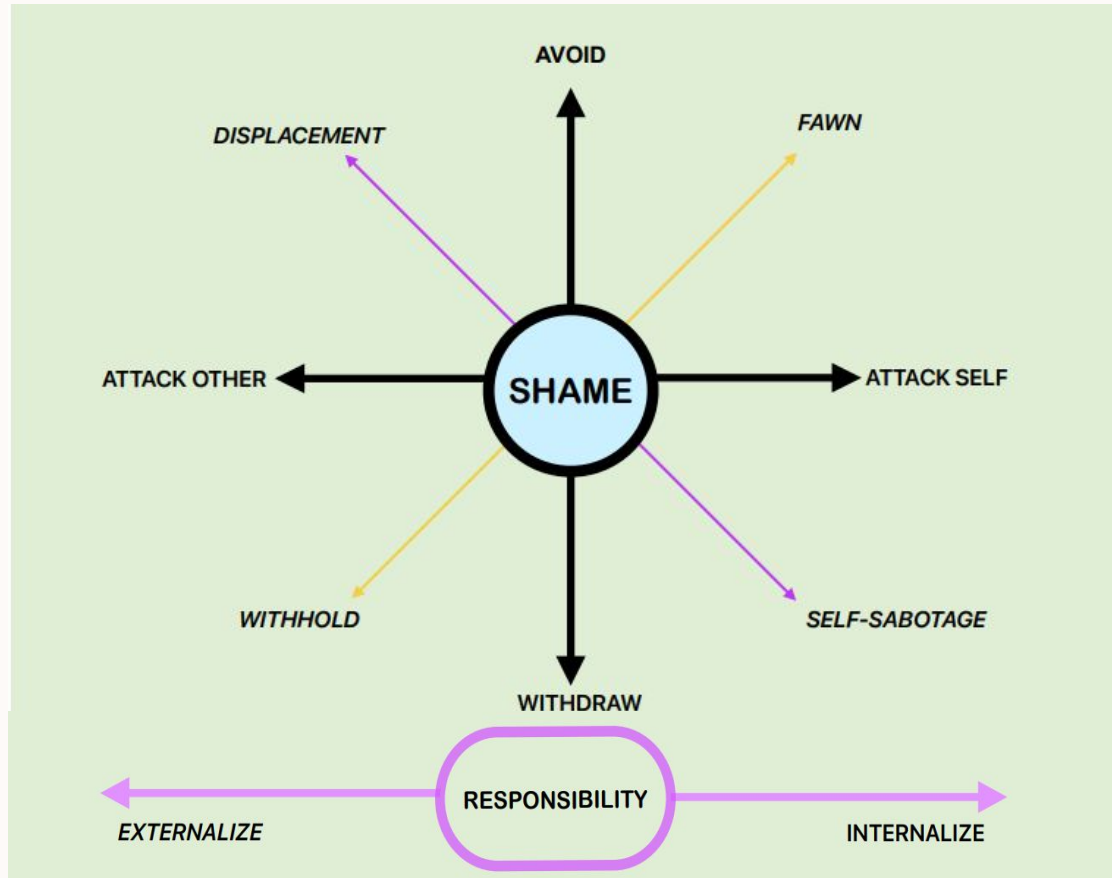
Addressing Shame: De-Shaming the Narrative

Notice:

- new details as they emerge
- new interpretations or further clarification of old ones
- Linkages with past patterns



Addressing Shame: Responsibility Balance



Nathanson, D. Compass of Shame (1992)
Rubin, S. and Lyon B. (2023),
Fawn and Withhold;
Sofer, K. (2025) Displacement
and Self-sabotage,
Responsibility

First...some Affirmation through Countershaming

You aren't alone!

- Universality and challenge of shame-events (ruptures)
 - ALL therapists struggle with clients who are:
 - Hostile
 - Withdrawn
 - Avoidant (Strupp, 1980)
 - Study showing same therapists with good outcomes with some clients and poor outcomes with others (Henry et al., 1993)
 - No subset of "bad therapists": (Strupp, 1980, p. 954).



Oh Rupture, Where Art Thou?



(Hara et al., 2015), (Muran and Eubanks, 2020)

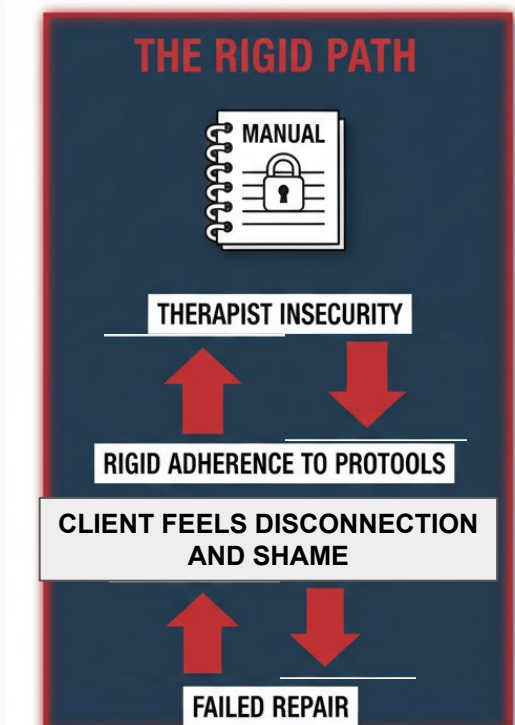
Oh Rupture, Where Art Thou?

Withdrawal ruptures 	Confrontation ruptures 
Movements away from other or self	Movements against other
Efforts toward isolation or appeasement	Efforts toward aggression or control
Pursuits of communion at the expense of agency	Pursuits of agency at the expense of communion



Keren Sofer

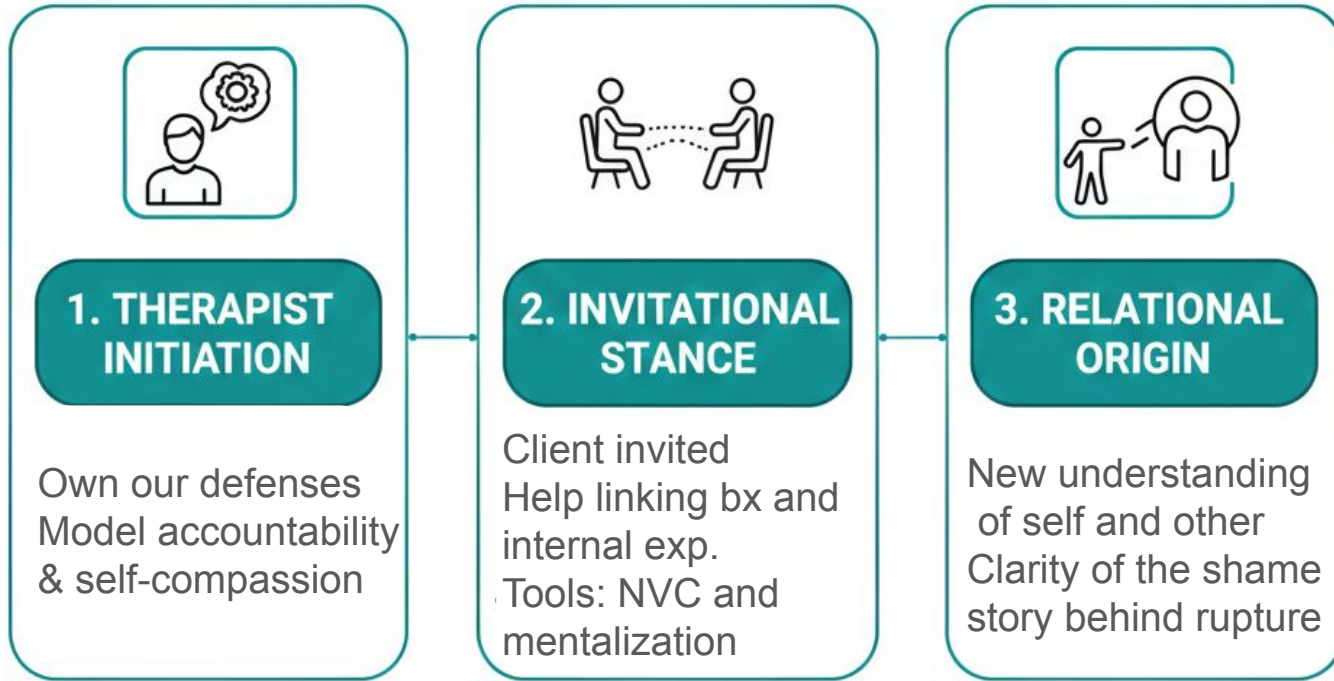
Addressing Shame: A Paradox and Some Good News



Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

(Strupp, 1993), (Henry et. al 1993)

Important Elements of Repair



Note. Image adapted from Google Gemini (2026).

Putting It All Together: the 3A's

Case Example

Where is the shame?

How can pendulation help expand capacity to address the shame?

What are ways the therapist begins the stage of addressing the shame?

Putting It All Together: the 3A's

Breakout Group:

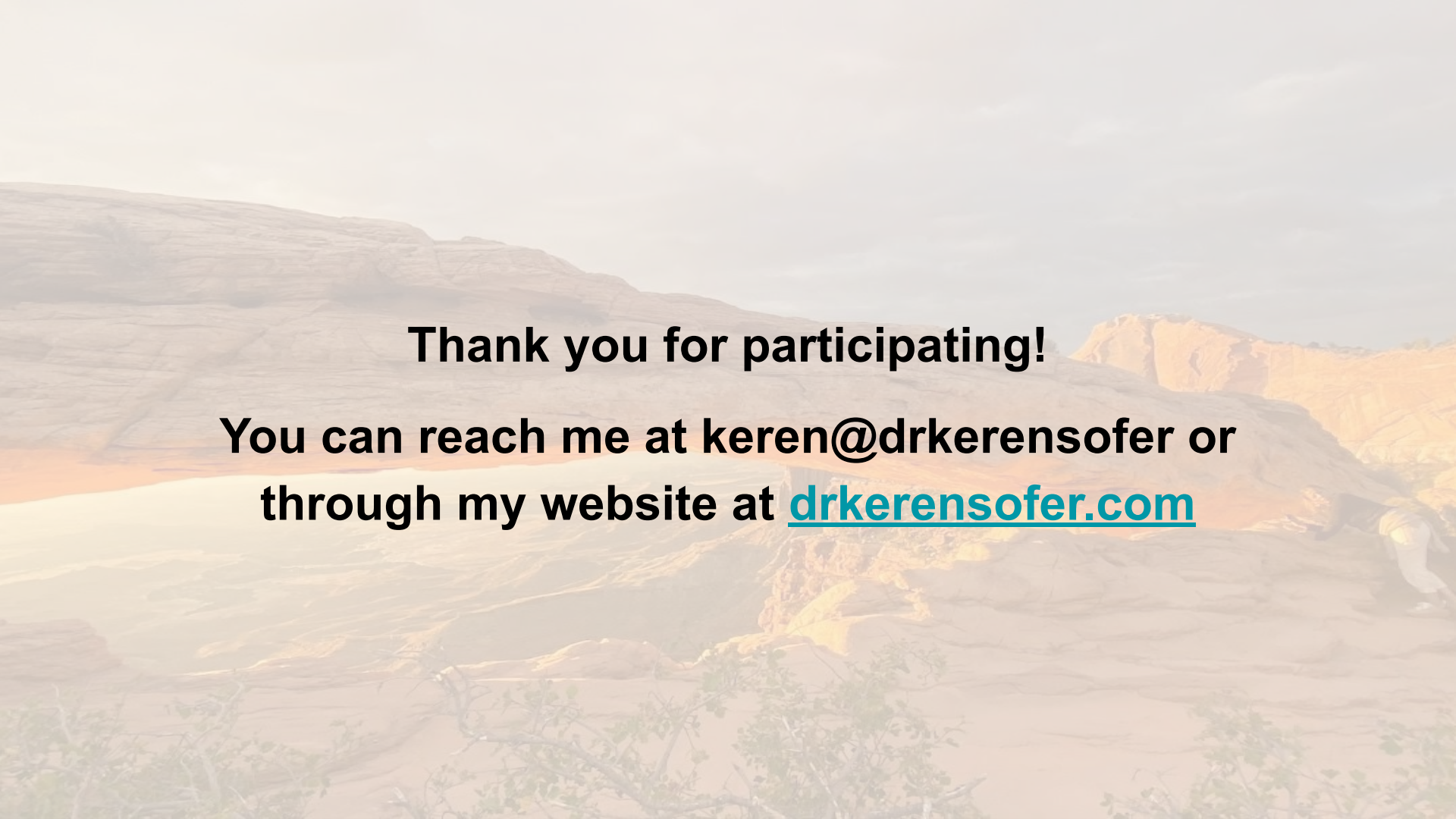
1. **Phase I: Safety and Impasse (5 Minutes):** Briefly introduce yourselves, then the Speaker shares a brief rupture (be mindful to not include much content or identifying information - in fact, the less the better for this exercise). The rest of the team asks simple clarifying questions.
2. **Phase II: Awareness & Affirmation (10 Minutes):** Spend **5 minutes** identifying the shame defenses in therapist and client. Then spend **5 minutes** suggesting ways to Pendulate and build capacity.
3. **Phase III: Addressing (5 Minutes):** Design a final, single question or intervention to address shame stuck point.

Concluding Comments and Questions



kintsukuroi

(n.) (v. phr.) "to repair with gold"; the art of repairing pottery with gold or silver lacquer and understanding that the piece is more beautiful for having been broken

A background image of a desert landscape with sand dunes and a person in the distance. The text is overlaid on this image.

Thank you for participating!

**You can reach me at keren@drkerensofer or
through my website at drkerensofer.com**

Appendix: Generative AI Disclosure

The following slides contain visual elements and diagrams developed with the assistance of Generative AI:

- **Slide 10 & 11:** Conceptual visuals adapted from Google Gemini 3 Flash.
- **Slide 20 & 21:** Data/Process diagrams modified from Google Gemini 3 Flash to ensure accuracy of psychological concepts.
- **Slide 29:** Thematic graphic created using Google Gemini 3 Flash.
- **Slide 38 & 39:** Summary and closing visuals adapted from Google Gemini 3 Flash.

Methodology: Images were generated using the Google Gemini 3 Flash model (January & February 2026). In accordance with APA 7th Edition guidelines for non-retrievable AI content, specific prompts were used to generate base visuals, which were then manually refined and edited by the author to ensure technical accuracy and relevance to the program's learning objectives. All concepts and metaphors fully my own.

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