

stephan konrad niederwieser

illustrated by johan planeveldt



what a shame

- when shame and guilt turn chronic
- when shame and guilt distort your idea of who you are
- the devastating consequences for your relationships

! how to resolve these patterns to achieve more freedom and fulfillment in life !

© Stephan Konrad Niederwieser, 2024. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored and transferred—neither electronically or mechanically—without the written permission of the author. For more information please contact:

Stephan Konrad Niederwieser
Gotenst. 65, 10829 Berlin, Germany
kontakt@stephan-niederwieser.de
www.stephan-niederwieser.de

All illustrations including the cover: © Johan Planefeldt, www.johanplanefeldt.com with the exception of flag and wheelchair (p. 19), which were created with the help of Dall-E 2 in July 2023.

Cover design and book design © Stephan Konrad Niederwieser, 2024

Medical disclaimer

The information contained in this book is of general nature. Please consult your doctor or psychotherapist before attempting anything described in this book. The author assumes no liability. You act entirely at your own risk.

»It is not what happened to us that is as important as how we react to what happens.«

Epiktet, griechischer Philosoph

»Shame has nothing to do with who you are.«

Dr. Laurence Heller, founder and developer of the NARM-Model

how this book came to be

My mother was born in 1920. Her father, an illegitimate child without a father, was wounded in World War I and subsequently developed a fondness for red wine. After her parents' divorce, my mother was passed from one relative to another.

In 1941, she gave birth to her first daughter—an illegitimate child. She married young and had two more children with her first husband. The first contracted meningitis and remained disabled for life, the second died during the war. In 1947, she met my father and shortly after became pregnant by him—with my first biological sister.

My father lost his parents early. His father succumbed to appendicitis, his mother died in a car accident when he was just eleven. Similar to my mother, he, an orphan, was passed around. At 17, he volunteered for military service and was sent to war to the Netherlands, Belgium, and France before marching to Stalingrad. A shrapnel wounded his leg and saved him: he was evacuated, a tremor from the bomb stayed with him for the rest of his life.

Both of my parents couldn't leave the war behind. They continued fighting at home, leaving deep wounds in the souls of their children. Four out of six survived. As my mother's ninth child, I suffered for a long time from oversensitivities to light, sounds, smells... I could hardly eat anything, was chronically tense, and struggled in school. Learning was nearly impossible for me. Every time I was called upon I blushed and my mind went blank.

At 16, I talked to my first psychotherapist. At 20, I participated in the EST training. At 23, I began learning to become a Hakomi therapist, one of the first mindfulness-based, body-centered depth psychology approaches. I tried rebirthing, rolfing, and bio-energetics; I meditated, studied psychotrauma, and learned to facilitate family constellations. I became a Buddhist and circumambulated the sacred Mount Kailash in Tibet. Over the past 40 years, I have had many corrective experiences, but it wasn't until I started to meet my shame that I began to overcome the idea that it would be better not to exist. This booklet is the result of that. May it be of service to you.

the capacity for shame is of great value

Every person can feel shame, and that is a good thing. In its acute form your cheeks may turn red, you might feel hot and uncomfortable, and some people start to sweat. Your heart can race, and you might even wish to disappear. Although all of this feels unpleasant, shame serves an important function: it helps you distinguish between right and wrong. If you hurt someone, shame pushes you to make things right again and helps you to learn from your mistakes. You can think of it as the glue that holds our society together, our communities, and our families.

But there's a catch: when shame becomes chronic, it makes life difficult. It can prevent you from being yourself. It can distort your perception of who you believe you are. It even affects the function of your organs, your nervous and immune systems. Your feelings and your perception of yourself, others, and the whole world can be affected. Physical symptoms and relationship difficulties are the result. To put it more dramatically: chronic shame and guilt are the sources of most symptoms and difficulties from which people suffer.

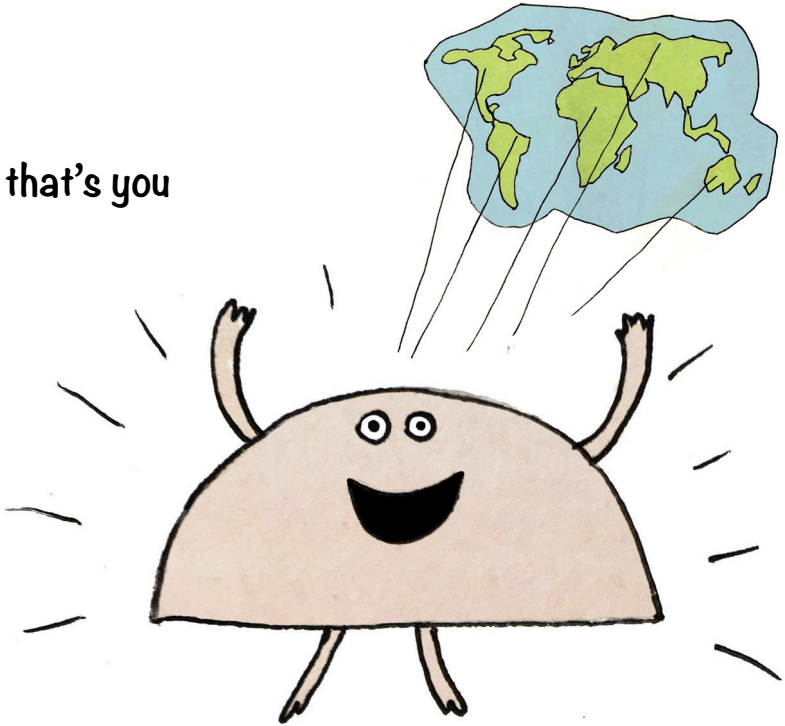
Therapists are becoming increasingly aware that chronic shame and guilt hinder self-healing. But how to deal with it? Corrective experiences can be valuable and helpful, but they rarely address the underlying dynamics. To free yourself from chronic shame and guilt, it is important to recognize how we carry our traumas into the present and reproduce them.

This booklet aims to give you insight into a slightly different model of shame. It does not assume that shame is a feeling that overcomes us, but that we have something to do with it. Shame is, in fact, a very clever strategy. With this intention in mind you will get an outlook on how to fundamentally free yourself today from the fall-out of your childhood.

P.S.: There are many people who contribute to the individual development of children. For the sake of simplicity, I have summarized them all under the term »parents.«

BEST CONDITIONS

that's you



Let's say this here is you. Regardless of your appearance, whether you are tall or short, thin or curvy, whatever ethnic group you identify with, whether you were born in America, Japan, Africa, Europe, or Malaysia—you are a human being. Neither your preferences in relating to others nor your personal beliefs change that basic fact.

Like everyone else, you are endowed with the fundamental traits of being human. For example, the ability to feel connected to yourself, others, and the world. You have feelings, the capacity to open your heart, and—depending on your age—the potential to develop healthy independence. Like all people, you want to express yourself authentically, find your own path, experience physical closeness, intimacy, and fulfilling sexuality.

Your current age does not matter for the following. Here, we turn towards your early experiences: the first ten years of your life or so, starting from the moment of your conception. I paint you beige, which symbolizes a blend of all skin colors.

the world you grew up in

This green field represents the world you were born into, grew up in, and live in. Your world is filled with many factors that influence your development. Here are a few examples:

Family Dynamics: how do parents, siblings and relatives relate to each other: including parenting style, physical closeness, vulnerability, care, emotionality...

Cultural Background: cultural norms, values, and traditions shape your worldview and identity.

Socioeconomic Status: financial stability and resources available to you affect your opportunities such as access to education and healthcare.

Education: The quality and type of education you receive, as well as the attitudes towards learning instilled in you.



Community: The neighborhood and community you grow up in, including the level of safety, support, and social connections.

Health: Your physical and mental health, including any genetic predispositions or illnesses.

Peers: The influence of friends and peers, which can affect your behaviors, interests, and self-esteem.

Media, including television, internet, and social media impact your perceptions and beliefs.

Major Life Events: the loss of a loved one, moving to a new place, or experiencing a natural disaster can have lasting effects, depending on how you are related to.

Personal Experiences and what you take away from them can impact how you perceive yourself and others forever after.



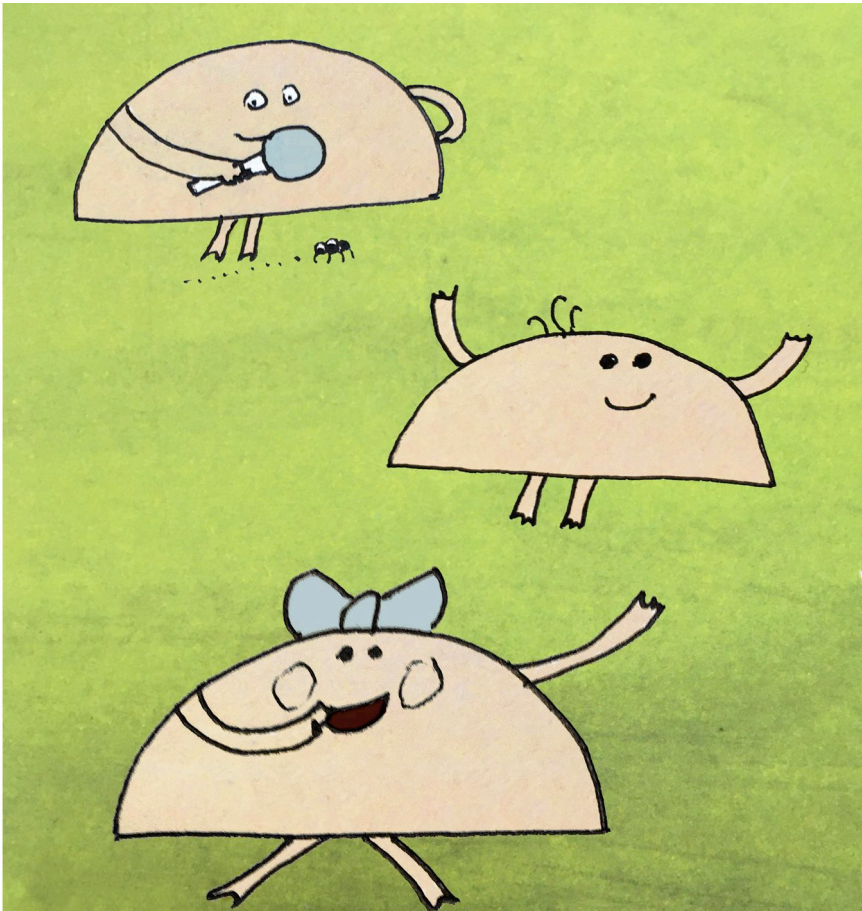
These factors, among others, interact in complex ways to shape your development, influencing who you become and how you navigate the world.



you depend on attachment

Like all children you need to feel that you belong to your family. This sense of belonging comes not only from carrying the same family name as them, having enough to eat, being bathed and changed regularly. You need your parents to engage with you, to play and cuddle with you. You need them to actively support your natural impulses for development, and you need them to take joy in what comes alive through you.

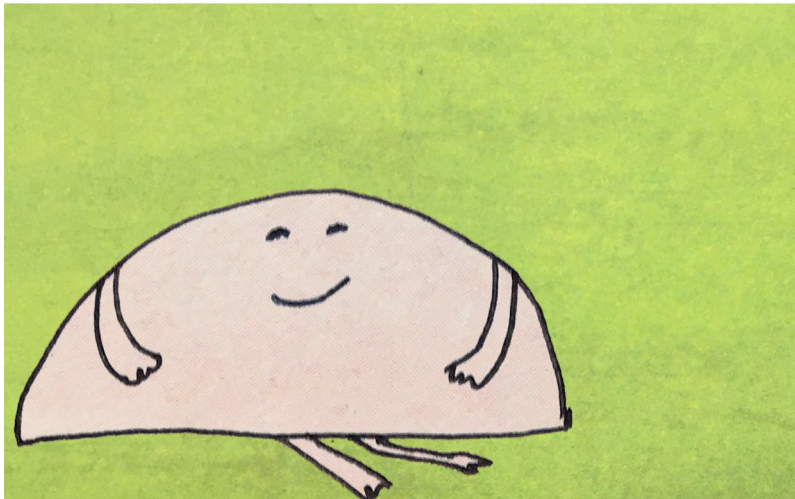
This type of attachment is not a luxury. It is the foundation for you to develop into the wonderful person you have the potential to be.



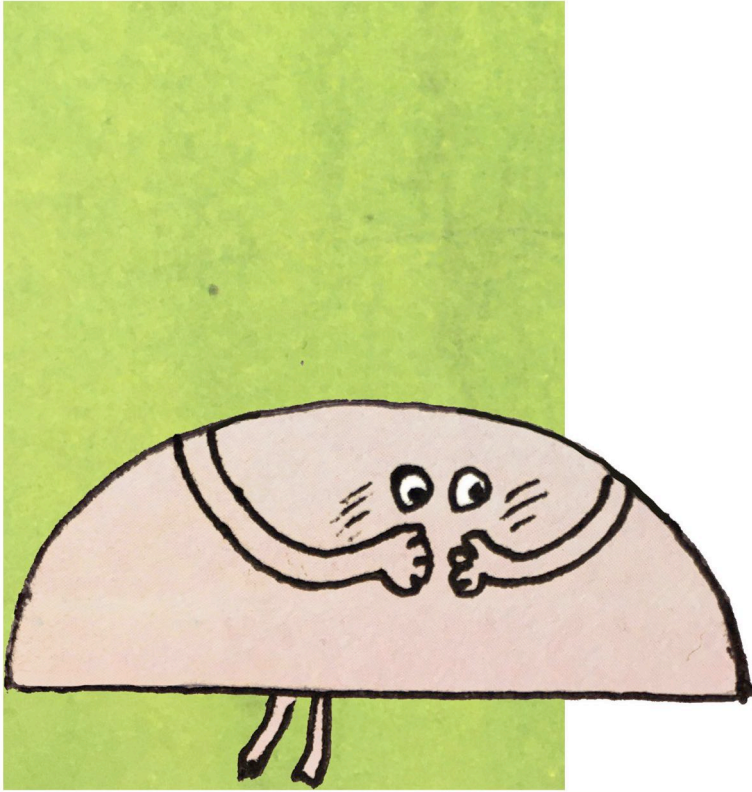
when you feel loved...

This is what it can look like when you grow up in an environment that supports your development: you feel safe, you can relax and sleep well. Soon, you learn to roll over from your back to your stomach, then you start to crawl, and eventually the ground will become so boring that you stand up on your two legs. All on your own. Your curiosity is insatiable. You want to explore everything and take joy in discovering and claiming the world.

Gradually, you learn essential things about life: how the sensations in your body are connected to your needs, trust in the help of others, and you get to know what you truly want—and don't want. You will realize how much fun it is to say »No« and practice it until everyone around you is annoyed. Which makes it even more fun. Eventually, those strange butterflies in your stomach appear, too.



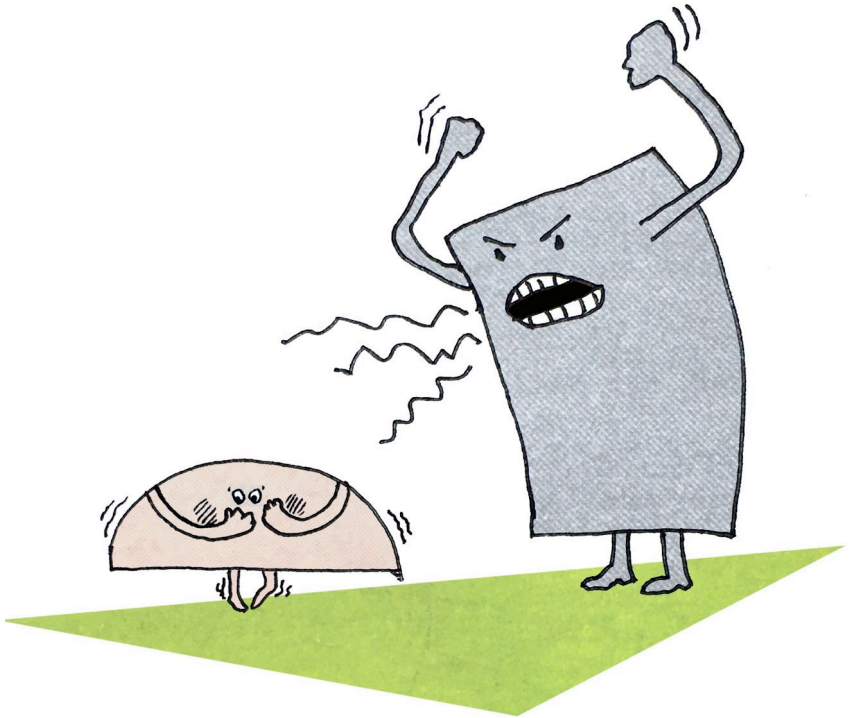
NOT SO GOOD CONDITIONS



when not all of you is welcome...

How does it impact you when your environment is simply not »big enough« for you? Some parents just can't handle how spirited their child is—perhaps because they weren't allowed to be that themselves. Or your parents might struggle to fulfill your need for connection. It could also be that your overwhelming love scares them. Some parents have fixed ideas about what their child has to become, instead of allowing them to grow into who they truly are. There are many ways that lead children to start seeing their own qualities as wrong. I'll illustrate this in more detail shortly...

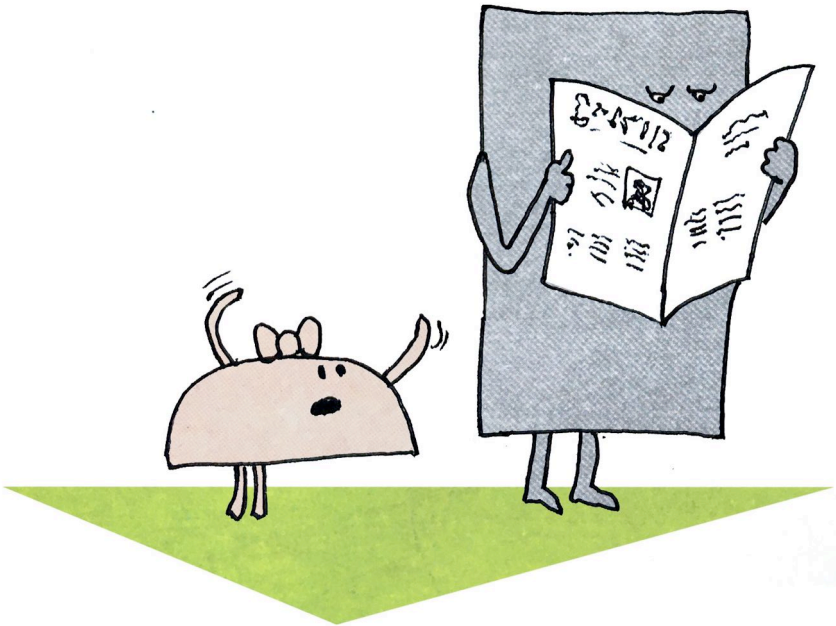
being shamed



Being shamed, especially by people you love, is unbearable. As a child you don't think about your big ears until people start calling you »Dumbo.« You don't doubt your intelligence until someone calls you an idiot. And you don't question your feelings until someone tells you that »boys don't cry« or that girls are »hysterical.«

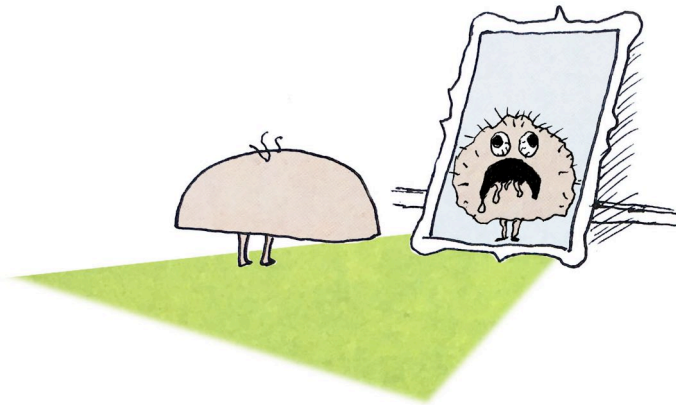
None of this would be a problem if strangers said it. But if important people (like your parents) state this as facts repeatedly, it becomes difficult for you to continue appreciating your funny ears, being satisfied with your intelligence, and enjoying your wonderful feelings.

being ignored



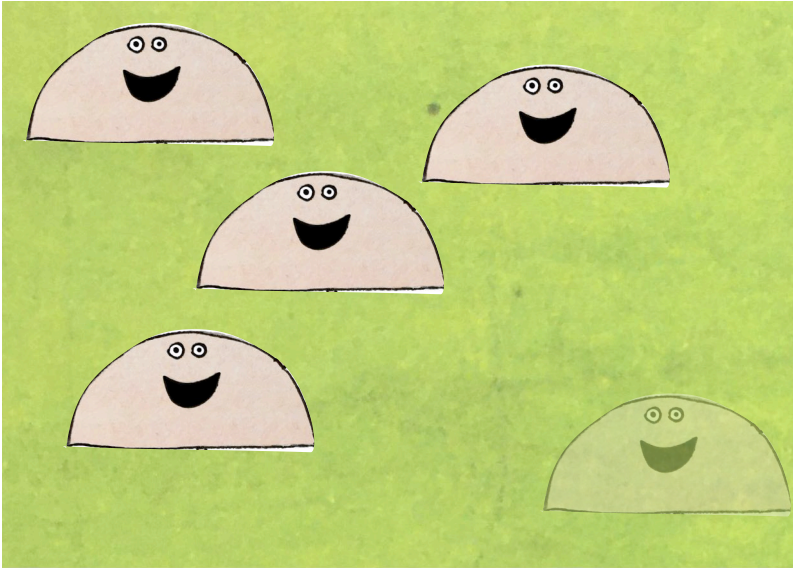
Every child tries to understand what is happening to and around them. After all, they want to learn. For life. So do you. Therefore, you interpret your experiences. If your parents do not show interest in you or take joy in you, you might interpret this as: »I am boring« or »I am not lovable.«

being confused with someone else



Your self-image is what you hold yourself to be. You develop it based on what your parents reflect back to you. This is called »mirroring«. If they see your true abilities, talents, and characteristics, you get to know yourself. If instead they see their own unfulfilled dreams in you, expect you to meet their needs, or criticize you for what they dislike about themselves, you get a false impression of yourself. You start to believe that you should be someone else and feel ashamed of who you really are.

not being seen



Entire groups of people are only portrayed one-sidedly; they either do not appear at all or only in certain negative contexts in TV shows or news. Schools do not teach about them objectively, they have no place in your religion, or they are marginalized by your country's laws. This way, they are made invisible either entirely or partially. Some people take that onto themselves and start to believe that they do not exist.



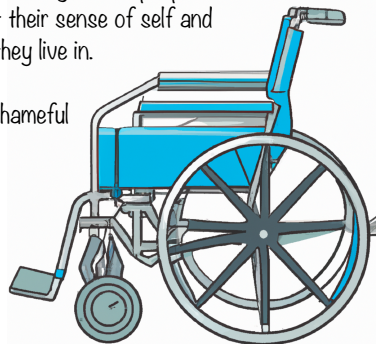
being actively excluded



Your skin color is unimportant until someone else makes it important. Being physically disabled is difficult enough, but it becomes terrible when you are being excluded from important areas of life because of that. And your biological sex, your perceived gender or sexual orientation are nobody's business but your own, and yet it will feel like everyone's concern as soon as someone tries to convince you that you're »not normal.«

Being discriminated in any way is a form of violence. Marginalized people often identify with these shaming messages, which affect their sense of self and belonging to the people around them and the world they live in.

Every form of discrimination is deeply hurtful and shameful and contributes to people's suffering.



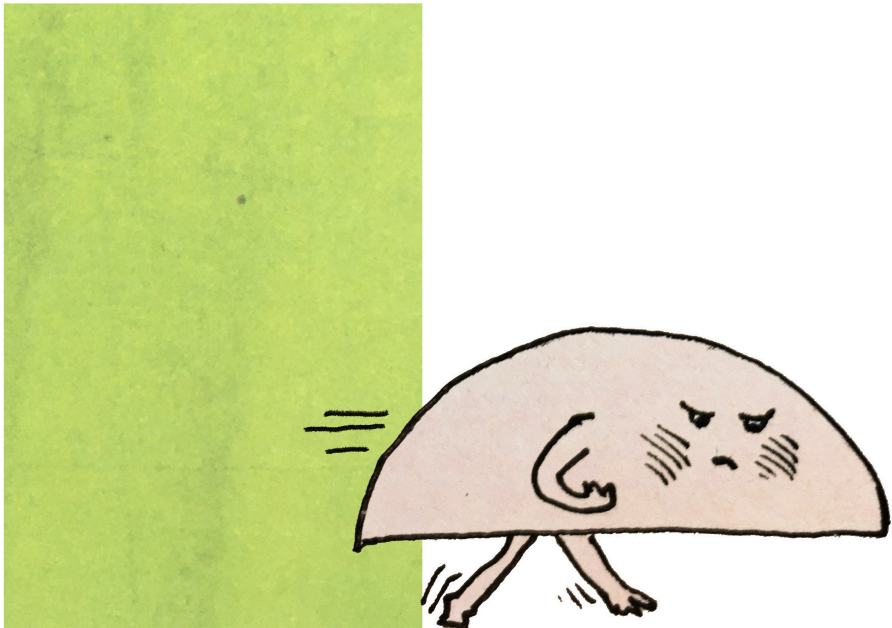
EFFORTS TO RESOLVE, Stage I

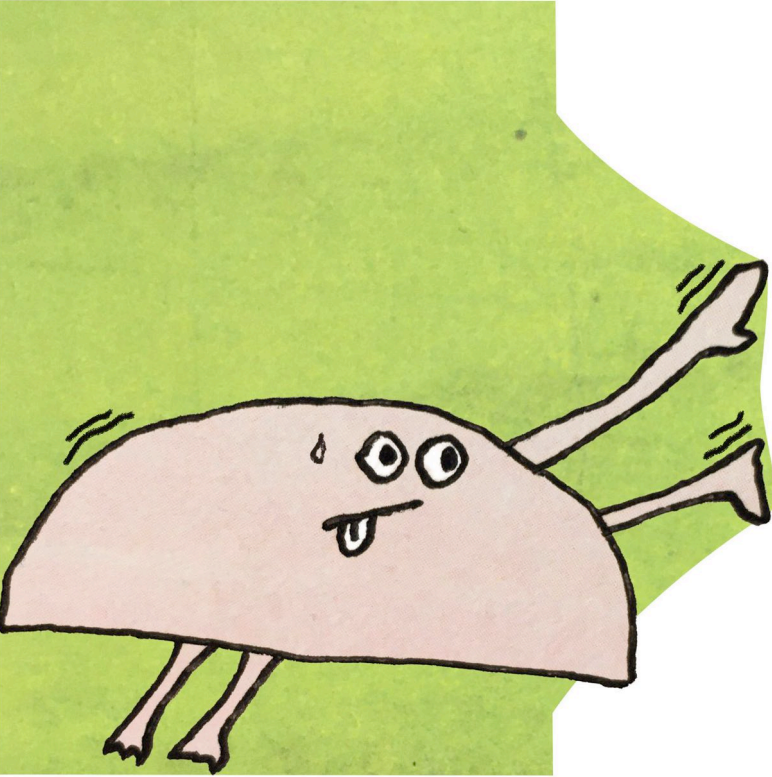
If you're unlucky enough to grow up with parents who can't accept you, or accept only parts of you, you have to somehow adapt to that. Here are some strategies:

Solution #1: **Running away**

That's easier said than done, because for a little kid, it's impossible. When you're small, you can't even crawl away. Besides, you cannot know that other people will accept you more. So, what would running away achieve?

Since you can't physically leave your family, you might resort to a common alternative known as »internally running away«: You escape into fantasy worlds, fairy tales, and daydreams. You play alone in nature, talk to animals and plants, or make your computer your best friend. Being with people who don't accept you is unbearable for a child. It has to get away, even if it's only internally. And in doing so, the child learns that connecting with others is dangerous.





Solution #2: **Efforting**

Some children start efforting to gain the love of their parents. They try to be particularly sweet and kind, particularly quiet, particularly good. They start to take care of their parents when they are sad or worried, when they are overwhelmed or struggling with the facts of life. In desperate situations, a child might even become a substitute partner for a parent. Anyhow, they feel they have to try to earn the love that gives meaning to their lives. However, those who choose this strategy must give up their connection to their true self—and they are doing it with the help of self-shaming.



Solution #3: **Hiding**

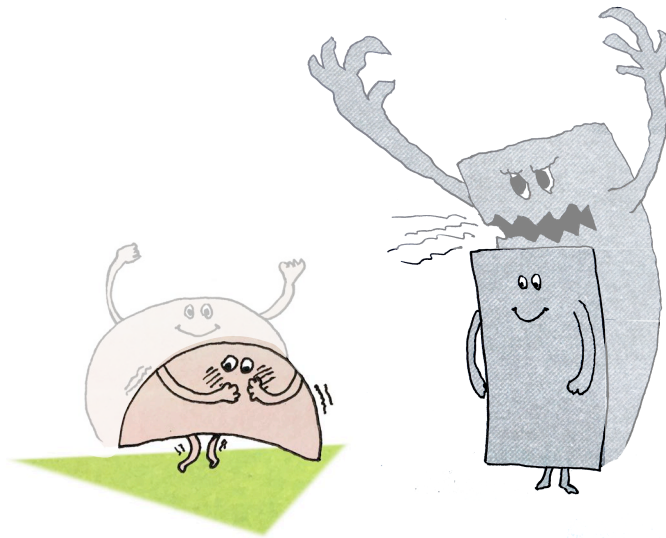
You hide what feels:

- unwelcome,
- unloved,
- rejected,
- ridiculed, and so on.

Of course, these »solutions« are not mutually exclusive. You can simultaneously run away internally, effort, and hide parts of yourself. Or use them alternatively depending on the situation. Many people do.

THIS IS HOW SHAME TURNS CHRONIC

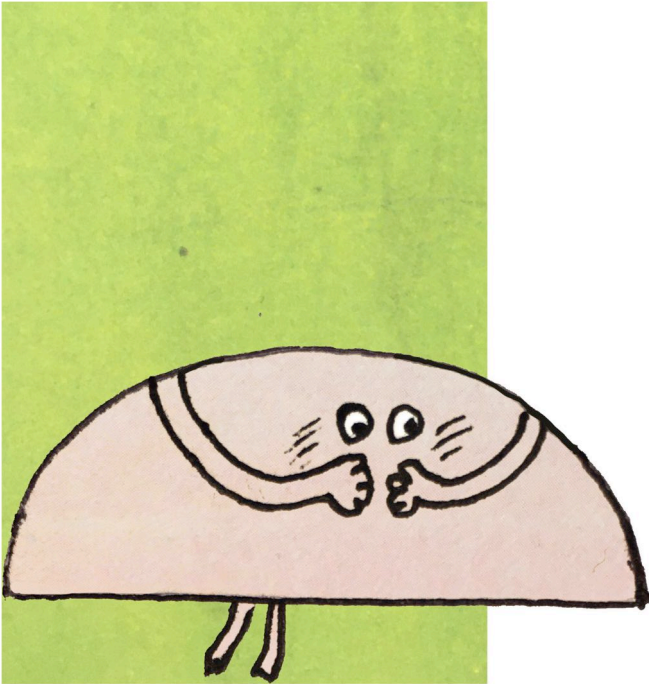
You're probably thinking right now, »Hold on, a child must feel ashamed in such situations!« True. But why exactly? Let's take a closer look at that. But before we do, I want to remind you of something you should never forget: Every child **needs** the people they grow up with. Belonging and attachment are vital for survival. This applies to everyone born on this planet. That's why children do everything to maintain or establish attachment.



As a child, you are simply not capable to love your parents and be angry with them at the same time. That's why you keep one feeling separate from the other. Because of your need for love, you become blind to your parents' mistakes and to what scares you about them. Since you have to cling to their loving aspects, there is one question left to answer: »If it's not their fault that I feel bad, then who's to blame?« The only other party involved in the conflict is **you**. By convincing yourself that it's your fault that you don't receive love, you can continue to hope that one day you will be loved. All you have to do is get rid of your self and turn into somebody else.

I shame...

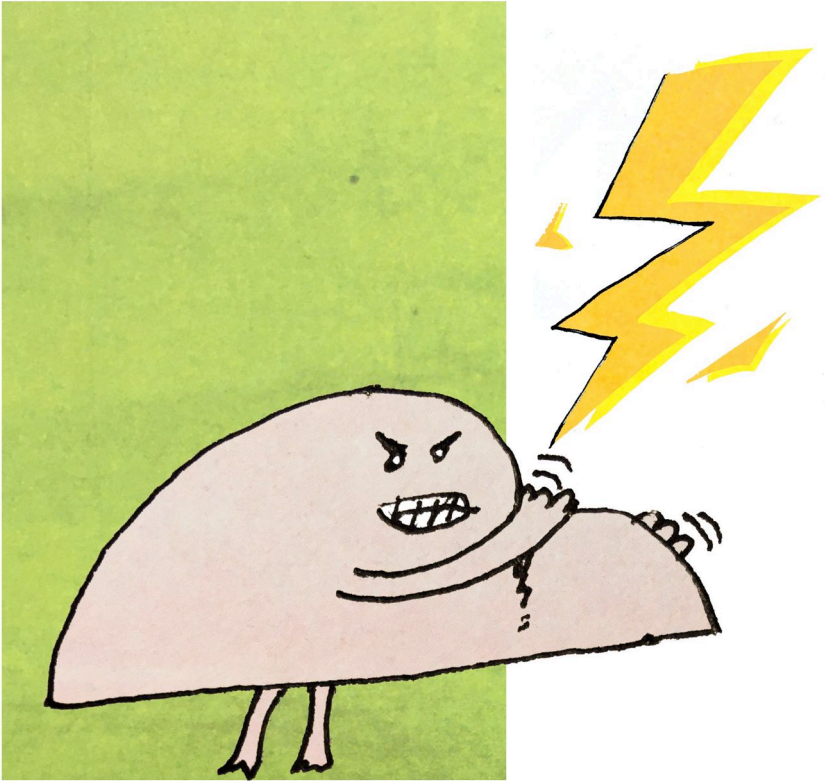




And it goes like this: you try to figure out what your parents don't like about you. Then you do everything to get rid of this part of yourself. It could be your need for affection or needs as such. After all, you tell yourself, who likes a needy person? Or you hope to win their love by always saying yes and trying to fulfill their expectations. If you don't feel loved at all, you might adapt and tiptoe around your home, try to go unnoticed, make yourself small, invisible or as transparent as possible. You withdraw, stay quiet, play by yourself, and strive to not bother your parents.

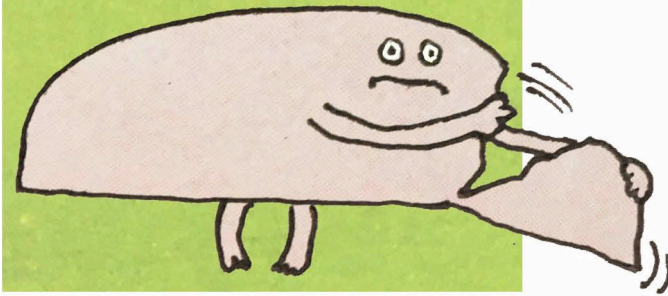
It's really tough when you grow up with people who are indifferent towards you. As a child, you can't but believe you are to blame for their unhappiness.

attacking yourself



»Self-shaming« has many faces. There's the idea that people »cut themselves off« from something; e.g. from emotions or from needs. Another idea is that one »suppresses« something or other. Sounds simple, but what exactly are we doing there? The truth is a bit worse than these ideas suggest: you have to get angry at what others don't like about you, and you have to feel bad or belittle yourself for this characteristic of yours. More precisely: you have to judge yourself for it.

for example with the following tools



We become aggressive towards ourselves—or at least towards important parts of ourselves, like our ability to say »no,« our vulnerability, our longing for connection and physicality.

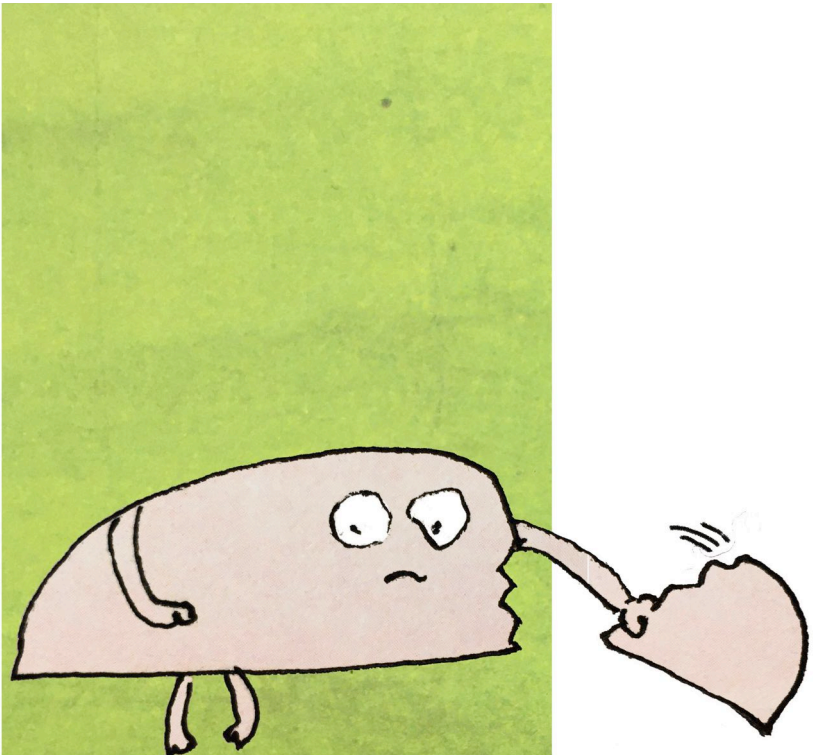
»Aggressive« sounds harsh, but unfortunately, it is just that. Check it out for yourself: you shame yourself by...

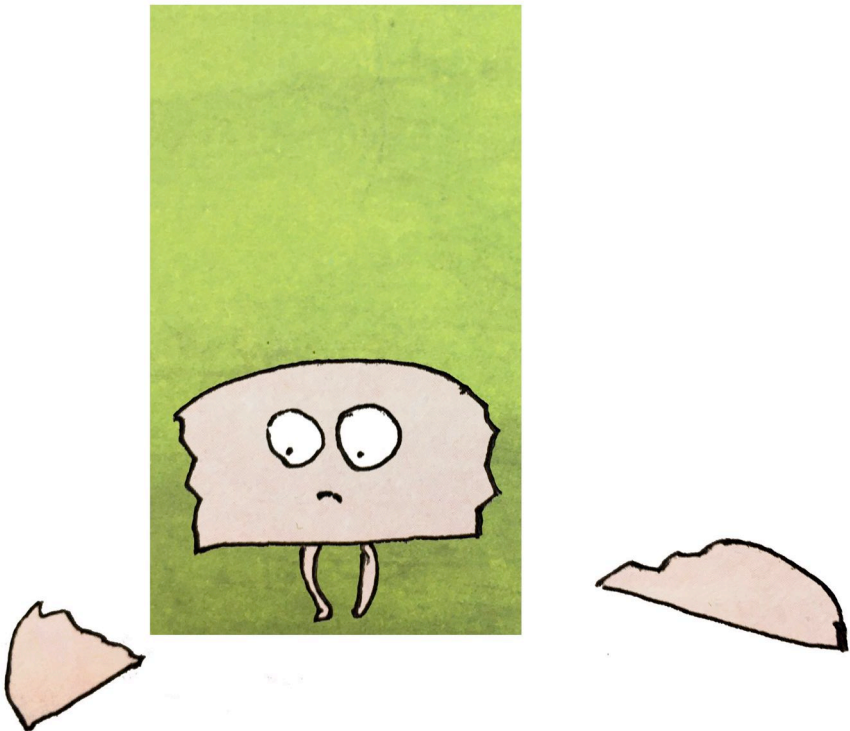
- criticizing yourself,
- condemning yourself,
- wishing to be different, or even someone else,
- demanding higher performance from yourself and pushing beyond your limits,
- trying to make yourself invisible,
- disregarding your needs,
- denying yourself care, love, and compassion...

More specifically?

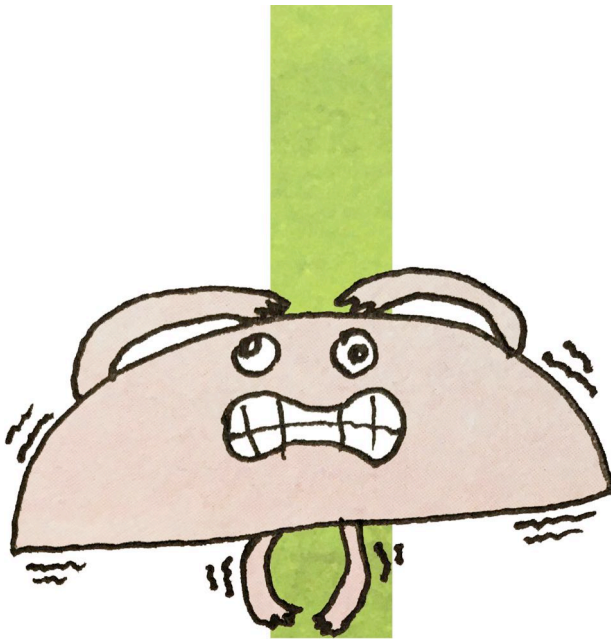
- perhaps you berate your sensitivity with: »I'm just too sensitive«
- or you condemn your need for connection as »dependence«
- you might label your desire for independence as »selfish«
- or believe that vulnerability is a »weakness«
- do you want to get rid of your feelings because you consider them »irrational«?
- or do you think your curiosity is »intrusive«?
- you feel that you're too loud and take up too much space when you're »alive«?

Sensitivity, need for connection, desire for independence, vulnerability, feelings, curiosity, aliveness... These are actually human qualities, aren't they? But if love and affection are only received without expressing these normal and healthy capacities, you start hating yourself for being »that way.«



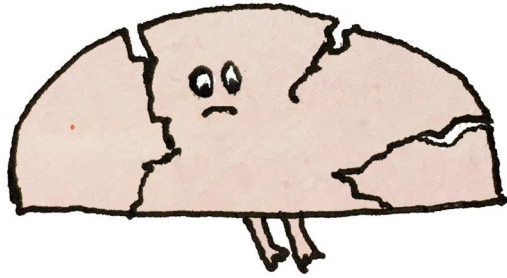


Adults often used to say: »children should be seen, but not heard.« Perhaps you grew up hearing that, too. How alive do you allow yourself as a child to be when you hear that? How much singing, laughing, playing is possible, when you are not supposed to be heard? And how can you then get what is important for all children: attention, affection, joy that you exist, closeness, warmth...?

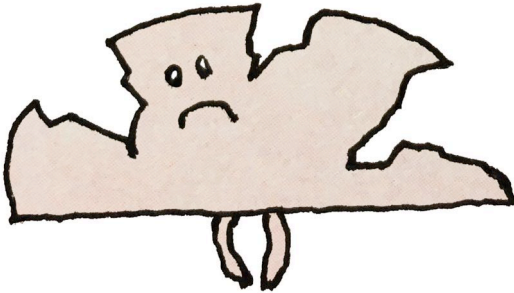


By distorting your natural capacities and seeing them as faulty, your growth and development are partly impaired. You no longer accept yourself as you are. This alienates you more and more from your authentic self.

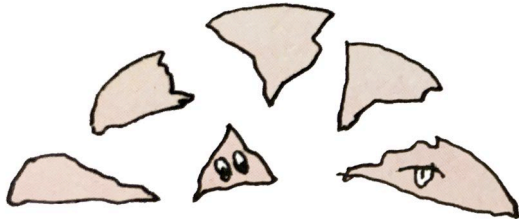
Sooner or later you feel like this...



or like that.

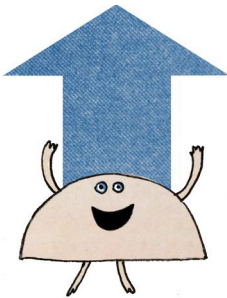


Some people need to fall apart entirely in order to survive in their environment.

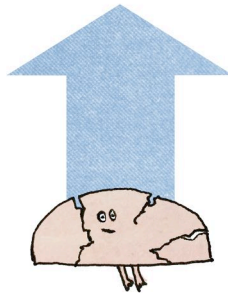


falling apart makes sense

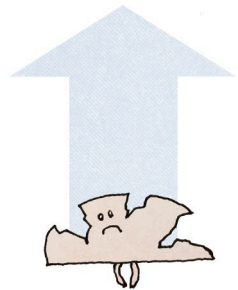
Falling apart is terrible, but for some children dialing down the expression of their life force (depicted as blue arrows) is the only way to maintain or even establish attachment.



This is you, fully connected to all of yourself.



If your energy feels dangerous, you might start dimming down,

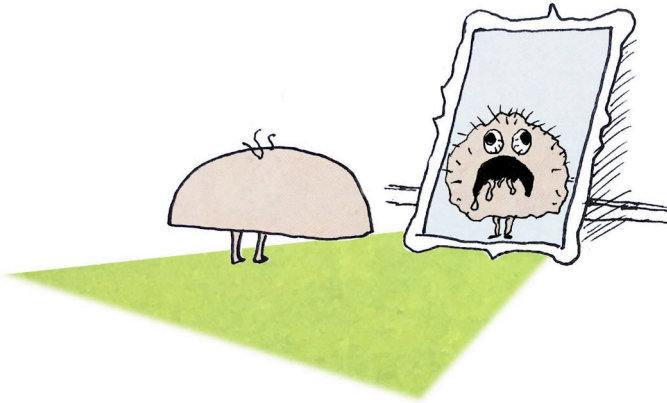


or try to get rid of your power altogether.

Therefore, falling apart or dimming down your vitality is neither an illness, nor a fault, nor a lack of character. On the contrary, from the perspective of a child, if that's what it takes to secure the attachment you so desperately need and rely upon to survive, it makes all the sense in the world. Without attachment, as a child you would be completely lost.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SHAME

distorting the perception of who you are



Because you believe that something is wrong with you, you try to become someone else. This effort—you can call it a »strategy«—further disconnects you from yourself until you no longer know who you truly are. This has far-reaching effects on your self-perception, on how you feel in the world, and on how you look at your past and your future.

For example, you might find it difficult to feel what you need. Or you no longer dare to express what truly matters to you. Others hold back their love, their need for affection and physicality or give up their boundaries.

With all these sacrifices, your life becomes more and more empty. Most people will then consider that as their fault—and shame themselves further for it.

trying to become someone else



Meditation, breathing exercises, visualization, affirmations, prayer, body work, talk therapy... While all of these approaches can be helpful or offer some relief, they often tend to assume, and reinforce the feeling, that you are lacking something, or that something in you is wrong and requires fixing. In other words—the bread and butter of shame. By trying to become someone else (and in that rejecting who you are), you constantly send yourself the message that you are not okay as you are.

shaming can extremely narrow your life

Many other experiences can lead to chronic shame. But unfortunately, that's not the end. Many children—and later the adults—feel ashamed for feeling ashamed, a vicious cycle at best, more often a downward spiral. Over time chronic shame will make you want to avoid everything that could get you anywhere near the sense of shame.



Perhaps you no longer dare to sing, even though you used to enjoy it so much. Or you don't like others watching you dance anymore. You might no longer want to express your creativity for fear of being shamed. This way, your life becomes narrower and narrower.

You see, the real trauma is not so much what you did or did not experience as a child. The real trauma lies more in the distortion of how you perceive yourself and the strategies you have taken away from early challenging experiences.

EFFORTS TO RESOLVE, Stage II

Unfortunately this is not the end. Often the problems first start at this point. Because it feels confusing, unpleasant, and often downright terrible to shame yourself, to dimm yourself down and shame yourself for shaming yourself, you need something to help you bear all that. Alcohol can help, spiritual practices help, pills, social media, overworking, overeating, »oversexing«, or resorting to other self-harming or destructive behaviors.

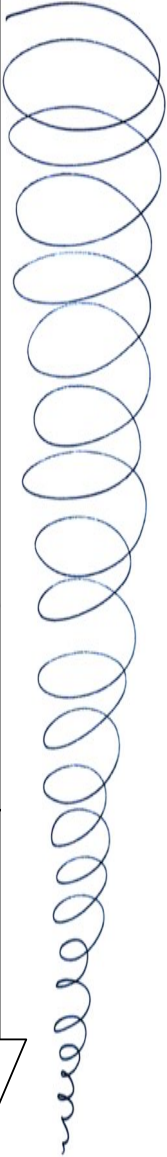


You will probably »feel even more ashamed« of resorting to these kinds of »solutions« and the consequences that arise from them in the process: let the downward spiral spin.

Why we experience, what we experience

or: how we organize our experiences

The more pronounced the dynamic, the less sense of aliveness



After they are born children need a lot of support to develop into self-reliant human adults that feel fulfilled in life, can sustain healthy relationships and experience a deep sense of intimacy.

When parents care, mirror, attend

too little

too much

or in a distorted way

children will protest.

When parents don't attune over and over again

children will ramp up the volume; they might even get angry.

Depending on the response of the parent (anger, withdrawal or other forms of disconnection)

children will start to fear the loss of the attachment (love).

Children will split off and separate from their natural needs and capacities in blaming themselves for them,

distorting who they hold themselves to be and they will develop an identity that is based on shame (or false pride).

This identification impacts their muscle tone, flow of energy, oxygen and important bodily liquids; and it will disregulate their ANS.

They will try to dim emotions, suppress or shut them down entirely, and/or become prone to emotional outbursts.

More and more symptoms and difficulties develop: cognition might be impacted, social phobias and unhealthy behaviors will arise (survival strategies and compensatory behaviors). Physical difficulties can come on top, even illnesses and invalidity may follow.

agency* in chronic shame

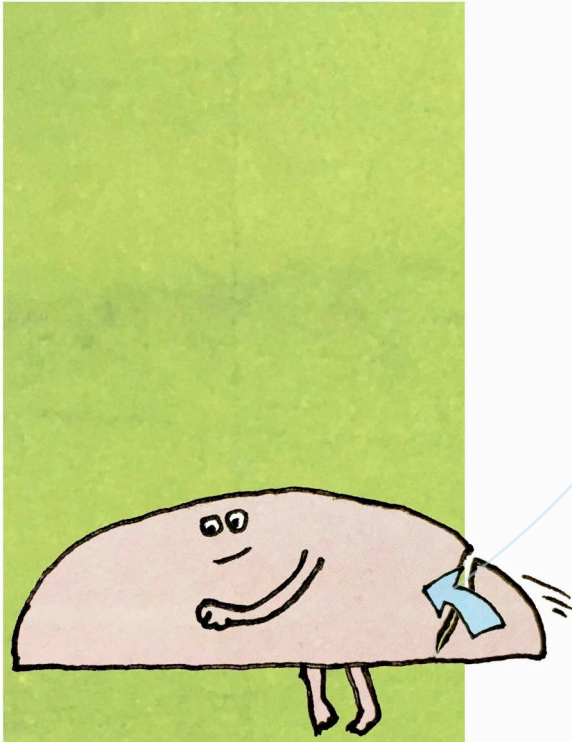
*agency = being an active agent

HOW TO RESOLVE CHRONIC SHAME

We can neither change our past nor undo bad experiences. This is good news because it means you don't have to rehash your past and bring all the terrible things you experienced to light. You also don't have to nurture anything you didn't receive or resolve anything with the people who treated you badly.

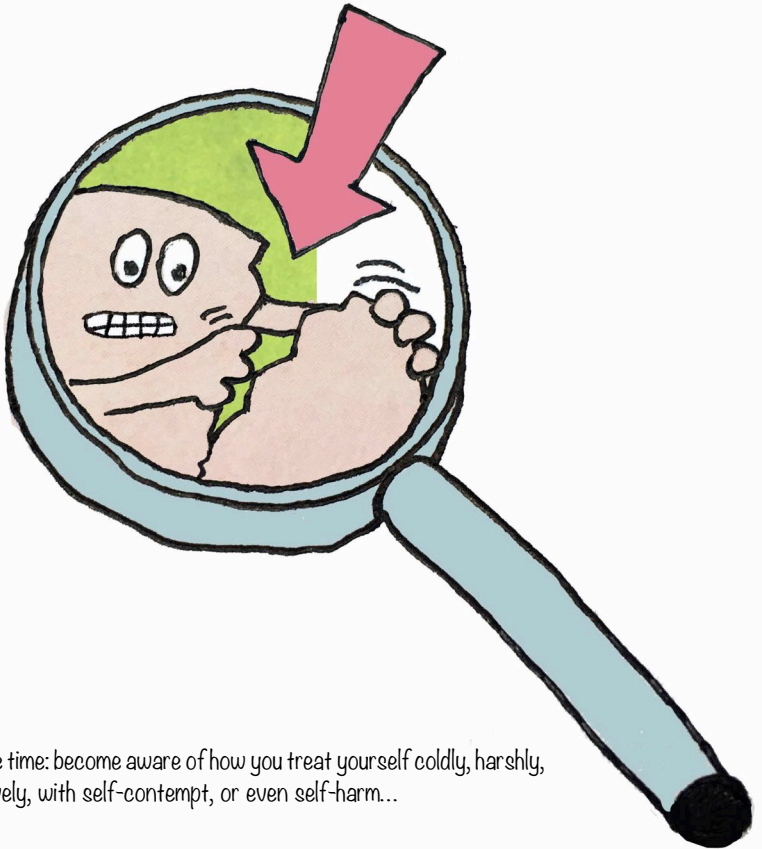
What's important is to become aware of what you have carried forward from those harmful experiences to the present: the false ideas about yourself that you confirm daily through chronic self-shaming and imagined guilt, and the coping strategies you've developed.

And now for the best news of all: within every person lies the impulse to **re-connect** with themselves, become more and more authentic and to continue to develop their capacities.

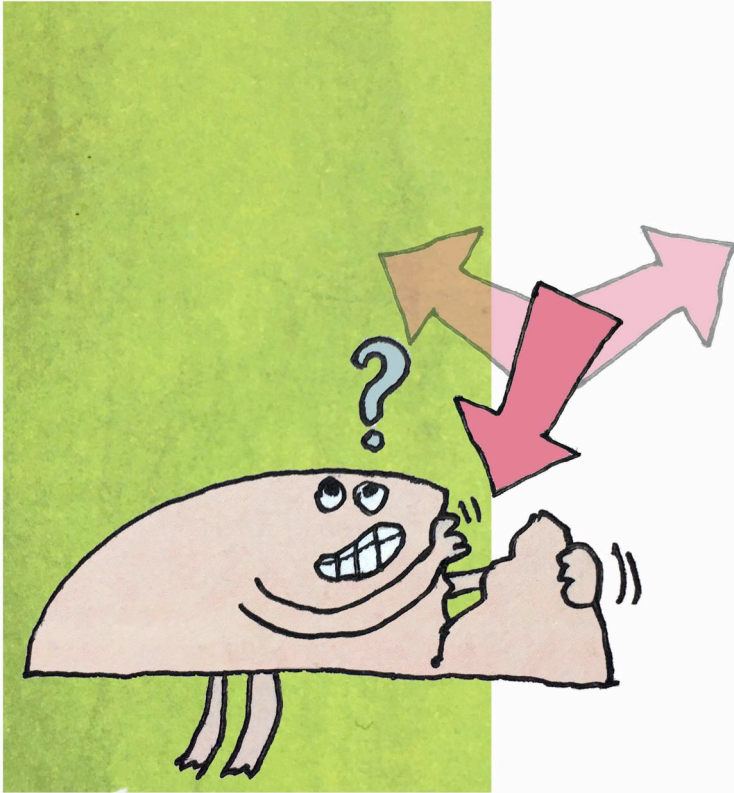


Anyone can free themselves from chronic shame by simply recognizing how they shame themselves and acknowledging the impact it has on their day-to-day experiences.

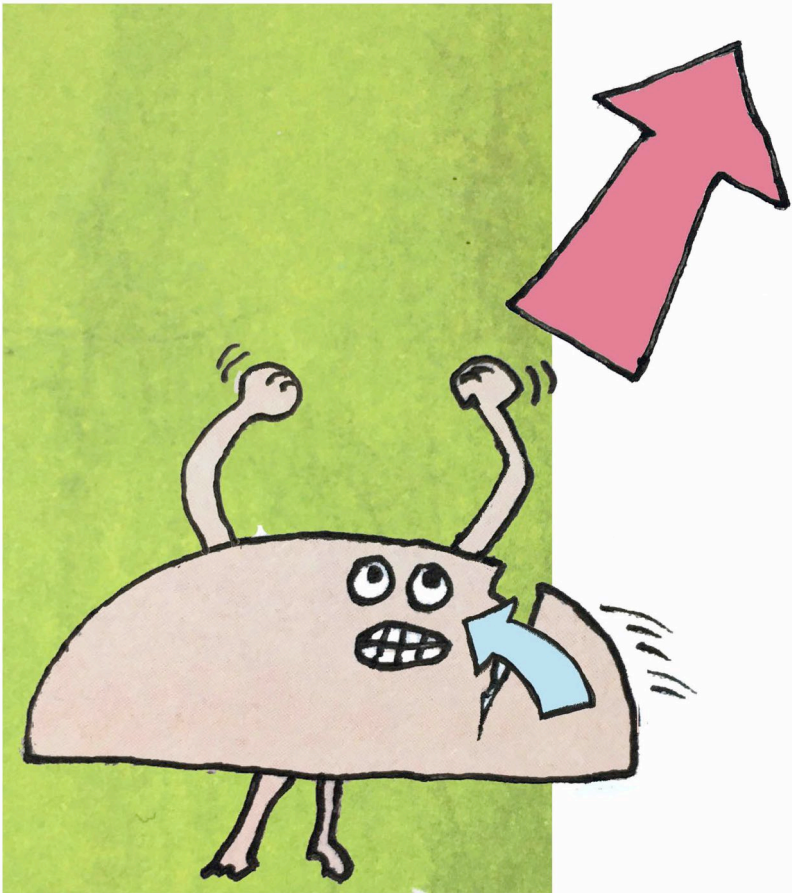
By exploring what prevents you from accepting yourself as you are, you can gradually relate to yourself more kindly. In this way, you can get to know your true identity more and more, sustain more fulfilling relationships, and enjoy life more.



One more time: become aware of how you treat yourself coldly, harshly, aggressively, with self-contempt, or even self-harm...

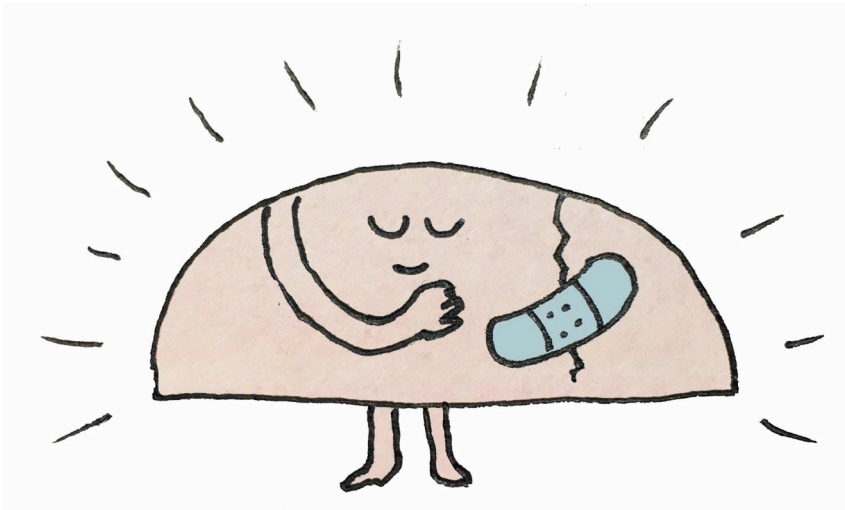


Then, explore what this aggression actually aims to achieve. Don't forget: aggression generally has something to do with a very specific dynamic within one particular relationship. The anger always comes with a message, a: to the other person, and b: to yourself.



Once you identify the intention of your anger and understand the message of it, you will automatically stop directing it against yourself any longer. Instead you will reclaim what you had to »cut off« from in the first place: aliveness, life force, natural capacities...

Since this anger is something you've carried around with you for a long time, all this is an internal process, something that involves only yourself. It's rarely about resolving something with someone else. Therefore, you can even resolve the unresolved emotions with people who are not willing to have that conversation, either because they are not capable or no longer alive.



The more you accept yourself with all that you are, the more kindly you will treat yourself and the better you will take care of yourself. Gradually, many of your symptoms will disappear. And very likely, you will feel more comfortable with other people, be happier in life, and look to your future with greater confidence.

reflective exercise

Here is an exercise to help you explore yourself and your internal dynamic of self-shaming:

- Spend 15 minutes writing down all the tricks you use to avoid feeling ashamed. Everything you do and say to prevent feeling ashamed.
- As you write, pay attention to all the sensations, emotions, and memories that come up, and write those down too.
- After you finish, take a moment to reflect on how this exercise has affected you. What do you take away from it?

You can repeat this as often as you like. You will see how much comes to mind.

PS: Note that exercises dealing with shame can evoke intense emotions and memories. It is important to approach such exercises carefully. Seek professional support if needed.

another exercise of self-reflection

Wanna do another exercise?

- Imagine that you were suddenly freed from all chronic shame and guilt. How would this affect your body, your love life, your relationships, your career, your life...?
- Spend 15 minutes writing down everything that comes to mind.
- Pay attention to how your entire organism responds to this idea: your body, your emotions, your sensations, the state of tension in you, your thoughts, images, desires, hopes... Note all these changes as well.

After you finish, take some time to reflect on how this exercise has affected you. Anything you want to carry with you into your everyday life?

thanks

Books are never written alone. Without my shame and fears, I would never had the idea for this booklet. Thanks also to all those who have accompanied me over the years: therapists, friends, colleagues, partners, and those who have conducted groundbreaking research and developed practical applications from it. You all know who you are.

In the end, there were people who took the time to suggest changes for this book. Their feedback made it better. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

stephan konrad niederwieser

I practice in my own clinic in Berlin, where I supervise therapists individually and in groups. I am authorized to certify NARM MasterPractitioners. Additionally, I offer »deepening seminar units« in this methodology as well as seminars on trauma-related topics such as chronic shame and guilt.

www.stephan-niederwieser.de

Books I have published (in German)

- Das Trauma von der Seele schreiben. Eine neue Methode zur Selbstheilung. Kösel, 2018
- Nie mehr schämen. Wie wir uns von lähmenden Gefühlen befreien. Kösel, 2019 (also available in Dutch, Czech and Taiwan Chinese).

»The spontaneous movement towards connection, health, and aliveness is the driving force in all of us. No matter how much we have withdrawn and isolated ourselves, or how severe the trauma we have experienced, on the deepest level, just as a plant naturally moves towards the sun, there is an impulse within each of us that moves us towards connection and healing.«

Dr. Laurence Heller & Aline LaPierre

- **But what happens if we stand in the way of these natural impulses, or**
- **if the distorted ideas about ourselves do not allow connection and healing?**
- **Is it even possible to change these dynamics?**

This little book shows how shame can become a chronic and limiting condition that affects relationships: the relationship with yourself, your body, your feelings, the people you love, and the world as a whole. It offers insight into the deep dynamics at work and a glimpse of how they can be resolved.

