

In med school...in psychotherapy...in doubt...
Alice in Wonderland · 7/12/99 at 2:03 am ET

Dr. N,

First, I'm not sure if I should be here with this question but you understand shame and I thought you might have a wise word or two.

I grew up in a violent home, sought out a psychologist for an eating disorder, was molested by him (and let it go on for 2 years) reported him, his license was revoked with testimony from additional clients, got a BS in Nursing, applied to medical school and was accepted, had a nervous breakdown, and found the neatest person I've ever met, my psychiatrist.

My question is... Is it possible, with hard work and emotional honesty, to get over the shame I've felt since I was a child (I'm F/26 now) or is it so engrained that it will never go away?

I get so distracted in my studies about the terrible things that I did as a child and with my old therapist, that it makes it difficult to concentrate on anything.

I'm terrified that if I let even more come out of my mouth than it'll make the shame even worse.

And on top of all that, I love my Dr. I feel guilty for loving him so much. I'm afraid if I tell him, he'll stop seeing me or send me away.

I just can't seem to find my way out of the rabbit hole :(

Alice

The path is upwards
Don Nathanson · 7/14/99 at 6:54 am ET

The courage that allows you to write this question is part of the strength that has permitted you to persevere so far. Years from now, when you have a normal life, or at least that version of a normal life allowed members of the healing professions, you'll look back on this period as critical to your success. There are some clues that allow further progress.

One afternoon, Silvan Tomkins startled me by saying "People with chronic shame problems are among the most loving in our society." Knowing from my own personal history how painful it is to be suffused with shame (I didn't start to write about shame because I thought it was merely interesting), I couldn't imagine what he was talking about. "It's simple," said the all-knowing master of affect to his student. "Shame is triggered when there is an impediment to the expression of one of the positive affects, interest-excitement or enjoyment-joy. The presence of the affect means not that positive affect has been turned off, but that there remains great reason for it to be maintained *and* that something is interfering with it. Shame is the least toxic of the negative affects because it always implies the presence of the good scene that we expect will return. The really unfortunate people are those who (not unexpectedly) have given up hope of the good scene ever returning, and therefore turn off expectation of positive

affect. The ones who live with chronic shame are the lucky ones because they are constantly hopeful that love will return."

So here you are at 26, smart enough and intense enough to have gotten your BS in nursing, and now to accept the radical increase in pressure associated with medical school. You got something good from that sloppy therapist who used you sexually---even though that particular part of his methodology was damaging, you felt loved enough by him to grow the amount possible in that flawed healing environment. You escaped when you had grown beyond him, and then you blew the whistle to protect others from his flaws. Now you've found a much better helper, and (big surprise) you find much to love in him.

I'm not sure why our culture has been brainwashed to believe that it is bad to love your therapist. Often our therapist is unique in our lives---thoughtful, well educated, intelligent, able to listen to us better than anyone in our past---what's not to love? I view most deep therapy as reparative parenting anyway; psychotherapy is "the art through which people are allowed to become who they might have been had they grown up in an optimal family." Furthermore, cure doesn't really require that the patient "fall in love" with the therapist, but that we as patients realize that the therapist is both capable of love and does love us. This, of course, is the disciplined love that would have been optimal from our parents, but that is another matter. So much of growing up is luck.

One of the best things you've got going for you is that you remain able to love. Don't ever be embarrassed by that wonderful trait! Furthermore, I suspect that whether or not you've discussed this with your therapist, he is quite comfortable being loved and loving you. Incidentally, the Greek language contains three separate words for love: eros, filios, and agape. Although these words have been shifted in meaning over the centuries, eros is basically a sexual/romantic kind of love; filios the love between parent and child that always contains a generational barrier; and agape the pure empathic love that contains neither a sexual element nor a generational element. It sounds as if you've been really lucky in this therapist.

Now for the problem about shame that you've mentioned: Firstly, shame and love are mutually incompatible. The very fact that you are dealing so forthrightly with these issues means that love is winning. Stay with both, the love and the shame, for within this healing environment you will lose the overweening sense of shame that has been your internal environment for so long. Actually, since medical school is such a terribly shaming environment, this phase of your therapeutic experience will act as excellent preparation for the trials and trauma to follow in your schooling. Secondly, if you are one of the few people in our culture who haven't been exposed to the serotonin transporter inhibitor medications (the Prozac class, of course), then you and your psychiatrist might talk about that route. I've written a great deal about the value of these medications in helping us get free from that part of the chronic shame experience that is due to neurotransmitter glitches.

All too brief an answer for a brave soul who has come so far. I'm honored that you chose to ask us for assistance, proud to know that you are joining the cadre of the helping professions, and wondrously respectful of your journey.

Re: The path is upwards
Alice · 7/15/99 at 2:57 pm ET

Dr. N.,

I took a deep breath and handed my doctor my question and your reply. He smiled and said, "Don't you know that I love you?" I just sat there in stunned silence. Then I cried. I cried harder than I've ever cried in my life. For the first time I got up and went to hug him and he hugged me back!

All day long I kept smiling that somebody loved me for me. That he loved me and I didn't even know it.

You don't have to reply but thanks for helping. Today I felt like I could do anything! I took my books outside in the sun and was able to study without all the doubts and intrusions that normally plague me. It's a strange feeling to be loved but I like it. :)

Re: The path is upwards
Don Nathanson · 7/15/99 at 9:56 pm ET

You sure are going to be one hell of a doctor.

Check in with us from time to time and let us know how you are doing. We don't like to lose friends.