

Shame and mediation

By Liv Larsson

"Never do anything to avoid shame."

I thought I had misunderstood the message. Shame's not something that I want to feel! Why, did this man suggest that we should not do anything to avoid it? I was listening to Marshall Rosenberg, the man behind the process language of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and he claimed that he was looking forward to the next time he would feel shame.

It took me a long time to understand what he meant. But it intrigued me so I decided to investigate it. I learned gradually that if we are willing to take a pause when we feel shame, give the feeling space, and listen to what we need in these moments, we gain access to valuable information. It gives us clarity about what we need and often about important needs like acceptance, community, respect and autonomy. Shame has shown me vulnerability, which gives me access to listen with empathy from a totally different place than before.

My source of inspiration when I mediate is NVC. My focus and the purpose of NVC are to create a certain quality of connection. I have confidence that when there is connection created between the parties in a conflict, we will soon reach a solution. The mediator helps the parties to express and understand each other's needs and thus to better understand how to proceed in a way that works for everyone.

It's been 15 years since I first heard Marshall talk about needs and about not doing anything to avoid shame. And for more than 10 years as a mediator, I have seen that one of the things that gets most in the way of mediation, is when some or both of the parties are trying to avoid feeling shame. When someone – either party, or the mediator – is trying to avoid shame, it becomes harder to create the connection that is needed to arrive at agreements that will meet everyone's needs. The vulnerability that shame gives us access to gets pushed aside and it becomes harder to get to the core of the conflict. When someone acts to try to, at any price, escape the comfortableness of shame, it lies in the way of both the connection and the solution.

Shame is often stimulated when we have done something that has not taken the needs of others into consideration. It has sometimes been called "our only social feeling"¹. When we are ashamed and judge ourselves as disrespectful or reckless, the shame increases. We may criticize ourselves for not having anticipated how our choices would affect others. Or we judge ourselves for not standing up for ourselves and showing others where our limits are.

If we listen to shame, we can learn about mutuality and care, but only if we do not believe in the self-destructive thoughts that often comes together with the feeling. As mutual willingness to talk with authenticity is one of the things that makes mediation work, the avoidance of shame, becomes an obstacle. For the mediation process to work a small element of vulnerability and willingness to "sit with a feeling of discomfort" is needed. Shame gives us that vulnerability, if it is received and allowed

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Nathanson, Donald L (1992), Shame and Pride.W.W. Norton&CO.

to exist. There is a lot a mediator can do that contributes to this.

When someone feels shame, there is more happening than what is expressed in words. If the mediator understands that behind specific behaviors strong feelings of shame usually hide, it becomes easier to pick up important messages.

To understand how shame affects people is something that is very useful to all mediators². Most of us experience feelings of shame as uncomfortable and do almost anything to get rid of them. We can summarize the most common ways to try to avoid shame into four categories (see below). How we as mediators can handle these four, affects the outcome of all mediation processes. I call it “the compass of needs”, because it is such a valuable tool to be able to reconnect with needs after traveling in any of the (compass) directions.

Four common strategies to avoid shame

1. Withdrawing - physically, mentally or emotionally.
2. Becoming self-critical and taking on the blame for everything.
3. Rebelling against what we perceive as demands and threats to our freedom or lack of respect. This might mean, “invading” the shame – doing exactly what we are asked not to.
4. Criticizing and attacking others. We justify ourselves, threaten, demand, judge, argue, and blame.

Let's see what happens if someone in mediation is trying to avoid shame.

Withdrawing:

A person can be physically present, but not be available emotionally. When the person moves in this direction, she or he rarely listens deeply to the others, even if she or he is silent. The person does not find the capacity to listen, or take in, what is being said out of fear that it would increase the burden of shame. He or she can seem unaffected or cold, but is, in fact, overwhelmed by a deep sense of powerlessness. When someone does not know how to express this, information that would be useful for the solution of the conflict, never comes up in the open.

If the mediator senses that this is going on, there are several ways to act. You can take a pause and talk to each party of the conflict in private. It can clarify your assumption that they feel strong shame and at the same time ease their internal pressure. If they feel they are received and heard, it can build enough trust to continue the mediation.

To slow down the conversation and connect around what has occurred can also help the contact. Give the person time to process what has been expressed and to find their own words. You want to avoid escalating shame, as shame that is involuntary is not supportive. At the same time you want to help the person be fully present.

Samples of what you as a mediator might say to create connection in this situation:

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- Does this whole situation seem hopeless to you, and that is why you are not saying much?
- Are you worried that whatever you say will increase the pain and shame?
- Is the thought of talking about what has happened and how it has affected your relationship making you uncomfortable, and you would like to have more trust that it can really make a difference?

You as a mediator may also help to clarify the situation by saying:

- I want you to really understand that it makes a difference if you participate in this mediation. Even if you find it challenging, it is valuable that you tell us about what you need and what you want. So I wonder if you can tell us what you need to continue?

The mediation may also be continued in two separate rooms - in a shuttle mediation - if it helps the person to manage their shame, but without having to withdraw.

2. Attacking oneself.

When someone takes on all the guilt for what has happened, it is often difficult to mediate. It is particularly difficult if the roles have been static for many years and one person often gets the blame for conflicts or misunderstandings. Roles can be even more static if the mediator does not help to hear both sides.

The situation is skewed if one party believes that if only she or he takes the blame than everything will be fine after that. It will be skewed because to heal a hurt action is often necessary. To heal from a conflict, openness is needed plus new agreements that will be kept for some time. If someone attacks or blames him or herself, this person often gets to be in the focus, instead of the focus being on how to establish connection and to find solutions. Mediation à la NVC is based on the supposition that the needs of both parties are heard. This creates the quality of connection that is needed so that you can come to mutual agreements on how to act after the mediation.

The mediator is not there to judge who has done right or wrong and find a scapegoat, the mediator is there to establish the connection. But remember this idea of finding a scapegoat is a big part of how most societies manage conflict. It is a multi-thousand year old habit that needs to be handled with care and clarity. I'm not saying here that both parties have equally hurt each other. I'm saying that if one person takes on the blame, the mediation is not as effective as it could be. Behind this idea of scapegoating a need to deeply mourn and heal is usually found. Mourning usually means taking the time to really let every feeling and need come to the table and to find new ways to build trust.

What the mediator can say if someone is taking on all the blame:

- Is it that you want to be seen to be willing to take in how your choices have led to the misunderstanding you now want to sort out?

- Do you want us to understand that knowing what you now know, you would have liked to have acted differently?

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- And are you ashamed of what impact your actions had on X and do you want to do everything in your power to make up for it?

After having connected with the needs the person wants to mourn, the mediator may express:

- I appreciate that you really want to take responsibility for what happened. I am also worried about putting more focus on what you did. This mediation is not about finding out who is right or wrong but about connection and in finding new agreement. I want to hear from both of you what needs you want to have met more in a future contact. How is this for you to hear?

3. Rebellion

When we rebel, we avoid the feeling of shame by showing that we are independent and free to do "what we want." We invade the shame and as a consequence we often become cold or hard to connect with. In pushing away shame we stop paying attention of the needs of others, and it becomes difficult to meet our own needs for care, reciprocity, connection and love. Behind the tough exterior there is still shame. For contact to be made between the parties, the rebelling person needs to feel safe enough to be vulnerable. This will probably lead to the person feeling the hidden shame.

If someone rebels and shows their independence then an unresolved conflict remains. A person, who is ready to invade any feeling of shame, may choose not to participate in a mediation process. This very "no", may be a way for the person to show that she or he does not need anyone else, and has not done anything wrong. A conflict that does not involve all parties' needs does not lead to lasting solutions.

What can the mediator do?

If I suspect that this is going on, I am sure to have a meeting with the people involved, before the mediation. At a pre-meeting or at the beginning of the mediation I put my attention on the positive intention this person had with the chosen action, or on some positive result.

If you have the ability to see the "positive" in their motivations and express appreciation for it, it often lowers their guard. Beware of giving appreciation in the form of "praise", that you think they are "good" or that they have done something "good". That kind of appreciation nourishes their rebellion and leads them to believe that you sympathize with their choices. Express instead the needs of yours that are met by something they have done and what it makes you feel. Criticizing them usually does not lead to connection, but rather to more reactions where they want to prove their freedom.

As a mediator you want to create connection, so you can eventually get to "common ground". When you are connected, you can tell what you are feeling distressed, angry or worried about. Connect your feelings to your needs. If they have difficulty hearing you, respond to their reaction with empathy and then go back to honesty again.

We try to meet them where they are, which could sound something like this:

"When you walked out during the mediation last time, after saying, "I do not care about this any more, I wonder if it was because you yearn for more understanding of your choices?"

An expression of honesty could sound something like:

"When I hear what you said to X, I am worried because I do not understand what it is you want in expressing this. Are you willing to tell us what you need?"

Often the connection with someone who has chosen to rebel needs to build quite slowly, step by step. The person might want to end the conversation if he or she experiences any attempt to limit their - highly valued - freedom. Behind this reaction there is the fear of being confronted with the shame they have tried to run from – maybe for a long time.

4. Attacking - criticizing and judging the other.

If someone gets angry, and attacks and criticizes the other party it might result in ending the mediation. At least if the situation threatens to increase into physical violence. Sometimes it can continue with the often more time-consuming form of a so-called shuttle mediation, with the parties in two different rooms³.

It often helps me connect if I remind myself that no one attacks anyone else, without having first experienced some form of violation or offense themselves. Often it is not conscious but still has a strong influence on the person. Also in this direction, just as in the opposite direction of the compass of needs – the focus is on the issue of guilt. Who is to blame for the conflict? In this case, the person blames the opponent, instead of them themself.

If you put hard against hard when someone is choosing to move in this direction, it can be seen as an invitation to compete about who is the strongest. Since the argument is often a part of this strategy, it is constructive to choose another way to communicate, or the conflict will increase. Instead of attacking, connect to both parties with empathy, and help them to get in touch with the needs they are trying to meet with their strong criticism.

When you do so, you become a role model, showing that there are other ways to handle a situation than by finding out who is wrong and competing. When they have a sense of being understood, they become more open to listening to what we have to say.

I often remind myself that the person may feel cornered and does not know how she or he will have the capacity to feel more shame. Either party may need a confirmation that you hear that the other person's behavior has affected him very much. He or she may struggle for quite a while to get his opponent to take on the blame.

Ideas of what the mediator might say:

- I wonder if it is so that you are angry, because you want to trust that we will all communicate in a respectful way? Maybe you want us all to see the big picture and every part that has led to this conflict and that we do not go for a quick fix?

- Do you want to make sure that we really find out what happened and how it has affected everyone involved before we try to find a solution?

Finally: All the directions of the compass have a place. We use all of them to some extent. Shame is a very valuable emotion to express and experience during mediation. That is if you feel free in sharing as much as you choose yourself.

If someone feels forced to be open around shameful issues, it will get in the way of both contact and solutions. When a person voluntarily embraces his or her shame, it contributes to vulnerability and, in the long run, with empathy for the other.

Some questions about feelings of shame in mediation

- How can a mediator handle and break the shame "pacing back and forth between two people?"

Liv: Shame is "contagious." That in itself is not bad for a mediation process. Recurring shame - no matter who feels it - can be used to make needs visible and to make mutual dependence more clear. Of course we need to mourn actions that did not contribute and let that be part of the healing. Mourning needs that are not met is often a great way of healing trust and connection in a relationship.

The healing and mourning process is different from when the mediation conversation gets stuck in who will win the "martyr race" - who had the worse experience, who has behaved most abominably and is suffering the greatest remorse. In this case the mediator may direct the communication, helping the parties move from self-pity or self-criticism and focusing on things that actually happened. Getting the real facts on the table, without evaluation of them usually gets the participants to 'sober up.' After the facts are on the table the mediator can help them focus on what they need and want now.

If the "martyr race" escalates, the mediator may suggest a pause where the participants take some time to think about what results they want to see from the mediation.

How can I create a supportive enough space for the participants to dare to open up to share difficult shame and vulnerability, especially with the "opponents"?

Liv: My focus as a mediator is to listen to whatever is said, in a way that gets me in touch with the needs behind the words. When we hear the needs behind whatever is expressed, it becomes easier to let go of ideas of right and wrong.

If either party did something that she or he is ashamed to talk about - for example having used physical violence, it may be convenient to suggest talking in a slower tempo. It allows more time for reflection and may help to lower everyone's guard.

Even if it seems that there is not so much being said, the mediator needs to remember that much of the mediation is going on within the people who participate.

Generally, I am prepared to interrupt if what is said does not seem to create a connection between the parties. I ask participants to slow down and focus on really listening for feelings and needs and in such a way that helps them to see each other's humanity. I would also focus on hearing what is said with empathy and express my own feelings and needs at times when I believe this will lead to increased safety.

I was part of a mediation and the other party was embarrassed and "confessed" things. Our relationship got worse after the mediation. Why?

Liv: When a person takes on all the guilt and shows how much she or he despises himself, it seldom helps the other party. The person who "admits their sins and wrong doings" often gets all the focus,

and those who have been exposed to the person's actions and need to be heard, do not get enough attention.

When the mediator is not paying attention and clarifying both parties' needs, it may contribute to an imbalance in the relationship after the mediation. If someone leaves a mediation and believes that he or she is worthless and deserves to be, the relationship will suffer from this.

So I make sure that I "pull the person who takes on all the blame by the ear." This means that I ask them to, in their own words, tell the other person what they heard that they were feeling and needing. I'm helping the person to listen to how the other person's needs have been affected by what has happened but without taking on the guilt. I also help the person who takes the blame to put into words what needs he or she wants to meet by doing it. (See above under section 2 of the various strategies in need compass.)

Situations that stimulates shame

We can divide the situations that often stimulate shame into various categories⁴. Many conflicts contain one or more of the following and are often represented in a mediation process.

1. Comparisons.

2. Dependence and independence.
3. Competition.
4. Self-criticism.
5. Appearance.
6. Sex.
7. To see and be seen.
8. Closeness.

When the mediator is ashamed

It is valuable for a mediator to know how to deal with shame so that it does not become an obstacle, but becomes an opportunity for in-depth vulnerability and connection. As a mediator, you may make mistakes, or say things you feel ashamed of. Or you might get embarrassed over something you hear the parties say. Maybe you feel ashamed "on their behalf" and get a secondary shame reaction. Shame makes us stupid. Shame makes us inattentive. Shame makes us a challenge to connect with. When we feel shame we often act in ways we later regret. At least if we try to pretend that we are not feeling shame or are trying to avoid it in some other way. Then all the energy, that could otherwise be used to create connection, is used to try to conceal a natural reaction.

Shame can make us more aware of our interaction with other people. Shame can make us more aware of our own and others' needs, if we are not trying to get away from the feeling. When we embrace the shame it becomes a door to a deeper capacity for empathy, so getting to know shame is really crucial for a mediator.

First, learn to recognize shame by the physical symptoms. Some common symptoms are warm waves through the body, blushing or heat in your face, your mouth gets dry, your mind goes into high gear, and if you meet a particular person's eyes, your mouth can get caught in a stiff smile.

Maybe you do not recognize these physical signs of shame, before you've move in either direction of the needs compass. Then you need to learn these behaviors. When you start recognizing your favorite avoidance tactics you can start from there, and “go backwards” until you feel the physical shame impact again. The natural physical reaction provides information about what you need at that moment.

If you, in the role of a mediator, feel strong shame in the midst of mediation, you can of course take a break. You can also ask the parties to listen to what is going on inside you, if you think you can express yourself in a way that creates more contact and authenticity. The more you learn about shame, the more you can learn about needs and about empathy.

Four steps to regain contact and inner balance after a shame attack

Dealing with shame in the manner proposed in the following four steps can be challenging. Especially challenging if you have a preconceived idea that a mediator is supposed to act within certain limits. Dealing with shame in this way is a path to greater authenticity. The more authentic the mediator can be, the greater role model, she or he can be for the parties in the mediation. When the mediator is willing to be vulnerable and open, it is often inspirational for the parties to choose the same path. The aim is that the mediator will handle shame, not to be the center of attention, but in order to be fully present with the mediation process again.

1. Allow yourself to feel shame in the body. It can be warm currents through the body that makes you blush or as a discomfort in the stomach. Do not try to stop it or numb the shame feelings, but try to give it space. If it takes too much of your focus, take a pause and go through the 3 following steps.

2. Get in touch with what you need. The shame, and maybe other feelings, will show you what your most important needs are in this very moment. If you act before you have a solid connection with yourself and what you need, there is a risk that you will do something you regret later.

3. Remind yourself that you need support of some kind, and that you would benefit from sharing your reaction with others. It may be the parties in the mediation or a support person.

4. If you take a pause in the mediation, use it to connect with someone you know can listen to you when you are feeling shame. If no one is available, be sure to take the time to listen to yourself with empathy. Shame cannot keep us in its desensitizing grip when we experience empathic contact with our needs.

Some things to know about shame

- Before a shame attack we experience a state of joy, unity, connection or satisfaction.
- Shame itself is nothing to worry about; it's a natural feeling.
- Shame often comes together with thoughts of violent content.

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- Shame is a sign that we have tried to meet some of our needs at the expense of other needs.
- Shame is a sign that the person knows that she or he is mutually dependent on others, but forgot to act accordingly.
- If the person chooses freely to embrace their shame during mediation, it can be very valuable
- If the person feels forced to feel shame, it is one of the worst feelings to feel during mediation.

About the author

Liv Larsson is a CNVC-certified trainer and passionate mediator. Based in Sweden, she has worked internationally sharing leadership, communication, and mediation skills for the past 20 years. Trained by Marshall Rosenberg, founder of NVC, her special interest is to see mediation in the context of a social change towards more life-serving structures. She is one of the assigned mediators between the Sami, the indigenous people of Scandinavia, and forest companies in the Sami region of Sweden. She regularly mediates conflict in the families and organizations.

She has written 13 books on NVC, including two for children. Her books, ***A Helping Hand***, ***Anger, Shame and Guilt*** as well as ***Relationships*** are all very useful for a mediator as well as for anyone wanting to enhance their communication skills. Many of her books have been translated into other languages.