

Reach Out Or Act Out

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Recovery from sexual addiction is a complex process that begins with accepting the invitation to start a journey without knowing who we can reach to along the way. The first obstacle that seems almost insurmountable is facing the fear of disappointing people, especially our loved ones, when we tell them our story. We are absolutely convinced that if we tell our stories the weight of it will be so heavy that it will push people away. We fear that we will be totally defined by our addiction. The feelings we experience that disconnect us from others and ultimately keep us in hiding exemplify *shame*.

Managing *shame* is key to addiction recovery because it stops us from telling our story and experiencing real relationships. Sexual addiction is defined by replacing real relationships with false ones. Reaching to false relationships when we are in pain quickly becomes the dominant pattern in our lives, locking out the real people that stand by confused by the distance shame has established in the relationship. As we progress along the way of recovery, we learn how good it feels to reach out to others and tell our stories, and be real. In fact, it changes our lives.

Despite how good we feel when we tell our story, it can be hard to share about our personal struggles, especially when we make a mistake or have a slip. We forget

how good it feels to turn to our real relationships. Even though shame tries to convince us we should not open up about our struggles, reaching out to real relationships is the answer and way back to recovery *every* time. Managing shame is important, and understanding a few things about it may help us confront it.

Brene Brown has studied shame and found that there are three things that we need to understand about shame:

1. We all have it.
2. We're all afraid to talk about it.
3. The less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.

I would also add that the less we talk about shame the more disconnected we become with ourselves, and the real relationships in our lives. We become less connected and more driven to create false relationships by acting out. One of the most important rules in recovery is reach out or act out. It is crucial that we find someone we feel safe with to reach to when we feel the grip of shame after we have made the normal mistakes in life, and especially when we have slipped. It is important to remember that in many ways addicts experience the normal mistakes of life differently because of shame. The good news is that we can develop safe relationships that help us combat shame when we open up and share our experiences about our personal struggles with life and our addiction. Shame occurs between people, and can only be healed between people.

Healing comes when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and talk about our mistakes in an open and transparent way.

Brene Brown found that people can overcome shame by doing four things:

1. They understand shame and recognize what messages and expectations trigger shame for them.
2. They practice critical awareness by reality-checking the messages and expectations that tell us that being *imperfect* means being inadequate.
3. They reach out and share their stories with people they trust.
4. They speak shame—they use the word shame, they talk about how they're feeling, and ask for what they need.

The reality is that shame loses power when it is brought out into the light and challenged by telling our story. Shame needs three things to grow: secrecy, silence, and judgment. When something shaming happens to us and we keep it locked up, it festers and grows. Soon it begins to consume us to the point where we are absolutely convinced no real person in our life will understand. It is at this point, when we are disconnected from ourselves and others, that we are most likely to return to the fake relationships that are nothing but empty wells in our lives. Noticing when we feel disconnected is an important step in reaching out. The sooner we reach out and name our shame, the better we will feel in our real relationships.

Here are some useful tips that we can use when someone in our group is reaching out to us because they feel triggered or are feeling shame. First, we can make sure they are safe by asking "are you near any computers or places you have acted out?" It is essential to feel safe before taking the next step. Second, we can ask when did shame convince them that nobody would understand what they were going through? When did they start reaching into themselves shutting out everyone else? Disconnection from others happens much sooner than the desire to sexually act out does. It is important to offer this person a real relationship that they can tell their story to. Third, we can talk about the people that are important in this persons life that need to know about struggles and slips. We can help them remember that disconnection and secrecy hurt their loved ones, and them, much more than any mistake or slip can. Finally, we can affirm them for having the courage to tell us their story, and encourage them to tell their story to their loved ones.

Brown, Brene, 2010, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are*

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