

**Perfect in Our Imperfection, The Journey to Self-Acceptance**  
**By Dr. Starr Ramson**

“I’m not pretty enough, smart enough, successful enough, rich enough, skinny enough, funny enough”...the list goes on and on and on. I invite you to ask yourself, what if you were just enough, what would it mean for you to accept yourself just as you are?

Imagine for a moment, you’re walking down the street; the sun is shining, the day ripe with potential. You’re thinking about how to design your day. What will you accomplish, will you laugh, maybe you’ll cry, whom will you connect with? The day is yours.

Now imagine that you aren’t alone, instead you are followed by an angry mob. Someone yells, “you’re fat and disgusting, you have no self control, pathetic, a glutton”. Another, “you’re foolish, unintelligent, a waste of space”. These violent insults are flying at you all at once; the voices are so loud and so vivid that you can no longer think about your day because your vision is clouded by shame.

This may seem extreme but unfortunately, many of us go through our lives housing this mob within us. We speak to ourselves with some of the most violent language we would ever dare to use outside of our own heads. Everyday, our chance of creating what we envision is eclipsed by the prolific judgment and criticism that dominates our consciousness.

Humans learn shame at a very young age. Bullying, name-calling, violence, no matter the magnitude, all reinforce the message that we aren’t enough, that our worthiness is contingent on what we make, say or do and even on how we look. Shame is not unique to victims of abuse; we learn shame by observing others’ shame. Parents, who overwork, never talk about feelings, criticize themselves, all teach shame. Studies show that children who are surrounded by peers with low self worth tend to emulate this behavior. We learn shame from others but yet we hide it from others. The many faces of shame silence it. It drives perfectionism in some and procrastination in others. This incredible diversity of shame symptoms make us feel isolated and weird, further driving the silence.

I want to communicate to you that you are not alone. Shame is a part of being human. The idea that we must be hard on ourselves, that we must always be

striving to be better is deeply ingrained in our culture. As a naturopathic doctor, I believe in the intelligence of the human body. When there is a stressor, the human body strains back in order to survive. For modern humans, I believe the most fundamental stressor is an aching need to connect. Success, financial freedom, beauty, all of these drive us but they drive us because of what they provide: the opportunity for connection.

When it comes to disease, we always seek to understand the underlying triggers. In my practice, I approach shame in much the same way.

We explore where the shame originated from and also what perpetuates it:

1. The dynamic in your childhood home.
2. Your role in the household including how many siblings and your relationship with them.
3. Parents' professions and if they had any vices (workaholics, addicts, emotionally closed, self deprecating) .
4. Was your home a place you could share your hopes, dreams and fears?
5. The impact of your first serious romantic relationship.
6. Did you have friends growing up or into adulthood that you could be yourself with?
7. Were you bullied? Over what?
8. What are the top 5 things you dislike about yourself?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

9. What are the top 3 situations that cause you to be reminded of the previous 5?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

How do the previous answers reveal who you truly want to be? Give three words to describe the kind of person you would be if you simply could not fail:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Once we have identified triggers and mediators, we can begin the process of changing the habit of beating yourself up and establish a new habit of self-acceptance. The therapeutic process for creating self-acceptance is similar to the process I use when approaching any health concern: give the body what it needs, take out the garbage and stimulate the vital force.

#### GIVE THE BODY WHAT IT NEEDS:

Have you ever asked yourself the question, what do I need right now? Amidst a shame storm of sitting down to a pint of chubby hubby, what if, before indulging, you ask yourself "how do I feel right now, what do I need?" What you discover may surprise you...the answer usually isn't chubby hubby. Many of my patients crave sweets when they are in need of comfort. Salty foods are a go to when stressed, especially the crunchy ones-starts out hard but you chew it down to a soft paste, easy to swallow. These kinds of substitutions for what we actually need distract us from creating and discovering the ingredients required for us to be our best selves. The next time you are about to numb in some way, whether it's TV, alcohol, drugs, food, sex, a fight with your spouse, yelling at your

kids...etc, just ask. Ask the same way you would ask a friend, with love and compassion.

The basic needs of all humankind:

1. Clean water
2. Whole, vibrant and personalized food
3. Movement
4. Sleep
5. Sunlight
6. Nature
7. Connection
8. Play
9. Purpose

Are you fulfilling these needs for yourself every single day? If the truthful answer is no, this is the place to start. There is no greater enemy to shame than self-care and there is no better way to learn to love yourself than to provide yourself with everything you need to thrive.

If I told you I had a houseplant that became infected with mold. Could I heal the plant by treating it with an antifungal? Perhaps. What if the plant lived in the basement in deficient soil and I always forgot to water it? I could kill the mold but it would likely return because the conditions were perfect for mold to grow. We CANNOT heal by simply eliminating the darkness (shame, infections, self-criticism, toxins, food allergies, etc). Healing starts by adding in light (basic needs).

One of my favorite antidotes for shame is self-compassion. Since one of our basic needs is connection, try connecting with yourself in a time of crisis with this simple self-compassion exercise:

1. Recognize that what you are feeling is suffering.
2. Acknowledge that suffering is a human experience.
3. Offer yourself a gentle touch: hand over your heart, caressing your cheek, on your belly or even just on your thigh.
4. Speak to yourself with words that convey kindness, words you would use with a child or with a loved one: I'm so sorry you are hurting, this is so hard, I am here for you, you're not alone...

## TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE

In medicine, by garbage, we mean inflammatory foods, toxins, infections, toxic relationships, stress, etc. When it comes to the quest for self-acceptance, the mob is the trash. As with any habit, the most successful strategies for change require what I call the trio of change:

**1. Replacement with something that produces an equally yummy reward.** In the case of shame, gratitude tends to be best antidote. Adopt a 21 day gratitude challenge: every time you catch the mob saying something judgmental or critical, challenge it with something you are grateful for about yourself.

Example:

Mob: "I am fat"

Challenge: "I am grateful to myself for the effort I make to exercise"

You will find that you will start to crave the compliments.

**2. Community.** Have you ever heard the saying "It takes a village"? Well, it's true. The most successful habit changes happen when our community supports us, empathizes with us and shares our experience. Ask your friends and family to join you in the 21-day challenge.

**3. Belief in yourself and in a higher power, that change is possible.** To change a habit, you must first want to change and second believe that you have the capacity to do so. Studies show that addicts who pray, have greater success rates in recovery than those who have no spiritual practice. Spirituality is not only religion, it is a belief in a force greater than one's self, which permeates and connects all things. If you don't have a spiritual practice yet, you can start by integrating mindfulness into your daily life. Notice the ordinary and yet extraordinary details in nature and in others around you. Once you open your awareness to the beauty around you, you will begin to realize that there is deep meaning and purpose in every living thing, especially you.

## STIMULATE THE VITAL FORCE

The vital force, also known as the *vis medicatrix naturae*.

*"It is this supreme power and intelligence, acting in and through every atom, molecule and cell in the human body, which is the true healer, the "vis medicatrix naturae" which always endeavors to repair, to heal, and to restore the perfect type."-Henry Lindlahr*

This is the healing force that creates the sniffles when you have a cold and that produces a rash when you have an allergic reaction. It is this same force that generates shame. So how do we stimulate the vital force to promote self-acceptance? The answer here is connection. If the need for connection drives us to use shame as a motivator, why not just bypass the shame and reach out?

Make no mistake; this is not about seeking cure outside of yourself. On the contrary, receiving true connection requires giving. Shame keeps us from opening our hearts and sharing our story and that silence is the breeding ground for feeling unworthy, lonely and incapable of giving love. Telling your story generates deep connection and it gives other people permission to do the same. The next time someone you trust asks you how you are, tell the truth. Tell them you are suffering, tell the story and give them the chance to show up for you. You will find that they will do the same and the isolating feeling of being weird and wrong will melt away. You will begin to learn that we are all the same, perfect in our imperfection and worthy of being heard.

### **Credits:**

I want to credit the incredible mentors who have inspired much of this article:

Kristin Neff: creator of self-compassion.org

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MITT: transformational seminars, which taught me all about my own mob

Brene Brown: dynamic author and speaker on shame and vulnerability