The Influence of Shame in Social Behavior

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Abstract

Shame is an emotion regulator of human behavior, has powerful effects on the adaptation, is an emotionally painful character and may even produce a break in the sense of self worth. Thus, it can trigger dysfunctional patterns of behavior such as low empathy and generate a sense that the individual is powerless or failed. It is crucial to understand how shame can be dysfunctional in order to undermine his power to build a healthy interpersonal relationship. The article discusses the shame, lists aspects of their dynamics and reinforces the need for a review for the clinician.

Key-words: Shame; Social Behavior; Psychopathology.

A Influência da Vergonha Sobre o Comportamento Social

Resumo

A vergonha é uma emoção reguladora do comportamento humano, possui efeitos poderosos sobre a adaptação, tem caráter emocionalmente doloroso e pode mesmo produzir uma quebra no senso de valor próprio. Desta forma, pode desencadear padrões disfuncionais de comportamentos como a baixa empatia e gerar, por conseguinte, uma sensação de que o individuo é fracassado ou impotente. É fundamental a compreensão de como a vergonha pode ser disfuncional, tendo em vista seu poder de prejudicar a construção de uma relação interpessoal saudável. O artigo discorre sobre a vergonha, elenca aspectos de sua dinâmica e reforça a necessidade de sua avaliação para o clínico.

Palavras-chave: Vergonha; Comportamento Social; Psicopatologia.

The humans have social interaction as a core behavior. Seeking acceptance, the sense of belonging and closeness are important shares of our lives. In relationship is important the social approval of behavior, which creates social rewards and possibly even higher status, even like moments that behavior suffers reprimands and rejection. When a person is rejected or criticized, is very common the occurrence of shame. Therefore, shame is a powerful agent of regulating behavior, providing some of the parameters of what would be acceptable or not within a group or society.

Shame is a feeling that is experienced at various times of life's journey, is present life spread and regulates human moral behavior. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (2011) wrote about shame, referring to it as a feeling that arises when supposedly are not met the requirements of society and when this perception of our actions influence the sense of belonging and acceptance. Schopenhauer offers a way to understanding shame and the concept of self-conscious emotions that are evoked by self-assessment and self-reflection, considering individual and moral values of society.

A proper understanding of the origins and consequences of shame is critical because it has important clinical relationships with some mental disorders, such as depression and bulimia nervosa (Scheff, 2012). To understand how shame influences the dynamic between emotions, cognitions and behaviors is critical, since these three factors interact in personality and significantly shift with social interactions (Scott, 2011; Rathbone, 2012).

The Feeling of Shame

The emotions essentially involve people's reactions to their intimate experiences, personal characteristics and behavior. They are linked to learning processes, such as the seizure of social standards, rules, limits, comparing their behavior with others and the inferences that makes about third-party evaluation. The shame is then a conscious emotion by relying on a judgment of others that generates a feeling of a failure in behavior, caused by a disapproval or not engagement in the moral system of society. Therefore, it is an emotion that encompasses a global negative view of self (Leary & Tangney, 2011).

Conscious emotions are feelings that drive moral behavior and are directly related to the approval of others. The shame would be such a thrill because it involves a sense of exposure, of fault, or an offense: there is a (real or imaginary) disapproving public. Shame is very painful, is accompanied by various unpleasant sensations that are shrinking or feeling "be small" and is related to a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness (Behrendt & Ben-Ari, 2012).

Although shame would seem like a "selfish" emotion, i. e., an emotion that involves a system of concerns exclusively about himself, it is a part of the moral and emotional motivational system and is closely related to the behavior of others, especially the feeling to be evaluated (Costa, 2009; Darab & Hartman, 2011; Power, Cole & Fredrickson, 2010; Hobson, 2012). It is important to emphasize that shame differs from shyness and embarrassment for being a feeling of potentially more severe consequences for social interaction, as it has a strong character self-reproach and guilt.

Shame has a strong potential to generate psychological vulnerability. Do something shameful, or thought have done something, can increase the perception that others are evaluating the person in a negative or harmful way. It usually feeds back the feeling of shame, increasing existing vulnerability and further weakening behavior. It may even occur that strong feelings of shame impair the ability to recognize the emotions of others, possibly feeding back this process (Fischer et al., 2012).

The role of shame as a behavior modulator

Like any behavior, shame is modulated by social and historical aspects. In contemporary times, while there are cultures that exacerbate the power of shame as a regulator of behavior, such as Japanese, there is also the extreme opposite, where there is a total lack of concern with the effects than mildly shameful behavior will cause, as in some reality shows (Madianou, 2011; Stets & Carter, 2012; Madsen & Brinkmann, 2012).

In excess, shame can take a non-adaptive aspect, generating a low tendency to change behavior and producing a self-destructive cycle that increases social isolation and the difficulty in interpersonal relationships (Leary & Tangney, 2011; Giner-Sorolla & Espinosa , 2011). The vulnerability that may cause embarrassment has its origin in the perception that it is seen as flawed or weak. For those who feel shame, vulnerability causes unattainable standards of perfection, making hard the opening for satisfactory intercourse. Thus, one starts to consider the fact that to be receptive to other's evaluations is emotionally harmful. Since there may not be considered his or her vulnerability, can happen that a person does not admit the failure for another, causing behaviors and emotions that generate a pattern of intolerance with themselves (Brown, 2010).

Due to the unpleasant and intense features of shame, the reaction it causes may be out of proportion to the situation that is triggered. There is a positive correlation between shame and anger, and might be a high possibility of the emergence of open aggressiveness and over-reaction (Mader , 2011; Ilies et al , 2012.). This hostility may be an attempt to self-defense, aiming to put the guilt elsewhere. In doing so, the person ashamed tries to recover some sense of control and superiority in your life, friends, work colleagues and people nearby. If persistent, this difficulty of acceptance, fear of judgment and consequently aggression can result in negative consequences in the long term, thereby increasing their sense of helplessness, low self-esteem and worsening its relations with others (Tangney , 2011).

There is, however, an adaptive aspect of shame. It happens when shame can be an indicator of excessive behavior; in these cases, shame is a healthy sign that gives to the person parameters for identifying who did something socially reprehensible, and signals what society approves or not. Thus, it is acting as both punishment and negative reinforcement.

Shame may contribute to the development of clinical conditions such as mood, anxiety, eating and personality disorders. This occurs because it arises from a lack of internalisation of values and limits, in which the person has never been this whole feeling and that his ideals and his self is being put in check by the people, by society and by itself (Leary & Tangney, 2011; Ilies et al, 2012). The person that experience a huge shame may have a propensity to focuses on the negative perception of him or herself, which can produce a painful experience. This situation creates difficulties to be emotionally connect with others, and reduces the emotional availability and sensitivity. Shame motivates defensive and protective behaviors, such as evitation from situations, which causes the individual to shun close relationships hindering the resolution of conflicts, and attempt to repair damage, apologize or be solicitous (Santos, 2009; Klinger, Kulp & Ladany, 2012). All these components form a pattern of shame that generates a self-destructive cycle of behavior and that increasingly favor the non-social engagement, the escape of interpersonal relationships, and a low tendency to resolve conflicts and problems that are arising from this emotion.

There is an intimate relationship between shame and empathy. Empathy is essential for maintaining close and satisfying relationships, because it implies that someone put in another's place, understand their needs and their suffering with sensitivity; this brings great benefit to human relations. The lack or low capacity for empathy interferes greatly in quality and quantity of satisfactory relationships that person maintains lifelong, also influencing the sense of belonging that is extremely important to build a good self-esteem. Shame is associated with a diminished capacity for empathy and is related to a propensity to focus on problems and anxiety responses, ie, the person is overloaded with herself and has difficulty connecting with the suffering of others. In summary, one tends to focus on their own needs and emotions and suffering itself (Leary & Tangney, 2011; Mader, 2011).

Conclusions

Shame is an emotion that, although be important to regulate the behavior, may cause many problems if severe and bring severe consequences for the establishment of affective ties in social relationships. Shame can be summarized by a feeling caused by other than just hitting the self, affecting the ability to empathize and generating difficulties of belonging, and reaching a strong feeling not deserve bonds with others. The behavioral effects of shame can be aggressive tendencies, externalization of guilt and low self-esteem and alienation of relationships, and the difficulty of solving the problem situation, since the individual feels that he himself is the problem.

The knowledge of shame's dynamics is paramount for clinical practice, by allowing trace coping strategies and developing effective interventions, minimizing the suffering of patients and leading to a better quality of life. Likewise, it is essential that psychologists include shame evaluation in the clinical context, due to the fact of the shame be a possible symptom that is fueling the current disorder status.

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