



Session Five: Connectedness and Healthy Relationships

Connectedness and healthy relationships

Positive and distorted images of the “divine,” God, or higher power

*How these images encourage or discourage an individual
to seek connection with the transcendent or the divine*

Shame, guilt, and a spiritual model for the shame-control cycle

Healthy relationships with others

Healthy connections to the community and communities of faith

Incorporating some type of prayer or meditation into daily living activities

Session Five: Connectedness and Healthy Relationships

This session deals with connectedness and healthy relationships. It begins by exploring both positive and distorted images of the “divine,” God, or higher power, and how these images either encourage an individual to seek connection with the transcendent or the divine, or impair that connection. This session also deals with shame and guilt, and provides a spiritual model for the shame-control cycle often found in dysfunctional relationships. It examines some characteristics of healthy relationships with others, highlighting both commitment and responsibility for building healthy relationships. The session also explores healthy connections to the community and communities of faith. It concludes with a spiritual exercise on prayer and encourages an “action step” for incorporating some type of prayer or meditation into daily living activities. Each section has “questions for reflection and sharing,” and a “personal evaluation worksheet” is included at the end of the session.

Goals:

- 1) Exploring our connectedness to the “divine,” God, or higher power, others and the community
- 2) Dealing with barriers to connectedness, such as shame and guilt
- 3) Understanding the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships/connectedness

God, divine, higher power – positive and negative images

Our ideas of God, the “divine,” or a higher power are discovered and learned over a lifetime of experience. We learn about God through our own unique and individual experiences:

- We might observe the world around us in wonder and think about how it all came about
- We might sense and perceive the presence of the transcendent, the presence of a love greater than anything we’ve experienced in human relationships, or we might experience a deep peace of heart and mind, and we wonder about the origins of these experiences
- We might read sacred scriptures and, somehow, some verses here or there seem to speak the very needs we are attempting to deal with
- We might enter into a rehabilitation group and use a 12-Step curriculum, asking for help with recovery from a power greater and beyond ourselves

We might learn about God through our relationships with:

- Parents, family members, and others through the love, care, protection, and support they give us
- Church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or the faith communities that provide us with education and nurture in our spiritual journey
- Our culture, society and providence

We might also learn about God in the sometimes-difficult challenges that we face in life:

- In the loss of someone we are very close to
- In the loss of something of value to us, such as a job
- In our struggle with illness, addiction, and recovery

All of these life experiences shape our ideas about God and our connectedness to the “divine.”

Positive images of the “divine,” God, or higher power

Our positive images or ideas about the “divine,” God, or higher power often include the following qualities that we often associate with them:

- **Love:** a sense that the “divine,” God, or higher power cares about us in a very special way, that is affirming, encouraging and attentive to our needs and concerns
- **Goodness:** a sense that there is always a quality of goodness in the “divine,” a goodness that exceeds our human goodness, a goodness that is positive and healing
- **Wisdom:** a sense that the “divine” has a deep understanding of life and all things, an understanding that is greater than our own
- **Peace:** a sense of the “divine” as a source of deep inner peace
- **Power:** a sense of encountering a strength or an entity unlike any other in ordinary life
- **Mystery:** a sense that there is much more to the “divine” than we are aware of or can experience at any moment in time

Our positive images of the “divine,” God, or higher power can also include the following roles that we might associate with them:

- **Creator:** understanding the “divine,” God, or higher power to be a creative entity
- **Divine Parent:** understanding the “divine” to exhibit love, care, and guidance for us just as a human parent might do
- **Liberator and provider of justice:** understanding the “divine” to have an ethic that seeks liberation and justice for human beings
- **Advocate:** understanding the “divine” to support, help, and act on behalf of another

Questions for reflection and sharing

- 1) Who was most influential in helping you form your understanding about God, the “divine,” or higher power? How has this person influenced your spiritual journey?
- 2) When you think about God, the “divine,” or higher power, what images are especially meaningful to you? How does this thinking influence or strengthen your spiritual journey?
- 3) Are there positive images of the “divine” that have been helpful for your healing or recovery?

4) Are there any other positive images of the “divine” that are especially meaningful to you, that are not on the lists above?

Positive images could open up opportunities for our connectedness with the “divine,” God, or higher power. With positive experiences, we are more likely to trust, to be transparent, and to seek a healthy connection.

Distorted images of the “divine,” God, or higher power

We can acquire distorted or negative images of God through our life experiences, and these can serve as obstacles to both our understanding of the “divine” and our ability to seek connection with the “divine.” In this day and age, there are many distorted images of the “divine” that might come to mind. Our purposes might best be served if we look at four of these and consider ways to transform these distorted images into healthy ones.

In their book, *Soul Repair: Rebuilding Your Spiritual Life*, authors Jeff VanVonderen, Dale Ryan, and Juanita Ryan point to four common distorted images of the “divine.” [93-105]

1. **A God who punishes:** We see this type of god as one who can’t wait to punish us for something that we’ve done. With this type of god, we always live with fear and can never relax or be at peace. When things go wrong in our lives, we are sure that we’re receiving divine punishment. There is no joy in life with this type of god.
2. **A God who abandons:** When we are most in need, we feel that this god has left us alone to fend for ourselves. We feel that this god has deserted or forsaken us. We feel alone and without connection to the divine.
3. **A God who is emotionally distant:** Even though we try our best to please this god, we never get any sense of approval for our actions. We want to love and be loved but we don’t believe this god loves us. We wonder if we are worthy to be loved at all.
4. **A God who is indifferent or passive:** We see this type of god as one who has the ability to help us in difficult times but chooses not to. When we struggle or suffer in life this god either doesn’t care or doesn’t have the power to make a difference in our situation.

Questions for reflection and sharing

- 1) Have you experienced any of the distorted images of God described above?
- 2) Have you experienced other distorted images of God besides the ones described above?
- 3) How have any of these distorted images influenced your spiritual journey?
- 4) Were you able to move from distorted images to healthy images of God? How?

Connection to others

Connecting with others is vital for our emotional and spiritual health. Good relationships can keep us centered, can help us better understand ourselves, and can serve as a foundation for support, encouragement, and love. There are times when we walk alone in our spiritual journeys (times of personal prayer, quiet reflection, or the seclusion when we seek peace or rest) and other times when we walk with family members, friends, or spouses. All of us have had both rewarding experiences and difficult times with personal relationships. Within each of us is the desire to live, work, and play in a network of healthy and happy personal relationships. What steps can we take in this direction?

Psychologist David Richo has a useful list of healthy relationship characteristics for healthy relationships. As we begin to think about these and put them into practice, we may see improvements in our personal relationships. Let's consider some of his points.

Some Characteristics of Healthy Relationships:

1) Expressing love:

- Paying attention to another person's words and feelings
- Accepting the person as they are
- Appreciating and valuing that person
- Showing affection in healthy and appropriate ways
- Allowing that person to live freely, rather than attempting to control them

2) Staying through challenging times or conflict:

- All relationships will encounter conflict. Staying means the commitment to work through the conflict for a positive outcome and a healthier relationship
- It doesn't mean allowing someone else to violate personal boundaries or to be abusive

3) Working through problems:

- We refrain from blaming someone else
- We commit to addressing, processing, and resolving the issues involved
- We find solutions that are suitable to both people, so there is no room for resentment

4) Strong but not retaliatory:

- Each person should be treated with dignity, respect, and integrity. This requires strength
- Agree never to engage in negative behaviors, such as retaliation, the silent treatment, violence, unfaithfulness, or holding grudges

5) Honor personal boundaries:

- Ask the other person to honor your personal boundaries in return
- Honor boundaries without resorting to controlling behaviors

6) Non-judgmental listening:

- Hearing what someone is really saying requires trust
 - Allowing a person to express their thoughts, feelings, and point of view without correcting them or imposing your own beliefs upon them
- 7) *Don't let ego control you:*
- Be honest about your mistakes with another person; offer a sincere apology when needed, and take steps to change your behaviors
- 8) *Be assertive but not aggressive:*
- A healthy self-image and self-esteem will allow us to be assertive in ways that strengthen our relationships
 - Aggressiveness in a relationship is a sign that we have to have our way. Don't let ego control you. Be self-confident without being over-bearing
- 9) *Grow true friendship:*
- Transparency, honesty, caring, gentleness, integrity, and fairness are just some of the ingredients that help build lasting personal friendships

Questions for reflection and sharing

- 1) In your opinion, how do healthy relationships help you in your healing and recovery? In your spiritual growth and spiritual journey?
- 2) When you consider the nine characteristics of healthy relationships listed above, which of these is your strongest point? Which of these is an area in which you need to grow the most?
- 3) Can you think about other things that you believe are essential for a healthy personal relationship?
- 4) How is your own sense of self-worth related to the kind of personal relationships you currently have or enjoy?
- 5) How has your relationship with others influenced your spirituality and your journey of wellness and recovery?

Feeling shame and guilt, responsibility and accountability

Shame and guilt are powerful feelings. They are perceptions that we hold of ourselves that require our awareness and attention, if we are to seek healing, recovery and growth in our spiritual journey. Most often, we do not actively think of shame or guilt as possible problem areas in our lives, because our attention is usually focused on things that are much more visible to us. These visible things may include difficult or abusive relationships, addictions, or other unhealthy behaviors.

In his book, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve*, Lewis Smedes gives a very simple definition of shame. He writes: *"The feeling of shame is about our very selves – not about some bad thing we did or said but about what we are. It tells us that we are unworthy... We feel that we are unacceptable. And to feel that is a life-wearying heaviness."* [6]

Note that in Smedes' description of undeserved shame, he talks about both our actions and our identity. He tells us that our sense of shame is linked to our identity, self-worth, and the idea that we are somehow flawed and unacceptable to others. Lewis Smedes also says that undeserved shame can emerge from false messages from our culture, our institutions, or our families. The general message being: if you do these things you will be accepted, otherwise you won't be accepted (conditional acceptance).

Healing from shame

What then is the pathway to healing from the shame in our lives? Lewis Smedes tells us that: *"The experience of being accepted is the beginning of the healing for the feeling of being unacceptable."*

He follows this thought with an all-important question for which he provides an answer: *"Our struggle with shame, then, leaves us with this critical question: are we stuck with our merciless illusion that we need to be acceptable before we can feel accepted? Is there an alternative to the shame-producing ideals of secular culture, graceless religion, and un-accepting parents?"*

"There is. It is called grace. Grace is the beginning of our healing, because it offers the one thing we need most: to be accepted without regard to whether we are acceptable. Grace stands for the gift; it is the gift of being accepted before we become acceptable." [107-108]

The Lewis Smedes' story: Overcoming shame

Lewis Smedes was the son of Dutch parents who immigrated to the United States and settled in Muskegon, Michigan. When Lewis was 2 months old, his father passed away, leaving his 30-year-old mother with five children to feed and care for. With limited English language skills and no vocational skills, Lewis' mother labored as a house-cleaning lady. As a young boy, he experienced a sense of shame but never understood why he felt the way he did. One Sunday evening, as family friends visited with his mother in the living room of their home, Lewis sat in the darkened kitchen eagerly listening to the adults' conversations. As each husband or wife took turns talking about their children with pride, Lewis could hardly wait to hear what his mother would say about her children. When his mother, Rena, finally spoke, Lewis could hardly believe his ears. His mother complained that her children were not too bright, didn't do what they were told, caused her a lot of worry, and wore out their clothes way too fast. As Lewis went to his room, he was overwhelmed with the feeling of being like a child disowned by his mother. In his mind, it made no sense: a widowed mother who worked so hard to support her children, but who seemed ashamed of her kids. That evening, Lewis realized that the reason his mother could take no pride in her children was because she had no pride in herself.

It was not until years later when Lewis returned to Holland to attend graduate school that he discovered the reason for his mother's lack of self-worth as family members spoke to him about his mother's childhood. Lewis writes: *"I will tell you only this: my mother had a demented stepfather who apparently,*

when she first showed signs of ripening, went crazy at the sight of her. He repeatedly, day after day, grabbed her by her hair, lifted her off her feet, and beat her with his fists. The sin of the father becomes the shame of the daughter, and the shame of the daughter shrivels her power to take pride in herself. Once I knew the secret, I never again wondered why my mother did not have enough faith in herself to take pride in her children. I wonder instead how a child so shamed at the start could shine so fine in the end. As I wonder, I think I hear the answer blowing in the winds of grace.”

Lewis Smedes married, and he and his wife, Doris, adopted a number of children both girls and boys; accepting them and raising them in a loving home. Lewis went on to become a professor in the School of Psychology at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. He wrote 15 books on topics, such as shame and grace, forgiveness, life choices, living with gratitude, and caring and commitment. Lewis addressed the shame in his life, sought healing through “divine grace,” and continued his healing and spiritual journey until he passed away in 2002 at age 81. [72-74]

Shame: Our spiritual journey and the 12-steps

In their book, *Facing Shame: Families in Recovery*, Merle Fossum and Marilyn Mason give a more detailed definition of shame: *“We define shame in experiential terms. It is more than loss of face or embarrassment. Shame is the inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self-judging the self. A moment of shame may be humiliation so painful or an indignity so profound that one feels one has been robbed of her or his dignity or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection. A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being.”* [5]

Fossum and Mason tell us that the sense of shame in our lives emerge from life experiences of abuse, violations of our personhood, damage to our sense of self, and disregard for our personal boundaries. [6] These authors look at the concept of shame from the perspective of unhealthy family relationships and dealing with addictions. A CONTROL-RELEASE Cycle is a model that can help us understand how shame can drive addictive or self-destructive behaviors (Figure 1).

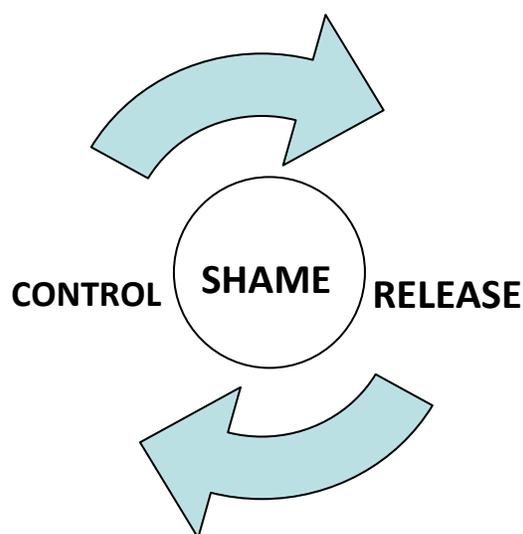


Figure 1. Control and release cycle

Control-release cycles can be healthy life experiences. For example, a track athlete who has to exercise control in the practice and discipline of training for the 100-yard dash, experiences the release phase during and after the race. In this case, the release phase brings a sense of accomplishment, a sense of fulfillment, a sense of inner peace. However, when the control-release cycle is driven by shame, a person feels compelled to live a controlled life by staying away from certain negative behaviors. For example, a father or mother trying to fit the image of being the perfect parent: try as they might (control phase), when the child doesn't behave in ways the parent thinks they should behave, the self-image of the parent is negatively impacted. The parent thinks, "I'm not a good enough parent," and lashes out in anger (release phase) against the child. This provides release from always having to be in control, but it also brings guilt and a sense of shame upon the parent. The parent then begins another cycle by committing to work harder at being a good father or mother.

This control-release cycle also operates in addictive behaviors, such as misuse of alcohol or drugs. According to Fossum and Mason, the reason 12-Step programs are so successful is because they address control and release in the first two steps. They go on to say that, *"When we observe several of the subsequent steps of the AA program, it is clear that they deal with issues of shame and guilt, accountability, repair of relationships, and reliability, all of which are crucial to the shame-bound cycle. This gives us a better theoretical understanding of why the Alcoholics Anonymous program has been so successful."* [110]

The impact of shame on our spiritual journey is explained by Fossum and Mason: *"Shame erodes the spirit – that natural, animating life force that is unknown to human language. Spirit is made up of mind,*

the unconscious, and intuition. Families as well as individuals are spiritual... As [individuals] face their shame, their spirits awaken and resume their natural growth. One [individual] stated, during her closing session in therapy, 'I used to plan my life and now I just show up!' This was her shorthand way of stating that she was now able to trust life.

"Trusting life comes from making some meaning of who we are, what we are all about. When we confront shame, we become aware of emptiness, a spiritual hunger. Our attempts to fill this hunger with controlling, compulsive behaviors only lead to pain and remorse... We have found that 12-step support systems (i.e., Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Co-SAA, Overeaters Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous) are important adjuncts for continued spiritual growth." [159-160]

Guilt is different from shame. It is connected to our actions. When we realize that we have violated our own values, or that our actions have hurt someone else, we respond with regret and remorse, and take responsibility for our actions. Our actions can be corrected. We can make better choices that are good for ourselves and others. Once we take positive steps to correct bad or unhealthy behaviors, feelings of guilt will leave us and they are often times forgotten.

Questions for reflection and sharing

- 1) Feelings of shame can be difficult to talk about. What could someone do to help you feel more secure so that perhaps you could speak about your struggle with feelings of shame?
- 2) If someone wanted to understand what shame feels like, how would you describe it to them?
- 3) What are some of the things that bring healing and release us from feelings of shame?
- 4) Have you ever experienced the shame-driven control and release cycle? What steps did you take to find freedom from this cycle?
- 5) Do you agree with the authors above that 12-step programs help us to deal with guilt and shame? In your opinion, how does a 12-step program help with this?
- 6) What is the best way to deal with feelings of guilt?
- 7) How are shame and guilt dealt with in an unhealthy relationship?
- 8) How are shame and guilt dealt with in a healthy relationship?
- 9) How have shame and guilt influenced your spirituality and your journey of wellness and recovery?

Finding community in communities of faith

Many of us have had some experience with a community of faith over our lifetime. Some were born into a specific religious tradition or denomination, while others are without a religious or spiritual background connected with a community of faith later in life. Some have departed from faith communities because it no longer met their needs, while others are searching for new faith communities to meet the growing needs of their spiritual journeys.

Whatever your case may be, it's always good to pause and consider the value of participating in the life of a local faith community. Our spiritual journeys are both individual journeys and journeys together with like-minded people. Faith communities can offer spiritual support, helpful resources for growth and learning, and opportunities to share our love and compassion with our neighbors.

When searching for a faith community we have many resources for accessing information on a particular religious tradition or spiritual community: a Google search, a word of mouth recommendation from a friend, or simply by walking or driving through our local neighborhood.

Every search that brings good results always begins with the question: What am I looking for? You're more likely to find a faith community that suits your needs if you know what your needs and desires are. Once you've set your goals then step out with confidence and begin visiting faith communities and congregations. To get a reasonable sense of a faith community you'll need to visit a number of times. After your visit to a faith community (congregation, church, temple, mosque, gathering) it is helpful to reflect on your experiences. After two or three visits begin to evaluate your experience with some of the following questions:

Personal interaction

- Did I experience friendliness, warmth, or hospitality during my visit?
- Did someone make an extra effort to meet me, answer my questions, or provide some helpful guidance?
- Did I feel respected, valued, or made to feel special?

Supportive environment

- Did I see diversity and inclusiveness during my visits?
- If I have children or teens, were there programs suitable for them?
- Were there programs to help single parents with their needs and childcare?
- What kinds of support groups are offered by this faith community?
- Are there groups to help me develop my spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, exercise, experience of nature, creativity, music or song, or the arts?
- Are multi-lingual programs offered?

Spiritual content

- Did the services inspire me spiritually?
- Did I sense or experience love, hope, compassion, or another virtue that's important to me?
- Did I sense truth, goodness, and integrity?
- Was my spiritual experience enhanced by the words, music, dance, or art forms used during the service?
- Was humility and an attitude of serving others displayed?

- Did I sense transparency and openness in those who led the services?

Connection to the neighborhood or city

- Was the congregation excited about reaching out to their neighbors and connecting with the city?
- Was the congregation passionate about helping people in need in the neighborhood?
- Was the congregation involved in neighborhood improvement projects, such as beautification, helping schools, or green environmentally friendly projects?

Remember that the search for a good, supportive faith community is not a search for the perfect place. Rather it's a search for a community that best fits your needs and expectations for growth at this present time.

Questions for reflection and sharing

- 1) What is the thing of greatest importance to you in finding a good faith community?
- 2) What have been some of your positive experiences with life in a faith community?
- 3) If you have had negative experiences in a faith community, have you been able to process these experiences and pursue a healing journey?
- 4) How can faith communities better support people on their journey of wellness and recovery?
- 5) How can a faith community better support you on your own spiritual journey?

A spiritual practice

Prayer

Prayer is the spiritual practice of communicating with God, the "divine," or higher power. Through prayer some of us experience a greater connectedness with the "divine," a greater appreciation for all life, and a better understanding of our self. Prayer involves both observing and listening. The world around us speaks to us through its beauty and wonder, but also through its brokenness and tragedies. Our observations of the life around us provide inspiration for our prayers.

Listening is also vital to our practice of prayer. Think about what we hear through the personal stories of others, or in our participation in religious or spiritual services. What do we hear when reading or meditating upon portions of sacred scriptures and writings? What do we hear when searching our own hearts and looking within ourselves? All of these experiences in listening and hearing can inspire and orient us toward prayer.

Developing a practice of prayer may calm our senses and our mind, and provide us with a satisfying spiritual experience. It requires us to invest ourselves and begin this journey.

An action step

For the next five (5) days commit yourself to a time of prayer.

First, select a time when you are most awake and alert; a time when you're free from important responsibilities for a few minutes.

Now determine how much time you can spend in prayer: 5, 10, 15, or more minutes? It's not so much about the amount of time you spend but more about getting started and maintaining a focus for prayer.

Next, determine a place where you want to pray. It's best for this to be a quiet place, free from noise, interference, and distractions. It can be indoors, like your kitchen, or outdoors in a park, backyard, patio, or balcony.

Now, find a comfortable place to sit with good posture and relax. Pause briefly to clear your mind of distractions. Center your prayer by asking yourself a few questions such as: What am I grateful for today? Who needs to be loved and cared for today? What is the one thing I need help with the most today? As answers to these or other questions you might have come to mind, pray about them individually.

Express your gratitude to God, the "divine," or your higher power. Ask for the gifts that will help you navigate life and your spiritual journey, such as grace, wisdom, healing, love, compassion, forgiveness, and whatever gift you feel the most in need of at the moment. When you finish your prayers, pause for a moment of silence, rest, and peace.

You can expand your experience of prayer by writing your prayers into a small notebook or prayer journal. If you continue this practice of prayer journaling, you will see your growth and progress in prayer over time. This will give you a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

Personal Evaluation Worksheet

Session Five: Connectedness and Healthy Relationships

Learning about yourself and others:

- 1) What is the most important thing that you learned about yourself in this session?

- 2) What is the most important thing you learned from the stories of others: stories from the material covered or from individuals in this session?

Learning about spirituality and recovery:

- 1) What are the two most important things you learned about spirituality today?

- 2) What are the two most important things you learned about recovery and wellness today?

Possible spiritual, goals:

- 1) Can you list two possible goals that will help you in your spirituality?

- 2) Can you list two possible goals that will help you use your spirituality in your recovery and wellness?

References

Fossum, M. A., & Mason, M. J. (1986). *Facing shame: families in recovery*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.

Richo, David. *10 Steps to the relationship you deserve*.

<http://living.msn.com/love-relationships/love-sex/10-steps-to-the-relationship-you-deserve>

Smedes, L. B. (1993). *Shame and grace: healing the shame we don't deserve*, New York, NY: Harper Collins.

VanVonderen, J., Ryan, D., & Ryan, J. (2008). *Soul repair: rebuilding your spiritual life*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.