

Working with Shame: From Blocked Connection to Restored Self

What Shame Is

Gershen Kaufman: Shame is a core affect that organizes the self. It arises when we feel exposed, inadequate, or rejected. Over time, shame becomes embedded in governing scenes—memories, images, and phrases that silently shape how we expect others to see and treat us.

Donald Nathanson: Shame is triggered whenever interest or joy is interrupted in the eyes of another. It is a normal, universal human affect—our nervous system’s way of signaling that connection feels at risk.

The Compass of Shame (Nathanson)

Withdraw	Pulling away, hiding, isolating
Attack Self	Harsh self-criticism, perfectionism, self-blame
Avoid	Numbing with substances, overwork, distraction
Attack Other	Blaming, shaming, criticizing, lashing out

These are protective scripts—not character flaws.

Governing Scenes (Kaufman)

Shame often carries images and words that replay automatically in the mind, such as a critical parent’s face, a humiliating peer moment, or labels like “too much” or “not enough.” These governing scenes shape identity until they are named, shared, and rewritten in a safe, empathic relationship.

Pathways to Repair

1. Name it: This sinking feeling is shame—something blocked my interest or joy.
2. Spot the Compass move: Withdraw, attack self, avoid, or attack other.
3. Uncover the governing scene: What image or phrase appeared? Whose voice is it?
4. De-shame: Offer accurate, compassionate language.
5. Reconnect to interest and joy: Take a small, safe step toward connection. Healthy pride grows when interest and joy are restored in relationship.

Practice Tool: Governing Scene Worksheet

Trigger situation:	
What did I feel in my body?	
Which Compass move did I notice?	
What image or words popped up?	
Compassionate re-frame:	