

Sex Addiction and Shame

We have used the Shame Resilience work of Brene Brown in our program for years. Last night one of my long term recovery groups started the first week of her Connections curriculum. The group starts with a 23 minute video of Brene discussing Shame, Empathy and Vulnerability, followed by discussion.

I never cease to be amazed at the reactions to the initial video. I am going to talk about what came up last night for the group members as I am positive that they are not alone in their feelings.

So, what came up in group?

"I'm ashamed to be a sex addict."

"I would never tell anyone"

These gentlemen keenly feel the shame that is attached to sex addiction in our society. One group member mentioned being a sex addict in an AA meeting and was quickly shut down, being told that "We don't talk about that here." Another group member told his story while in in-patient treatment for another addiction. He was courageous and vulnerable in the group and included his sex addiction in his story. He was met with lots of looks and questions afterwards. His act of bravery was met with judgment by other addicts.

As a clinician who works with cross addiction and has many clients who have multiple addictions, these events make me sad. Research states that up to 33% of clients with a substance dependence problem also meet the criteria for a sex addiction. There is no data that I am aware of that looks at other addictions such as gambling. If the recovery community maintains a hierarchy of "more acceptable" addictions, we are fostering shame and doing a disservice to recovery. As long as our society judges sex addiction so harshly, we make it harder for others to feel safe enough to seek help and recovery.

Thoughts on Blame and Accountability

Brene states in this introductory video that blame and accountability are mutually exclusive. If we blame others for hurting us, we are letting them off the hook and not holding them accountable. The suggestion that we should be vulnerable and share our feelings with the person who hurt us to hold them accountable was hard for the group members to embrace.

What good does it do to tell someone how I feel and try to set a boundary if they never respect it? I hear about this conundrum often in my work with clients. I continue to wish I had a great answer for these questions but I don't. Why do we need to work on being open, honest and vulnerable? Is it for others or for us? I maintain that it is all about us in these moments. When we stuff feelings and hurts they can turn into resentments. All of the bottled up emotion often ends up coming out sideways. When it comes to addiction this often means a slip or relapse.

Lessons from week one continue to show me that we need to continue to talk about sex addiction both to reduce the shame but also to reduce the societal stigma. Brene Brown cites a quote about change coming from a million individual acts. Last night we did not change the world's perception about sex addiction, but for an hour and a half in time, a group of men felt courageous enough to share, be

vulnerable and sit with each other's' darkness. These are the individual acts that leave me with hope for the future.