

The Best Way for People With PTSD to Cope With Shame

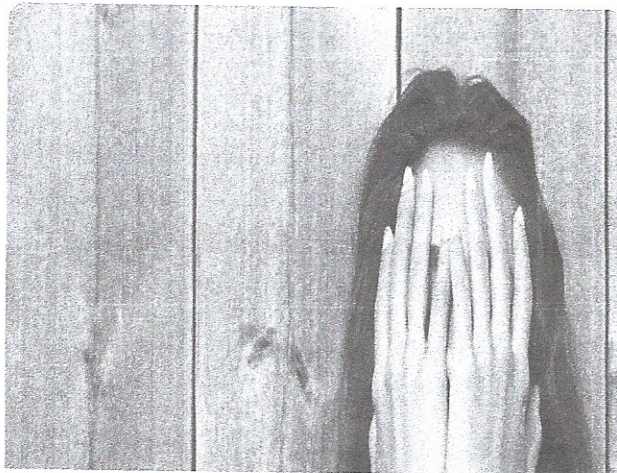
Social Support and Self-compassion Can Help

By [Matthew Tull, PhD](#) | Reviewed by [Steven Gans, MD](#)

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Following exposure to a traumatic event, people may experience a variety of emotions, including [shame](#). When a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is thrown into the mix, this emotion can become even more intense, leading to a number of unhealthy behaviors. Shame is a particularly difficult emotion to cope with. This article provides some information on shame, as well as some ways to manage shame.

What is Shame?



Shame is often considered a "self-conscious emotion" and is generally very closely related to the emotion of guilt. In fact, many people have difficulty distinguishing between shame and guilt. Shame is an emotion that occurs when a person evaluates or judges himself in a negative light. For example, a person might experience shame if he views himself as worthless, weak, bad or

useless. Shame can be a dangerous emotion. With shame, people may be more likely to engage in self-punishment (such as through deliberate self-harm) or isolate themselves from others. This will do little to alleviate the shame in the long-term and

can even intensify the shame. This article provides information on shame, as well as the relationship between PTSD and shame.

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Monitoring Your Emotions

In coping with any emotional experience, it is important to first increase your awareness of the emotion that you are trying to cope with. Specifically, you want to know what types of situations generally trigger the emotion, what thoughts are associated with the emotion, what the emotion feels like in your body and what you generally do in response to the emotion. The skills discussed in this article can be used to increase your awareness of shame, as well as help you identify different places where you can intervene to reduce your experience of shame.

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Using Distraction to Cope with Intense Shame

Intense emotions such as shame can be hard to cope with. As a result, they often lead to the use of unhealthy coping strategies, such as alcohol or drug use. Although alcohol and drugs may initially work to take away an intense feeling, this is only a temporary fix. In the long run, alcohol and drug use often lead to more intense emotions and other problems. Given this, it is important to learn how to cope with very strong emotions in the moment by using skills that do not put you at risk for long-term negative consequences. One such skill is distraction. Just as the name implies, distraction is anything you do to temporarily take your attention off of a strong emotion. Sometimes focusing on a strong emotion can make it feel even stronger and more out of control. So by temporarily distracting yourself, you may give the emotion some time to decrease in intensity, making it easier to manage.

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Self-Soothing Exercises to Cope with Shame

Coping strategies focused on improving your mood are sometimes described as self-soothing or self-care coping strategies. Effective self-soothing coping strategies may be those that involve one or more of the five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight and sound). Self-soothing coping strategies are particularly helpful in coping with shame, as they are focused on providing you with a positive experience. This action is counter to what shame often tells you to do.

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Managing Negative Beliefs About Emotions

The experiences you have throughout your life can influence how you respond to and evaluate your emotions, especially in regard to the development of negative beliefs about emotions. In addition, people who have experienced traumatic events at some point in their lives may be especially likely to develop strong negative beliefs about emotions. These beliefs may become further pronounced when a diagnosis of PTSD develops. PTSD may lead to strong and unpleasant emotions, such as shame, that may feel out of control, harmful or unpredictable. Learn some common negative beliefs about emotions and how they can feed into shame with this article.

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Increasing Self-Compassion to Cope with Shame

A lack of self-compassion can have a huge impact on recovery from PTSD. A lack of self-compassion may decrease motivation to continue through difficult moments in treatment. It may increase feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. A lack of self-compassion can also bring about strong feelings of shame, which can make emotions even more difficult to manage. Finally, low self-compassion may lead to self-destructive behaviors. For example, a person might begin to engage in deliberate self-harm as a form of self-punishment. Self-compassion can be difficult to increase; however, it is very important to do so. This article provides some strategies for fostering a stronger sense of self-compassion.

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Managing Negative Thoughts That Lead to Shame

Our thoughts can have a tremendous impact on our emotions, both positive and negative. When we evaluate ourselves in a negative light (as is common in PTSD), this is going to have a negative impact on emotions. In particular, negatively judging oneself (for example, telling yourself that you are weak for having PTSD) can lead to strong feelings of shame. Therefore, it can be helpful to learn ways of addressing these negative thoughts. This article provides information on how to manage negative self-focused thoughts, with the goal of reducing unpleasant emotional experiences.

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Seeking Out Social Support to Cope with Shame

Seeking out social support can be an excellent way of addressing shame. Shame often motivates people to hide from others or isolate themselves. As a result, important relationships may suffer, leading to depression. Seeking help from others can reduce isolation that is common among people who struggle with shame. In addition, it can help you gain another perspective on your experience.

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PTSD and Self-Compassion

Thinking More Positively About Yourself

By [Matthew Tull, PhD](#) | Reviewed by [Steven Gans, MD](#)

Updated February 20, 2017

If you have a [diagnosis of PTSD](#), you may struggle with self-compassion. The [symptoms of PTSD](#) can be very intense and can [disrupt many areas of a person's life](#). As a result, you may experience feelings of guilt or shame, negative thoughts about yourself or feelings that you're worthless or a failure.

These are common thoughts in people with PTSD - but they're not true and they can make matters worse for you.

We'll share strategies for learning how to be more compassionate toward yourself.

Why a Lack of Self-Compassion is Dangerous for People with PTSD

A lack of self-compassion can have a huge impact on recovery from PTSD. Here's why:

- This way of thinking and living may decrease your motivation to continue through difficult moments [in treatment](#).
- It may increase feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. For example, you might think, "I'm a failure, so what's the point with continuing with treatment?"
- A lack of self-compassion can also bring about strong feelings of shame and guilt, which can make emotions even more difficult to manage.
- Finally, low self-compassion may lead to self-destructive behaviors. For example, you might begin to engage in [deliberate self-harm](#) as a form of self-punishment.

Self-compassion can be difficult to increase, but it's very important to do so. Below are some strategies for fostering a stronger sense of self-compassion as you deal with PTSD.

How People with PTSD Can Increase Their Self-Compassion

Fortunately, there are many ways to work on your sense of self-compassion. Here are some of the most effective strategies:

- **Recognize that you're human.** If you set very high expectations that you can't meet, it be hard to feel compassionate about yourself. For example, you may have in your mind a timeline for improving your PTSD symptoms through treatment. But different people progress through treatment at different paces. Some people notice immediate gains, whereas others may take a little more time to notice benefits from treatment. Setting very high standards or expectations increases the likelihood that you won't meet them, which can increase feelings of worthlessness, helpless, hopelessness, and failure. Recognize that you're human and that there are going to be times when you struggle or slip. This is normal and actually a positive part of the process of recovery. Those moments of struggle can help you identify areas you need to continue to work on, as well as help you find new coping strategies to prevent similar struggles in the future.
- **Be mindful of negative self-focused thoughts.** Just because you have a negative self-focused thought doesn't mean it's true. Our thoughts are largely the result of habit. We can't always trust them, and this is especially the case for negative thoughts about the self. Such thoughts generally only result in more shame and guilt. Mindfulness can be a very useful strategy for managing negative thoughts. Being mindful of thoughts helps you take a step back from them, so you don't connect with them or buying into them as truth. This will decrease their intensity and, eventually, the frequency with which they occur.
- **Practice self-care.** When people feel low self-compassion, they're at greater risk for engaging in self-destructive behaviors or isolating themselves from social support. When you're experiencing low self-compassion, it's very important to act in a way that is counter to those feelings. Remember: Even if we can't always control our thoughts or feelings, we always have some level of control over our behavior and the choices we make. So when you're feeling worthless, act in a way that is opposite to that feeling by engaging in some kind of self-care activity. Do something nice for yourself and your body. Self-care may be a difficult thing to do if you're having very strong negative thoughts or feelings. But even a small self-care activity can prevent these thoughts and feelings from taking hold. Acting as though you care about yourself can eventually bring about actual feelings and thoughts of self-compassion.

- **Validate your emotions.** Another way to increase self-compassion is to validate your emotions. We don't experience emotions randomly. They are there for a reason. Emotions are our body's way of communicating with us. When we beat ourselves up for having certain emotions, all we do is increase our emotional distress. Therefore, recognize that your emotions are important and reasonable. Try to listen to what your emotions are telling you and realize that it's OK to have those emotions.
- **Reduce self-destructive behaviors.** A lack of self-compassion can lead to self-destructive behaviors, such as deliberate self-harm, eating disordered behaviors (for example, bingeing and restricting) or substance use. These behaviors may be a form of self-punishment, and they're very destructive if you're also dealing with PTSD. Although they may initially reduce your feelings of distress, in the long-term they'll only reinforce a sense of shame, worthlessness or helplessness. It's important to take steps to reduce these behaviors. Strategies focused on impulse control may be particularly useful for this.
- **Practice acts of kindness.** If you're feeling like there's nothing you can do to help yourself, then make the choice to help others. Acting with compassion toward others can improve your own self-compassion. Plus, there's some evidence that helping others can facilitate recovery from a traumatic event. Helping others by volunteering, for example, can improve your mood, provide a sense of accomplishment and agency and bring about a sense of worth.
- **Recognize your accomplishments.** Finally, recognize what you have accomplished. It's especially important to recognize accomplishments you have made despite the experience of PTSD symptoms. Make note of difficult tasks you have accomplished or challenging situations you have successfully navigated. Recognize accomplishments both big and small. We often brush aside small accomplishments, but no accomplishment is too small when you have PTSD. Give yourself credit for showing strength and perseverance despite dealing with a PTSD diagnosis.

Self-compassion is very important in recovering from PTSD. But it's also a very difficult thing to foster. Try out all of the strategies above and discover which combination of activities and behaviors work best for you. Your progress may be slow, but even a small amount of self-compassion can have a tremendous impact on your mental and emotional health.

Managing Catastrophic Thinking in PTSD

Learn Practical Ways to Control Catastrophic Thinking

By [Matthew Tull, PhD](#) | Reviewed by [Steven Gans, MD](#)

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People with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often experience [cognitive distortions](#) such as catastrophic thinking--a tendency to expect the worst to happen without considering other possibilities.

Cognitive distortions are extreme, exaggerated thoughts that don't match up with the reality of a situation.

For example, a woman with PTSD who was traumatized by [rape](#) may have the catastrophic thought that if she goes out on a date, she will be assaulted again.

Although that could occur, it's much more likely that the date will not feature anything upsetting--it could even go well. But people who struggle with catastrophic thinking typically don't even consider that anything but the worst could happen.

Understandably, focusing on the worst-case scenario leads to a good deal of [anxiety](#) and stress--and in this case, could cause the woman to refuse the date.

How Does Catastrophic Thinking Develop?

Living through a traumatic event destroys positive beliefs that people typically have about the world, such as that they're safe from deliberate harm or, after someone else's traumatic event, that "This can't ever happen to me." So it makes sense that someone with [PTSD](#) might fall into catastrophic thinking after [exposure to a traumatic event](#): The trauma is viewed as proof that the worst actually *can* happen--and seen as a sign that *only* traumatic events will happen from now on.

No other possible outcomes are even considered.

As time goes on, catastrophic thinking develops into a day-to-day coping strategy designed to help ensure that the person will never be placed in a dangerous situation again. But having catastrophic thoughts over and over can be paralyzing, leading to extreme anxiety, avoidance, and isolation.

This may have the effect of undermining the coping strategy. How? By bringing back the person's sense of being constantly in danger and not safe anywhere.

You Can Manage Catastrophic Thinking

The first step in managing catastrophic thoughts is knowing when you have them. Self-monitoring can be an excellent way of increasing awareness of your thoughts and the effects they have on your mood and actions.

Next, take steps to move your thinking away from extremes. Allow yourself to consider other options. When catastrophic thinking starts, it may be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- What evidence do I have that this thought is realistic?
- What evidence do I have that it isn't?
- Have there been times when I've had this thought and it didn't come true?
- Do I have this kind of thought when I'm feeling okay, or when I feel sad, angry, or anxious?
- What would I tell someone else who was having this thought?
- Is it possible that I'm having this thought just out of habit?
- What might be a different, more realistic thought in this situation?

Asking yourself these types of questions can help you break the habit of catastrophic thinking by learning to be more flexible in considering your options. You'll know you're succeeding when you feel that 1) you're not as anxious as you were before or 2) your anxiety isn't getting any worse.

It may also help if you practice mindfulness about your thoughts, which can help weaken their power over your mood. It's easy: When you notice that you're having a catastrophic thought, simply view it as just a thought, nothing else--just something your mind does when you're feeling a certain way or are faced with a certain situation. Just a habit.

You may decide to go out and test how well you're managing your catastrophic thinking. Similar to exposure therapy, the idea is to slowly approach the situations that brought up catastrophic thoughts in the past and see what happens now. If you don't have such thoughts, or they aren't as strong and threatening as before, you'll know you're making progress.

Getting Treatment for Catastrophic Thinking

If you have many catastrophic thoughts, you may find it helpful to discuss them with a cognitive behavioral therapist. Cognitive-behavior therapy places a strong emphasis on the thoughts people have and how those thoughts influence their emotions and behaviors. These websites can help you find cognitive behavioral treatment providers in your area.

Source:

Beck, J.S. (1995). *Cognitive Therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.