

THE JOURNEY OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

HEALING SHAME & INTERNALISED STIGMA

Unlearning messages that were never yours to carry

ARTICLE 2 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we'll ever do." — Brené Brown

Introduction

Shame can be one of the most painful emotions we experience.

Unlike guilt, which tells us "I have done something wrong," shame tells us "There is something wrong with me." When someone grows up hearing negative messages about LGBTQ+ identities, those messages can gradually become internalised, influencing how they think, feel and relate to themselves.

Many people describe this as carrying around an invisible weight. They may appear confident on the outside while privately questioning whether they are "too much," "not enough," or somehow less deserving of love and acceptance.

The important thing to remember is this:

- Shame is learned. It is not something we are born with.

If it has been learned, it can also be unlearned.

What Is Internalised Stigma?

Internalised stigma occurs when society's negative beliefs become our own inner voice.

You may never consciously choose these beliefs, yet after hearing them repeatedly they can begin to feel true.

You might notice thoughts such as:

- "People won't accept the real me."

"I shouldn't make a fuss."

"I need to hide parts of myself."

"Maybe life would be easier if I were different."

"I don't deserve happiness."

These thoughts often feel automatic because they have been repeated for years.

They are learned beliefs—not facts.

Where Does Shame Come From?

Shame rarely develops overnight.

Instead, it often grows through repeated experiences.

These experiences might include:

- Hearing homophobic, biphobic or transphobic language.

Feeling unable to talk openly about your identity.

Fear of rejection by family or friends.

Religious or cultural messages suggesting you are "wrong."

Bullying or exclusion at school.

Never seeing people like yourself represented positively.

Sometimes nobody says anything directly.

Silence itself can send a powerful message.

If no one talks positively about LGBTQ+ identities, it is easy to assume there is something that should remain hidden.

Understanding Minority Stress

Psychologist Dr Ilan Meyer developed the Minority Stress Model, helping explain why LGBTQ+ people experience higher rates of anxiety, depression and emotional distress.

Importantly, the model does not suggest that being LGBTQ+ causes poor mental health.

Instead, it recognises that living with prejudice, discrimination or the fear of rejection creates chronic stress.

This stress may include:

- Expecting rejection even when it never comes.

Constantly monitoring what you say.

Hiding parts of yourself.

Feeling pressure to prove your worth.

Carrying memories of previous discrimination.

These experiences can leave people emotionally exhausted.

Understanding this can be incredibly validating.

There is nothing "wrong" with you.

Many of the difficulties you experience may be understandable responses to living in environments that have not always felt safe.

The Inner Critic

Internalised stigma often becomes an inner critic.

It whispers things like:

- "Don't draw attention to yourself."

"People will judge you."

"You're asking for too much."

Over time, this voice can become so familiar that we mistake it for our own.

One helpful question to ask is:

- Whose voice does this sound like?

Sometimes it belongs to a school bully.

Sometimes a critical family member.

Sometimes society itself.

Recognising where these messages came from is often the first step towards letting them go.

Replacing Shame with Compassion

Healing does not happen by arguing with yourself or pretending difficult feelings do not exist.

It begins with compassion.

Self-compassion means responding to your own struggles with the same understanding you would offer someone you care about.

Instead of saying:

- "Why am I still struggling?"

You might ask:

"Given everything I've experienced, it's understandable that this feels difficult. What do I need right now?"

That small shift changes the conversation from criticism to care.

Small Steps Towards Healing

Healing shame rarely happens through one life-changing moment.

More often, it grows through consistent, compassionate actions.

You might begin by:

- Noticing when your inner critic appears.

Challenging beliefs that no longer serve you.

Spending time with people who accept you.

Reading stories that reflect your experiences.

Allowing yourself to receive kindness instead of pushing it away.

Speaking to yourself with greater patience.

Every small act of self-kindness weakens shame's grip.

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to consider:

- What messages about LGBTQ+ identities did you hear growing up?

Which of those messages do you still carry today?

When does your inner critic appear most strongly?

If a close friend shared these same fears, what would you say to them?

Can you begin offering yourself that same compassion?

Key Takeaways

Shame is learned through experiences—it is not an inherent part of who you are.

Internalised stigma develops when negative societal messages become self-beliefs.

The Minority Stress Model explains how chronic exposure to prejudice can affect wellbeing.

Your thoughts are not always facts; many are reflections of past experiences.

Self-compassion is one of the most powerful antidotes to shame.

Healing takes time, patience and kindness towards yourself.

Final Thoughts

Many LGBTQ+ people spend years believing they need to earn acceptance by changing themselves, hiding parts of who they are or becoming easier for others to understand.

The truth is that you were never the problem.

The shame you carry may have developed as a response to painful experiences, but it does not define your identity or your future.

Healing begins when you stop asking, "What's wrong with me?" and start asking, "What happened to me that made me believe I wasn't enough?"

That question opens the door to compassion instead of criticism.

As you continue your journey of self-acceptance, remember that every time you challenge an old belief, every time you respond to yourself with kindness instead of judgement, and every time you choose authenticity over fear, you are rewriting a story that may have been written by others for far too long.

You deserve a story that reflects your worth, your resilience and your humanity.