

*Counselor's Toolbox*

## Three Questions to Help Counselors Identify Shame



by ESTHER LIU

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It is rare that someone identifies “shame” as their presenting problem on their intake forms or during their first session. More often people name depression, anxiety, difficulty managing stress or burnout, relational issues, or an existing psychiatric diagnosis. Yet it is clear that Scripture is filled with references to the experience of shame, and it is also clear that with enough time in the counseling room, shame often emerges as a prominent area of struggle for those who come to us for help, regardless of their initial presenting problem.

The fact that counselees do not identify shame as a struggle may be a cultural phenomenon, but it is also inherent to the experience of shame itself. A defining aspect of shame entails an inclination to hide, cover up, and pretend—before others, before God, and even before ourselves. A struggle with shame may not be obvious, and the person experiencing it may not know they are struggling with it. When I published my devotional on shame in 2022, it was striking how many people remarked,

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“I didn’t think I struggled with shame at all . . . until I read your book.” I have consistently heard the same sentiment at my speaking events on the topic. I have encountered many people who have gone their entire lives without identifying shame as a problem for them until the experience is named and described. It was a struggle they lived with—unnamed, unidentified, hidden from others and even themselves. Yet

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once they saw it, they began to see how much it had touched their lives, their relationships with others, and their relationship with God. And once they saw it, they were clearer on what they needed to do to address it—or more accurately, what God does to address it.

For these reasons, one of our tasks as helpers is to help strugglers name what often remains unnamed. If the presence of shame is negatively impacting someone’s life, we want to be able to see and identify it. If the struggle with shame is contributing to their initial presenting problem, such as depression, anxiety, or relationship issues, then identifying and addressing shame is a key component of how we can help. In this article, I will present three questions helpers can use to identify shame even in situations where it is not named or immediately obvious. I will use a brief case study to illustrate what it might look like to keep these three questions in mind in a counseling situation. Then I will briefly discuss what to do once it is identified.

### **A Case Study: Hazel**

Hazel is a twenty-three-year-old graduate student. She grew up in a Christian household and has been an active member at her church throughout her life. Four months ago, she began counseling with you for her struggle with depression. In the initial sessions, she shared about her persistent lack of motivation and exhaustion. It is difficult for her to get out of bed every morning. She feels a constant gray cloud over her. She can’t shake this deep sense of emptiness.

As counseling progressed, Hazel began to talk about how different she was in high school and college—she was a straight A student and her

schedule was filled with social events, extracurriculars, and time with friends. She was known to be mature in her faith and devoted to Bible reading, serving on the worship team, and participating in mission trips with her church.

She is discouraged at how different life is now. She began missing her assignment deadlines and had to drop two classes that she was at risk of failing. She often withdraws from social events and her church community. It feels like they require more energy than she has, and she feels nagging guilt about it. She feels like she's just scraping by, doing the bare minimum to simply survive. She shares her daily experience of overwhelming emptiness and how doing anything feels impossible lately. In the last few sessions, you begin hearing her worries about failing out of her graduate program altogether, and how her friends started to voice complaints to her that she doesn't make time for them anymore. She is struggling to figure out how to manage her depression—how to feel better and be more functional in life.

Reflecting on this case study, it is clear that depression is at the forefront of her mind. It is also understandably on yours. She wrote *depression* on her intake form and uses that word every session, and what she is experiencing maps onto it. It is important to work together to consider what it means to navigate this well. And it is very possible that one of the ways to help her is to consider what has remained unnamed thus far: shame. Here I will present the three questions and highlight how identifying shame is relevant to help her with depression.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Three Questions**

These three questions are helpful to orient you as you gather information about someone and organize what they are sharing about themselves.

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1. Although this case study explores depression, these questions are also helpful for many other struggles as well: anxiety, anger, workaholism, etc. Anxiety driven by shame may show up in statements like “I don't know if I'll have what it takes to face this challenge (a sense of deficiency); therefore I am anxious.” Anger driven by shame may show up as harsh defensiveness and yelling because correction comes off as criticism that reminds them of their inadequacy. Workaholism driven by shame may show up as a strong need to overcompensate for perceived weaknesses—to strive and toil to be “enough.” This is a small sample of the many issues in which unidentified shame can be relevant to someone's struggle beyond depression.

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