

Intimacy, Shame, and Aging

By George M. Prince

One of the purposes of Mind-Free™ is to create a relationship of *Psychological Intimacy* between each member and the group..."[This] is an elusive and transient state of grace that initially creates great private excitement...When this form of intimacy is maintained, a long term quieting of the inner self occurs. [This] may be nothing less than an avenue to an emotionally rich life." (Levine 1991)

This state of grace"...begins with one person's ability to share her or his inner experiences with another. [This] rests on three separate abilities: 1. the capacity to know what one feels and thinks; 2. the willingness to say it to another; and 3. the skills to express the feelings and ideas with words." (ibid) Mind-Free™ is designed to develop and enhance these three abilities.

"The fundamental processes of mutual relationship [and intimacy] are mutual *engagement* (attention and interest), mutual *empathy*, and mutual *empowerment*. (Surrey 1987). For this "...to occur, one has to tell another about the self and the other[s] have to respond in a manner that conveys a non-critical acceptance of what is being said." (Levine 1991)

"On the way to the solace of being understood, and on the way to the pleasure and privilege of hearing another person's inner self, powerful emotions can be generated in the listener and the speaker. [It] creates a bond...which causes each to regard the other differently...there is a feeling of attachment, a loss of the usual social indifference, a vision of [each other] as special...the emotional power of these changes can be enormous." (ibid) "...all participants in [this] relationship interact in ways that build connection and enhance everyone's personal power." (Surrey 1987) This non-hierarchical model of learning/teaching and growth contrasts with the traditional vertical or hierarchical "power over" model and the outcome in terms of benefits to the members is astonishingly different.

In the case of an aging person an experience like that offered by Mind-Free™ can be critically useful because many, if not all people over sixty are suffering from, of all things, *shame* over the predicament in which they find themselves. On one hand, one must present an assured image to the world to avoid the appearance of incompetence and being 'out of it'. On the other hand, there is the haunting sense of gradual failing—and shame that I, who believed, for so many years it could never happen to me, am succumbing to this state which is so unacceptable to the culture.

This hidden shame—few of us aging youths will admit to any such crazy feeling as *shame* over the natural and universal phenomenon of growing old! This must be repressed. Yet these feelings "can stalk one's being, inflicting an unconscious self-loathing...Unacknowledged shame is a pathogen. It kills. ...it seems to block creative

avenues. It *is* crippling, because it contains not just the derisive accusation that one is [diminishing], ...but the further implication that one is at core a deformed being, fundamentally unlovable and unworthy of membership in the human community. It is the self-regarding the self with the withering and unforgiving eye of contempt. And most people are unable to face it. It is too annihilating." (Karen 1992)

Mind-Free™ is ambitious in aiming to be a catalyst in dealing with such a grave and intimate problem, yet our experience with therapists as participants suggests that this particular mix of creativity and self-disclosure is surprisingly effective in dealing with shame. The rewards for success are great.

The special climate of Experience Exchange helps each member develop tolerance for his or her anxiety and take the necessary risks so that "change [in attitude] or transformation can happen...when a man or woman is in [this] ritual space (inside that ceremonial place, both time and space become changed, different from what they are in " the well-defended everyday world) (Bly 1990).

References:

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Karen, Robert (1992): Shame. *The Atlantic Monthly* February, 1992

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