Episode Book

EPISODE #6566

Why Your Body Blames You Before You Think

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SYNOPSIS

A parent's name pops up in your inbox, your stomach drops, and "I'm so terrible" flashes through your mind—even when you know you did nothing wrong. Neuroscience and affect theory reveal that the order is reversed: the brain's pain system fires first, and self-blame is an aftermarket explanation. Exploring Silvan Tomkins' shame circuit, Donald Nathanson's compass of shame, and early attachment research, this discussion unpacks why pre-verbal relational wiring ignores logic and why facts alone cannot switch off a nervous system trained in childhood.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A message from your mother lands, and before you have read a word your stomach has already voted. That is where we start today, because we have a special prompt from Sam, a listener in Melbourne. Sam, welcome, this one is close to the bone for a lot of people, I suspect.



Herman

It is a good one to get.



Corn

Here is what he sent. When a message from his mother arrives it lands like a punch in the gut. Seeing her name in his inbox physically turns his stomach. For a moment while reading it he thinks, in his words, "I'm so terrible", even though he knows the accusations are false and he has been in therapy for years. He wants to know where that instant self-blame comes from. Body and brain. The shame response, the introjected critic, a nervous system trained in childhood. Why the facts do not switch it off. And what actually helps in that first minute.



Herman

The first thing worth saying is that the punch in the gut is not a metaphor. And the second is that the self-blame arrives after the punch, not before it. That order matters more than anything else we will say today.



Corn

Nobody chooses to feel that way about a name on a screen.



Herman

Nobody does, no. The standard assumption, the one most people carry, is that Sam blames himself because he believes something bad about himself, and the stomach follows the belief. The research says the order is reversed. A physiological event fires first, and the "I'm so terrible" is the aftermarket explanation the mind bolts onto a body that has already reacted.



Corn

The explanation arrives late and files the paperwork.



Herman

That is exactly the image, yes. The foundation for this is affect theory, Silvan Tomkins. He proposed nine innate affects, hardwired, each with its own facial display. Two positive, one neutral, six negative, and shame is one of the six. The point of calling it an affect rather than a feeling is that it is not a conclusion you reach. It is a circuit that fires.



Corn

Like flinching.



Herman

Like flinching, exactly. And here is the structural detail I find most useful. In Tomkins' model, shame operates as an auxiliary to the positive affects. It triggers on any impediment to interest or enjoyment. Not on a moral judgement. Not on wrongdoing. On interrupted connection. Which means a message from your mother, the person who is supposed to be the source of connection, is close to a perfect trigger for the circuit.



Corn

The one person who should open the door is the one standing on the bell.



Herman

That is a better sentence than mine, and I have the citations. By the end of this we should know why the reaction is fast, why it is durable, why insight does not touch it, and what the experimental evidence says to do in the first sixty seconds.



Corn

So if shame is a circuit that fires rather than a conclusion you reach, the next question is what that circuit is actually doing in the body. Where does it start?



Herman

It starts in the pain system. Naomi Eisenberger's work at the social end of this found that the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula process the affective component of physical pain, the unpleasantness of it rather than the location. Social exclusion activates the same regions. Greater activity in that dorsal anterior cingulate correlates with more reported social distress. Same hardware, different injury.



Corn

The stomach drop is the pain system doing what it evolved to do.



Herman

It is. And shame has its own neural signature on top of that, distinct from guilt. There was a voxel-based meta-analysis of seventeen imaging studies that put shame and embarrassment in the left anterior insula and the anterior cingulate, with the shame-specific areas tied to the social pain networks. Guilt, in that analysis, showed up in the left temporo-parietal junction, which is a completely different neighbourhood.



Corn

Different neighbourhood for a different emotion.



Herman

Although, honesty flag, there is a small pilot study, fourteen people, that put guilt in the amygdala and insula instead. The two studies disagree on where guilt lives. Shame's involvement of the cingulate and insula is the more consistent finding across the literature. Where this gets personal for Sam's "I'm so terrible" is the self-referential loop. A systematic review last year, twenty-three studies, found self-conscious emotions consistently implicate the medial prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate, and the default mode network.



Corn

Which is the brain asking what this says about me.



Herman

That is the computation those regions do. Social evaluation, self-referential processing. And that computation is precisely what produces "I'm so terrible." The brain is not checking the accusation against the facts. It is updating the self-model. Facts are content. The shame is a self-model update. They operate at different levels, which is why one cannot cancel the other.



Corn

I read that ahead of you, by the way. The one thing I would add is Donald Nathanson's compass of shame, because it names what Sam is doing. Four scripts people run with shame. Withdrawal. Attack Self. Avoidance. Attack Other.



Herman

The walking encyclopedia gets to rest.



Corn

The scale behind it was validated on over three hundred people, four factors, solid reliabilities, so it is not just a clinician's sketch. "Attack Self" is Sam's script, word for word. The reframe the compass offers is that self-attack is a coping strategy. One of four doors.



Herman

Which raises the question I actually want your answer to. If Attack Self is one door, what would Withdrawal look like in this scene? He is standing there with the phone, stomach dropped, shame fired. What does the withdrawal door look like?



Corn

Put the phone down. Do not reply for a day. Which, notice, is a completely different behaviour from "I'm so terrible" and requires no belief in anything. It is just leaving the room.



Herman

And Avoidance would be not opening the message at all, or answering it with a joke so nothing lands. Attack Other would be going straight to anger at her.



Corn

Notice he does none of the four in a controlled way. The script runs him.



Herman

It runs him because shame is a global emotion in Tangney's sense. June Tangney drew the line people now use. Guilt is specific to an action and motivates repair. "I did something bad." Shame is a global negative assessment of the self and motivates hiding. "I am bad." Sam's phrasing, "I'm so terrible," is textbook global self-evaluation.



Corn

Which is why it feels totalising. There is nowhere to stand in "I am bad." In "I did something bad" there is at least a floor.



Herman

There is a whole floor. And the body keeps score differently too, in a very literal sense. There is a thermographic study where they measured facial temperature patterns, and guilt showed greater arousal in the cheek and mouth regions while shame's arousal concentrated in the eyes. Which is the gaze aversion, the hiding response, written on the face as heat.



Corn

The thermal signature of looking away.



Herman

The same group also found the same scenario can produce guilt, shame, or remorse depending on the valence the person perceives. Appraisal, not the event, decides which emotion you get. Which is a lever, but the appraisal happens fast and mostly



Herman (continued)

automatically.



Corn

Before we leave the body, I want the honest caveat on the record.



Herman

It deserves it. The review that gathered all this says plainly that no evidence for arousal levels of these self-conscious emotions is known to date, and that self-conscious emotions remain underexplored compared to basic emotions, partly methodological, partly ethical, and mostly studied in Western samples. So the neuroscience of shame is real but not mature. I am not going to sell a cortisol story on top of it.



Corn

Good, because the cortisol story is the one everyone sells.



Herman

Everyone sells it and the data is not there to buy.



Corn

One more caveat that I think is only fair to Sam. Nobody has run a study where they measure physiology while an adult reads a message from their own parent.



Herman

Right, the closest experimental analogue is the social exclusion paradigm, where people get excluded in a simple ball-tossing game with strangers on a computer, and even that lights up the pain circuitry. Sam's scenario is that paradigm with the stakes raised to the highest possible setting. We are applying the mechanism, not citing a direct measurement of his inbox.



Corn

That explains the speed. It does not yet explain the durability. Why this particular circuit got wired to this particular person, and why it survives every fact he can bring to it.



Herman

That part starts in development, and the image the clinical literature uses is a small boy scolded by his mother for spilling milk, at the developmental stage where he is just beginning to recognise himself in a mirror. That is the moment self-recognition and shame coincide. The very first experiences of "me" are experiences of "me, seen and found wanting."



Corn

The self arrives already under review.



Herman

It does. And then repetition does the installing. Allan Schore's formulation is the one most clinicians cite: shame is the byproduct of compromised affect regulation resulting from emotional misattunement, unresponsiveness, or inadequate stimulation by primary caregivers. The child cannot regulate alone. If the caregiver is not attuned enough to co-regulate, the child manages somehow, and repeated rejection gets internalised as beliefs of being bad or not good enough. That is the introjected critic.



Corn

So it is not that he heard "you are terrible" and memorised it.



Herman

Sometimes it is exactly that, and those are the remembered ones. But the damaging ones, I have argued before, are often the omissions. The silence that creates a vacuum the child fills with negative self-assessment, because a child would rather be bad than be the reason a parent went quiet.



Corn

A child would rather be guilty than be nothing.



Herman

Patricia DeYoung takes the next step, and this is the sentence I would underline for Sam's question. Internal shamers and shamed selves are, in her words, by definition in a dysregulating relationship. The critic is not a neutral thought. It is a relational pattern that dysregulates you when it activates, the same pattern that formed in childhood. Which is why disputing the content of his mother's accusation does not touch the response. You cannot argue with a relationship by correcting its grammar.



Corn

You can only out-argue a proposition. A relationship you can only re-live differently.



Herman

Paul Gilbert gives the evolutionary frame. Compassion-focused therapy posits three emotion regulation systems. Threat, drive, and soothing. A childhood trained in threat mode leaves the soothing system underdeveloped, so self-criticism runs unopposed, like a parliament with one party. Gilbert's phrase for internal shame is the dark mirror within.



Corn

I have met that mirror. It does not flatter and it does not take questions.



Herman

Now, the closest thing in the literature to a direct answer on why years of therapy have not switched this off. Carol George published a study last year on attachment, shame, and trauma. Traumatized adults ascribed more shame than securely attached adults, and individuals classified Unresolved left shame unremedied. Left as is. George frames early attachment as built on right brain to right brain synchrony between parent and infant, with interactive failures as the hallmark of insecurity and trauma.



Corn

Meaning the wiring was laid down before language, in the channel beneath language.



Herman

And insight is language. That is the whole collision. Attachment-based shame patterns are not erased by insight. They are re-regulated, and under some conditions they are left unremedied. Which is a hard finding and an honest one.



Corn

So let us answer Sam's third question straight. Why does knowing the facts not switch it off?



Herman

Three reasons, stacking. First, shame is an affect, and affects are triggered, not reasoned. You cannot argue a circuit out of firing. You can only change what happens after it fires. Second, the self-referential computation is a self-model update, not a content judgement. The fact that the accusation is false operates at the level of content. The shame operates at the level of structure. Third, the critic is relational, not propositional. DeYoung again. It is his mother's voice in the shape of a relationship, not a claim awaiting contrary evidence.



Corn

Three locks, and the facts are the wrong key for all of them.



Herman

The cleanest statement of the mechanism comes from emotion-focused therapy. The premise, nearly verbatim, is that the most efficient way to change a maladaptive emotion is not through reason or skill learning, but through the activation of other, more adaptive emotions. EFT accesses shame-based emotional memories and transforms them by exposing them to new emotional experience. Assertive anger. Grief. Self-compassion. The change agent is a competing emotion, not a correct fact.



Corn

Which gives us the compassionate version of why the therapy years have not worked, and I want to say this carefully because it is the sentence Sam most needs. Therapy may have given him an accurate map without the new emotional experience. The map is real. It is just not the vehicle.



Herman

That is not a failure of his effort and it is not a failure of the therapy. It is a description of what each tool does. Now, the last question. What actually helps in the first minute. And here we have experiments, which is a relief after all that theory.



Corn

I have been looking forward to this part. Distanced self-talk.



Herman

Ethan Kross and colleagues. Silently using your own name, or non-first-person pronouns like "you," during introspection enhances self-distancing and self-control compared to using "I." In the speech study, people who coached themselves as "you" or by name before a five-minute speech were calmer, more confident, performed better on the observer ratings, three point six versus three point two on a five-point scale, and felt less shame afterward.



Corn

Half a point of performance for a pronoun.



Herman

For a pronoun. And the effect is quantified and replicated. Orvell, Kross and colleagues ran two high-powered experiments and found distanced self-talk reduced negative emotional reactivity by about ten percent for anticipated future events and twelve percent for past ones, across the range of emotional intensities. The benefits extended to emotionally vulnerable individuals, to children, and to over twelve hundred adults reflecting on Ebola anxiety.



Corn

The emotionally vulnerable clause is the one that matters for Sam.



Herman

It is the whole clause. This is not a technique for the already-resilient. And the same lab drew the reflection versus rumination line. Self-distanced reflection on negative experiences produced lower negative affect at follow-up than either self-immersion or distraction. Same content, different stance. The words do not change. The pronoun changes.



Corn

Talk to yourself as a friend, because apparently the pronoun is the whole trick.



Herman

The pronoun is the trick because it recruits the machinery you already have for other people. It is trivially easy to give Sam advice. Give it to yourself and you must first escape being yourself, and the pronoun is the escape hatch.



Hilbert

That all checks out.



Hilbert

But the first minute is not the hard part. The hard part is the forty minutes before you open it, when you already know it is there. Herman knows what I mean by the waiting. I keep a separate phone in a drawer that exists solely for my mother's messages. Checks in on a schedule I have never told her about. Cannot tell you the schedule either, Corn, before you ask, because if you say it out loud it stops working.



Corn

I was not going to ask. I was going to let you keep the schedule.



Hilbert

Good. She does not know the phone exists, mind. She believes she is texting my regular number. Has been receiving her messages on a phone she does not know about for some years now, and I consider that arrangement basically the most emotionally mature thing I have ever done. The drawer phone sitting there with one message on it, and the specific sensation in the chest knowing it is waiting. Worse than the message itself. The message is over in a minute.



Corn

The waiting is unpaid overtime.



Herman

The forty minutes before is interesting, actually, because it is the anticipation, and anticipation is pure appraisal with no content at all. There is no accusation in a closed envelope. The circuit is firing on the name alone.



Hilbert

On the drawer alone, some weeks.



Corn

You could move the schedule, surely.



Hilbert

No. The schedule is the only thing between me and checking it eleven times an hour, which I did once, before the drawer. Never again.



Corn

Fair enough.



Herman

The drawer phone raises the recovery question, though, and that is the finding I wanted to land. There was a study of adolescents with post-traumatic stress, just over fifty of them, where the complex trauma group showed significantly higher heart rate in the recovery phase, after the stressor was over, alongside higher subjective stress, guilt and shame. The problem is less the spike than the failure to come back down.



Corn

The body never gets the all-clear.



Herman

It does not, because the all-clear was never modelled for it. Which reframes Sam's question entirely. What helps in the first minute is really what helps you come down.



Corn

Which is where the honest limits come in.



Herman

They do. No head-to-head trial compares distanced self-talk against self-compassion against physiological downregulation for acute shame in the first minute. Distanced self-talk is the most directly applicable evidence, but it measures reactivity reduction over reflection tasks, not a sixty-second rescue protocol. The broader clinical support for shame specifically sits with compassion-focused therapy and self-compassion work. There is a recent review on acceptance-based and compassion-focused approaches that recommends what it calls compassionate language, emphasising empathy, non-judgmental support, and validation. Similar findings in dermatology, of all places, where chronic skin patients carry a lot of shame.



Corn

So the recommendation to Sam is real but honestly sized. In the minute itself, the name. Address yourself as you would address a colleague. "Sam, here is what is happening." The deeper work is not factual, it is experiential, and the marker of progress is not a smaller spike but a shorter recovery.



Herman

And one misconception to name before we go, because it is the one almost everyone holds. People believe the self-blame comes first and the body follows, and therefore that arguing with the self-blame should stop the body.



Corn

The order is backwards. The affect fires first and the "I'm so terrible" is the explanation bolted on after. You cannot litigate your way upstream of a reflex.



Herman

And its corollary, that years of therapy failing to switch it off means the therapy failed or Sam is not trying. Unresolved attachment leaves shame unremedied even with an accurate map. Re-regulation, not erasure.



Corn

Where that leaves me is this. If the change agent is a competing emotional experience rather than a correct fact, then the project is not winning the argument with his mother's message. The project is changing what happens in the sixty seconds after it lands. The drawer phone and the schedule, whatever we think of them, are one man's answer to that exact question. Sam gets to build his own, and the recovery phase is where to build it.



Herman

Shorten the come-down, and the spike stops being the story.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop at the desk, as ever, for producing the show. And thanks to Sam in Melbourne for sending this one in. If it hit close to home for you too, a review wherever you get the podcast helps other people find the conversation. If you want more of this, try episode sixteen, On Deepfakes, SynthID, And AI Watermarking. This has been My Weird Prompts, where no question is too obscure and no rabbit hole too deep.



Herman

See you soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

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