The Role of Shame in Alcohol Dependence; Narratives from those in Recovery

Dr Francesca Sawyer, Dr Kate Gleeson and Dr Paul Davis. University of Surrey.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No conflict of interest


Brief Introduction and Rationale

A literature review suggested that despite the reported link between shame and addiction (Potter-Efron, 1987), our understanding of its impact on recovery is relatively unknown; in particular how those with alcohol dependence experience shame.

Whilst shame is found to be a hindrance to recovery (Wiechelt, 2007) and increases vulnerability to becoming dependent on addictive substances (Dearing et al., 2005), it has also been found that addressing shame may also enhance recovery (Luoma et al., 2012). This suggests that we need to develop a better understanding of people’s experiences of shame in recovery.

This research aimed to analyse the stories of those in recovery from alcohol dependence and explore how shame was experienced and talked about in personal narratives.

Results: Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How was shame was experienced?</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having an addicted parent</td>
<td>'because of her addiction you know, I couldn't bring people home…we didn't have the niceties of life'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling inferior</td>
<td>'I thought I was different to other people. I thought that other people were better than me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core shame</td>
<td>'I just had a sense of shame of who I was, I just didn't think I normal or up to scratch'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How was shame described during recovery?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How was shame described during recovery?</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healing through hearing</td>
<td>'hearing other people tell their stories…it's not just me that’s done that. It doesn't make it right, but it’s suddenly not as shaming it’s more normal'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging and accepting shame</td>
<td>'being able to talk about shame and articulate it …. It releases it, it ceases to have power over you'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving back</td>
<td>'part of my recovery and staying recovered involves passing on and helping others'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results: A Proposed Model of Shame

- Foundations of shame
  - Feeling of inferiority-self is inadequate and not worthy
  - Disconnection-not belonging, not fitting in and feeling different
  - Absence of secure base/addicted parent

Alcohol Dependence (drinking as functional for masking feelings of shame)

- Overcoming shame in recovery
  - Develop a trusted and safe secure base in AA

- Accept and acknowledge shame

- Heal shame through hearing other stories and connecting to them

- Start to see self as worthy

Giving back by sharing own narrative to help others

Conclusions

Shame was understood to have a role in the development of alcohol dependence and in recovery. Whilst shame often maintained dependence because drinking alleviated distress, shameful behaviour as a result of drinking did not appear to maintain drinking. Instead participants experienced ‘core shame’ - a painful, internal experience that developed prior to dependence. During recovery, participants reported the importance of acknowledging these experiences in a safe space that allowed them to construct an understanding of their shame and subsequently heal it.

This model was developed to conceptualise shame, as described in the narratives.