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No Shame

Conversation with Richard, Celia and Anna

Anna: *"When we talk about the not enoughs, "I'm not pretty enough, not rich enough, not present enough with my kids," the root cause of the not enoughs is shame."*

Richard: *"You see, I'm afraid to go there. I don't want to be known that I'm not enough. So I just block it. So you try and bury it as much as you can. So then you get more isolated and alone."*

I'm Richard Fox from Messages of Hope. No one is immune from shame. Today, Celia and I are talking with counselor Anna Doecke. She's going to help us understand what shame really is and what we can do about it.

We've all had times where we've done something embarrassing or made a mistake and felt guilty about it and wanted to disappear into the background, but shame is something different to that.

Celia: There are a lot of things I feel guilty about, but it's a lot harder to think about shame.

Richard: It's for this very reason, we don't identify it in ourselves because we live in it. It's kind of like an old daggy coat, that we just get used to it and go, "This is part of me."

Celia: For me, it was very much tied up with appearance, which is totally not logical, but the shame that I feel if I eat that thing that I shouldn't, because it's been drummed into you as a child, what you should be and what you shouldn't be and if you're not measuring up, then you shame yourself.

Richard: It's more than being embarrassed.

Celia: Yeah. It's that sense of, "I've got no control. I'm not a good person. It's something wrong with me."

Anna: So we let shame dictate how we live or how we think about ourselves. It makes us hide, keeps us quiet. It makes us talk about it in a different way instead of naming it as shame. So we call it guilt. All the people who have researched shame come up with the exact same result, and that is that we all have it, none of us want to talk about it, and the less we talk about it, the more we have it.

Celia: Yeah. Whereas it's easier to talk about things you feel guilty about. As a working mother it was very much the things that I felt like I couldn't do well enough. I felt guilty because I wasn't being this for somebody else or I wasn't good enough. And I can talk about that because I suppose you connect with people who feel similarly like that. And so you feel okay to talk about the things you feel guilty about, but shame-

Anna: So the way to identify any areas that we have shame in is anything that we feel like we're not enough of. So "I don't feel like I'm not pretty enough, not rich enough, not present enough with my kids." When we talk about the not enoughts, the root cause of the not enoughts is shame.

Richard: You see, I'm afraid to go there. I don't want to be known that I'm not enough. I don't want to be told I'm not a good person. I don't want to be told that stuff. So I just block it. I think then there's that fear then of being vulnerable because you don't want that stuff revealed. So you try and bury it as much as you can. So then there's a fear of actually opening up and you get more isolated and alone.

Celia: You don't want anyone else to know.

Richard: That's right. Because you think you're the only one. And that's, I think, how shame really grabs you. It makes you think that you're the only one in the world dealing with this and it's all on you. You're the problem. It's not even the act or whatever. It's you're the problem.

The words shame and guilt are often used to mean the same thing, but they're actually very different, life-changing different.

Celia: Why do we need to identify whether it's guilt or shame? Does it matter?

Anna: It matters hugely. Shame makes us hide, and the more we do that, the worse our self-talk is. So if you're feeling shame about something and you don't talk about it, then it can turn into depression, violence, bullying, addiction, suicide, eating disorders

Celia: Negative behaviours.

Anna: If you see life where you might feel guilt about it, then it's going to create healthier relationships because guilt causes us to take action and make amends. You're going to be drawn to actually having a conversation with your partner or confessing to your boss that you made a mistake, and that will then create change and help you to move forward in your life instead of hiding how you feel through unhealthy behaviors.

Celia: That's really interesting as to why you go one way or the other.

Anna: So all of us default, usually to a shame self-talk shame response or a guilt self-talk guilt response, or the third option is blame. Where we either blame others, or we blame the world, or we blame the government, or we blame the cold. Like, today I was grumpy, and it's like, "I'll blame the cold." And so we tend to sit in either of those three categories.

Celia: But what makes us default to either one or the other?

Anna: That stuff is usually based on upbringing and how we were treated, how we were disciplined. So there's heaps of research about disciplining kids from a guilt perspective as opposed to a shame perspective. So saying, "It's not okay that you stole that," would be guilt parenting, as opposed to, "You're a stealer," is shame parenting. And so you tell a kid that they're a stealer from age five, of course they're going to grow up believing that to be true, and then their actions will follow through from that.

Richard: Yeah, because they just believe they're not good enough for it.

Anna: That's right.

Richard: And I think, see, to me, there's a key in there about what shame is, and that's something that's done to you. Whether you accept that or not, I suppose there's also a choice.

Anna: Yeah.

Richard:

But to have someone call you that, like name calling or an act on you, there is that shaming of you that happens.

Anna: Yeah. That's right.

Celia: And then you start to believe it.

Richard: Especially when you hear it a number of times. And that can be even if you're brilliant at something, some people could shame you to bring you down out of competition, or spite, or all sorts of things.

Anna: It's amazing what we can feel shame about, when other people could look at your situation and go, "Seriously? Why do you feel shame about that?" But that's because their shame triggers have nothing to do with that. They have something to do with other things. This is the definition of shame, "The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed, and because of our flaws then we believe that we're unworthy of love and belonging." (quote from Brene Brown)

Celia: Whereas we know it's okay to be flawed. We all are.

Anna: Correct. So you know that logically, though. But what about emotionally?

Celia: But it's also that belief, and that's what is so powerful, I think, to me about God is that, yes, we are flawed, but he loves us anyway. Whereas getting that unconditional love elsewhere, we find that hard to believe. And I suppose people find that hard to believe also that God loves us unconditionally.

Richard: Do you struggle to believe that you're loved? Coming up, you'll hear how love changes everything. God truly loves you and can help you break free of shame.

I think the love thing is how we deal with it. When you know that you're loved, it can break that. So if a parent who comes along and says, "I love you, and no matter what you have done," the freedom and the peace that that gives. And what also I think it does is it builds a level of trust for that person who's feeling the shame to be vulnerable.

Celia: Yeah. So it's okay to make mistakes.

Richard: You can hear yourself take a breath and go, "It's okay to be vulnerable." Shame traps us in that fear of, "No, I'm not going to let this out." And that's where, I think, guilt can transition into shame because you feel guilty, and then it starts building into shame. And it's until, I think, we feel safe in that place that we can be vulnerable. And I think you're right, when we hear that God loves us unconditionally, the God who made us, gives us life, even sees all our deepest secrets even more than what we do, yet still chooses to say, "I love you."

Celia: Chooses us.

Richard: Yeah. And that's why I think we see that when Jesus came, he made himself vulnerable and he humbled himself to the point of a cross. God didn't need to do that for himself.

Celia: So what do those words mean, "Humbled himself to the point of a cross"? What does that mean for me?

Richard: Well, a cross is the ultimate symbol of shame. So in its time, the cross, the way the Romans used that, was on a hill, exposed...

Anna: For everyone to see.

Richard: ... you're naked, you are shamed. You are the worst of the worst. No one wants to end up there. And so for Jesus willingly choosing that, to go there for us, to show, "No, not even this can break me and break my love for you," in a way he's demonstrating and also taking that shame on us and saying, "You can be vulnerable with me. Give it to me. Give whatever's locking you up and holding you back, making you depressed, bitter, angry," that list that you gave before, Anna, "give that to me." And I think then there's a freedom because it's his, and we can be vulnerable.

And so I think first steps for me in trying to break shame is actually self-talk, talking to myself and saying, "God, all right, this is being revealed to me. It's pricking my conscience in the middle of the night." But also praying to God and saying, "Help me deal with this. Take this from me and give me your peace." And then knowing that he comes with his promises and says, "I forgive you. I love you. And you are mine." And not that we're his possession, not even just a friend. Not even a best friend. He's better than a best friend. He actually makes us like a child.

Celia: It's a real bond, isn't it?

Richard: He makes us this real family space so that he says, "No, I care for you, and I love you." And I think then that gives us the power to then be vulnerable ourselves and share even just the tip of the iceberg of what we're experiencing with someone. And then someone else goes, "That's me too."

Anna: Yeah. "I could never have told anyone that, but now that you're telling me, I guess I can."

Celia: Yeah. Isn't that funny? It's hard to talk about, but when you find that place of safety to share that vulnerability, that's when you can almost start addressing it and healing.

Anna: Absolutely.

Richard: You've been listening to Messages of Hope. For more about breaking free of shame, go to messagesofhope.org.au where you'll find videos, podcasts, and articles to help you. Or for a free booklet call 1800 353 350.

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