

Finding Agency and Seeing Shame

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Agency and shame may not seem a likely pairing at first. But then you might remember someone saying to you, "It's not that hard to follow through, I did it." "Come on, you're just lazy, anyone could do that." "You've got to figure out how to take care of yourself around this!". Or perhaps you see others making decisions and taking action in an area of life that seems stuck for you.

The ability to identify your needs and take effective action to meet them is one way to define agency. Access to agency depends upon a variety of conditions:

- The ability to identify your needs
- A sense of worthiness around having your needs met
- An ability to act for long term gain rather than short term comfort or pleasure (this in itself is a complex skill)
- Confidence that you will succeed
- Resilience in the face of failure and fear
- Access to resources /support in one's personal life and in the systems of society
- Willingness to seek out resources / support
- Knowledge / creativity about possible courses of action
- Relevant Skills

All these things are not necessarily so obvious to someone who has not had modeling and support in cultivating them. If you are someone who struggles with agency, then shame may tell you that you are broken in some way. If you are someone for whom agency comes easily, then you may view others who struggle with it, as lazy or stubborn.

The truth is that access to agency is complex and varies widely from person to person. A lack of agency could point to a need for healing or support in any of the items in the bulleted list above or something else entirely.

Because of this complexity it is easier to trigger shame around agency than you might think. For example, when you casually offer a suggestion to your brother that he follow the arylurvedic cleanse that you have done several times, you are assuming he has the same agency you have regarding health. When he receives the information about the cleanse and all it involves, it may trigger shame for him. It is not that he doesn't want to make an effort about his health. It's that he doesn't have access to agency in that arena. Not understanding this fully, he may simply withdraw into shame. When you compare yourself to what others are able to do and you don't do, the same dynamic can occur. Shame doesn't motivate or inspire change in behavior. it is only meant to direct your attention to something you want or care deeply about.

Accessing agency and true change requires effort, support, skill, wisdom, and compassion. Sometimes this means engaging in deep healing work and skill building. Other times, agency is most supported by systemic changes in the culture at large. While shame focuses on what's wrong and has you asking questions that lead to more shame and blame, mindful inquiry into what would provide more access to agency, for yourself and others, will yield a way forward - one specific doable action at a time.

Practice

Take a few minutes now to reflect on agency in your own life. In an arena where you access agency easily, identify which of the bulleted items above are present for you and anything else you think helps with that access. Then examine a place where you have less access to agency. What supportive aspects are present and what's missing?