

# Where You Are

## S5 Episode 7 — Talking About Shame, Guilt & Parenthood

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Today we live very much in a society that normalizes perfection, when what is really more normal is making mistakes, right? Like it's struggling, it's being confused, it's trying to figure things out, and we end up feeling ashamed for what is really quite common.

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**Char Black:** This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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**Bryn Askwith:** And I'm Bryn Askwith. As a parent or caregiver, have you ever been in a store when your child starts to have a meltdown and you notice complete strangers giving you judgmental looks? Or do you have days when you feel like you're failing as a parent and just can't get anything right? Those small but significant moments can leave you feeling embarrassed, and even questioning your parenting skills. That feeling that comes over you is more common than you think, and that feeling could be shame.

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**Char Black:** In our episode today, we explore the concept of shame as an emotion that can be experienced by parents and caregivers, the difference between parent guilt versus shame, what a parent and caregiver can do to build resilience to shame, and how this approach can build connection with your child. Let's get into that conversation. Our first guest today on the podcast is Dr. Angela Low, researcher, educator, and mom. Currently an adjunct professor at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Low works with family support groups, early childhood educators and school teachers, sharing research and practical skills on child development, with the goal of developing programs that promote resilience and well-being. Welcome to Where You Are.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Thank you. I'm so glad to be here. Call me Angela. Dr. Low makes me feel like I need to be someone else.

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**Char Black:** Okay, sounds good. Angela, why is talking about shame relevant to parent and caregiver well-being?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Oh, we don't talk about shame enough. I think it's so important to talk about shame because it's one of those really powerful emotions that can disrupt connection and

relationships, and can really get in the way of us finding ease, finding joy, finding compassion with ourselves and the ones that we love. It's that feeling that we get when we have failed or have not met expectations because we feel that there's something wrong with us because we're not good enough. And it's really important to talk to parents about it because it turns out the parents are especially vulnerable to feeling shame. Now, there's lots of reasons for that. Shame and guilt, like many emotions, they play an evolutionary role, like how fear keeps us from doing dangerous things so our species can survive. Shame and guilt actually wire into parents to get them to keep their kids close and safe and well, so that our species can survive.

So these emotional systems, they were very useful back in the time of our ancestors, but the ways that we live today has changed and these emotional response systems have pretty much remained the same. What this means is for parents, when it comes to anything to do with their kids, parents can often feel guilty or ashamed even when there's no need to. For example, some parents might feel like a bad parent for dropping their kids off at a daycare or heading out for a date night, or even going off to work even if their child is in good hands. In our modern society today, there are pressures and expectations that are higher than ever for parents to be perfect. And because there parenting advice available 24/ 7 online, it can feel like we might always be bumping up against something else that we're not doing that we're supposed to be doing for our child.

I think today we live very much in a society that normalizes perfection, when what is really more normal is making mistakes, right? It's struggling, it's being confused, it's trying to figure things out, and we end up feeling ashamed for what is really quite common. And when a person has had repeated experiences of shame, like parents today might do, shame becomes a habitual response where ordinary events can cause people to feel shame. So what all this means is that parents are more shame- prone, everyday situations, the doctor's visits, trips to the grocery store with their kids can become spaces of fearfulness and anxiety. For many parents, there might be constant worry or anticipation of being judged and being exposed and feeling the shame again.

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**Char Black:** I really like the acknowledgement that is evolutionary, that we feel these things, so it normalizes shame because there are such negative connotations or stigma about shame. What I really like also is when you're saying there's confusion when you're a parent, you don't know what you're doing initially and you can't be perfect, and so I really love what you said there. I'm wondering, can you further explain the difference between the concepts of shame and guilt?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** I'll start first by saying that these two terms are commonly used for each other. It's common for people to say guilt, but they mean shame or to say shame when they mean guilt. Guilt is the feeling that we get when we've done something wrong, but we know we can do better. So guilt is very focused on the action that we know we can change. Shame is when we feel that a part of ourselves that makes us unworthy has been exposed. Maybe to make it

easier, guilt is, "I feel bad because I did something wrong, but I can do different." And shame is, "I feel bad because this shows who I am and this shows that I'm failing." Guilt can be motivating and helpful. Guilt is actually one of those... What is called approach- oriented emotions that drives actions towards repair, towards growth. Guilt drives apologizing, seeking help doing something different. Shame on the other hand, is usually debilitating. We feel exposed for our failings and it makes us want to run away. It makes us get defensive.

So studies have shown that these feelings actually co- occur, that we experience them at the same time. And it's really helpful to know this because when we know that both shame and guilt are in the room, then we can actually choose which one to focus on. We can listen to what we're saying to ourselves and we can choose to focus on the action instead of beating ourselves up.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Thanks so much, Angela. I'm really excited to bring into the conversation one of our parent guests who's joining us today. I want to introduce you to Sarah, a mom of two that keep her very busy and on the go. Thanks so much, Sarah, for making the time to be here with us today on Where You Are.

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**Sarah:** Thanks so much for having me.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Sarah, we've both been listening to Dr. Low talk about shame and parenting. I'm wondering, why do you think parents experience shame in parenthood?

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**Sarah:** I'm just still processing, I think in part, the difference between guilt and shame because I realized I think I had some of those collapse in my own brain. Parenting is really deep work. Shame is always right there below the surface because parenting is when we're touching some of the most intimate and sensitive places that we have.

I find I sometimes see myself as a child in my children just as I'm very conscious that at the age that I'm at right now, I have very vivid memories of my parents at that age. So I think a lot of shame in connection to parenting probably comes up in that true shame definition that Angela laid out for us because it's dealing with self- worth and those parts of ourselves that I think are certainly shaped during childhood.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I think that is really insightful and quite spot on. I think our kids are, as we look at them, especially as they grow... We feel are little reflections of ourselves. As we both were listening to Dr. Lo, you had mentioned there was something about parent guilt versus shame and you were processing that resonated with you. Just wondering if you wanted to elaborate on that?

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**Sarah:** There's something about the guilt vein that feels a little bit more generative in the sense that shame really shuts down lessons or threads or pieces that I think parenting can teach us, that our children can teach us. I know I'm in a particular parenting moment with a lot of teenage and pre-teenage energy, and when I think about that rebel impulse, that needing to push back on parents, if you're reading those sorts of moments through a shame lens, which sometimes I do, for sure, it can be a real knock on yourself and your self-esteem. And I think my reactions are probably harsher and maybe more survival mechanism based when I'm reacting from that. Whereas I think the guilt piece gives us a little bit more of a chance to listen to what our kids might be saying or what they might be exposing. There's an invitation to humility in guilt, to listening and to growth that maybe is not there with shame, which is unfortunate because in both cases, we're suffering, but at least there's value with the end of the guilt path.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I think that's a really powerful reflection.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Sarah, I love the invitation, the humility. It's quite common, I think, that not only do we feel shame for who we are, but because our identities and experiences are so tied to that of our kids, when we see them not meet expectations that we've known to be important, we can feel shame too. And then feeling shame can cause us to respond or react in a way that isn't always helpful. Quite often, there are two types of responses that have been found in the research. One of it is externalizing. So sometimes we want to put the blame and shame very quickly on other people and we get defensive, we get angry at others, which is maybe because it's easier than being angry at ourselves. And other times, we internalize the shame, we blame ourselves, we think, "I'm a bad parent, I'm failing at this, I'm not good enough." And it makes us want to disappear, to run away, to disconnect and hide.

And so shame is one of those really intense emotions that when it's triggered, it puts us in the fight or flight mode quite quickly. And all this can sabotage our ability to act thoughtfully, to act with our better selves. And when we feel guilty, we're more able to see the possibilities of change. Even as we feel guilt, we can maybe feel that invitation to humility. We can feel like we feel bad, but we could do something different, and apologizing might be the first step. But when we feel shame, it's hard to access the part of our brain that allows us to make good decisions. And in any case, neither of these impulses are helpful to our relationship with our kids, to repairing situations or to learning and growth as parents.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Sarah, I just wanted to ask, are there any specific moments where you felt feelings of shame and wondering, can you give an example of what's been helpful in those moments?

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**Sarah:** If I'm really honest, if I'm having a moment of shame in parenting, I don't know that it's in that moment that I turn it around. I feel like sometimes the helpful piece will come a little bit after. The most shameful moments take a minute for me to process. And often, it's because I've locked in on whatever happened in that parenting moment as being some sort of public assessment of me. And I feel like unfortunately, until I can spend a little time there and see what is happening for me, what did that trigger or what am I trying to work through here? It's only after that step that I'm actually able to fully empathize with what the experience would've felt like or played out for my child. I think that's one thing that I'll note about myself, that in moments of shame, I'm actually quite far from my child's experience of that moment, and I'm more focused on myself.

It sometimes feels like you're almost on autopilot or something. Some of those moments are maybe the ones that I'm least actually present and in control of and I'll just snap into reacting and saving face and whatever. And it's not until later that I'll come back into myself and have to explain to my kid because it's not maybe the most me version of me.

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**Char Black:** You are listening to Where You Are. I'm Char Black. Find more information and free resources about coping with feelings of shame as a parent or caregiver on our website at [keltymentalhealth.ca/parent-and-caregiver-wellbeing](http://keltymentalhealth.ca/parent-and-caregiver-wellbeing). So Angela, what can parents do to address their experiences of shame and what can parents and caregivers do for each other as a community?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** I think it's really, well, helpful to listen to this podcast, to learn about shame and to know that as part of parenthood, shame can be a constant companion, shame or guilt. And that sometimes when we feel shame or we feel guilt, it's because it's so normal to feel this way, that it could be an opportunity to just pause and go, "What am I feeling? What is it telling me? And is it really true?" Maybe that's a moment to stop and think, "It does feel bad and it's normal for me to feel bad because I'm hardwired to want to be with my kid." And so just to really stop the feeling in its tracks, even taking a little bit of time to just do that and move on can alleviate a bit of the stress that sometimes shame or even guilt can bring.

The other thing I'd say is normalize struggles. I was speaking to a parent the other day who's just had a baby and she said, "I feel like I failed childbirth." It broke my heart because I was like, "You can't fail childbirth." But she had a really difficult time that ended up with a C-section, and immediately what she felt was she should have done better, and it was devastating. So I told her that, "You've nailed childbirth, you've given birth to a baby despite it being a difficult journey." And I think that shame comes from when we think that other people are doing it so well and that there must be something wrong with us because we can't do this. We can't meet these expectations of what it should look like, what childbirth should look like, what parenting should look like, what going camping with kids should look like.

And I think that as parents, we could normalize struggles. We could speak to how it is difficult, how it is messy, how we do make mistakes, we screw up sometimes. And by speaking to it, we can take away some of the power of shame because maybe then you realize that you are not alone, that this mistake that you've is a pretty common mistake and there are ways to mitigate it. So I think that can help shift the focus on the self like, "I'm not good enough," to just, "I've simply made a mistake and I can do something different."

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**Char Black:** Thank you, Angela. I really like how you talked about just being aware of this experience happening to you is already a first step and normalizing the imperfections of life. And I think those two are very tangible things for parents listening. Sarah, I just wanted to ask you, listening to what Angela just said, is there anything that resonated with you there and anything you wanted to add?

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**Sarah:** Oh, it resonates, for sure. I think the normalization piece is really key. It's tough if as a parent, you're always competing against a benchmark of perfection. It's so punishing. I think the idea of minding your benchmark, what is it that you're aiming for? Because I think the external benchmark is probably not helpful. You're wondering, "What does this look like right now? What are other people saying right now?" Something like social media, you get these parenting blogs or everything's perfect. And then there's these other ones that are more about gentle parenting stuff, unparenting stuff, revolutionary parenting stuff. And I think you just have to be really mindful that you're choosing something that is not only healthy for your kids, but healthy for you and your own internal conversations.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** And if I can respond to that as well. Sarah and I have been parenting alongside each other for a good while, and I'll say that connection is a good antidote to shame. So when you're feeling down on yourself, you're getting everything wrong, and there will be those days, I think reaching out to a friend and talking to them about it, or even not talking about it, but just connecting with someone so you don't feel isolated and alone.

And I think offering self-compassion as well. And I'll say that this is what Sarah does for me. She reminds me to be kind to myself, and I think that's it. Just being really aware of the voices in your head, what's happening when you're feeling down on yourself in your role as a parent, and shifting that focus again from, "I'm feeling this, I'm a bad mother," to, "This is really hard right now. I'm doing the best that I can and tomorrow I can try again."

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**Char Black:** Well, I'm happy for both of you. I'm happy that you have each other. That's how I feel too. Both Bryn and I have two kids and it's like safety in numbers. We can talk to each other about things that we're embarrassed about or, "What am I supposed to do here?" And Bryn always helps me too.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Aw. Thanks, Sarah. I feel the same way.

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**Char Black:** Angela, I'm curious about if there were any interesting findings in your research around different cultures experiencing shame differently or gender differences, any interesting things that you'd want to share through your research?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** That's a whole week's retreat-

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**Char Black:** Okay.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Just to talk about that piece, but I will say that women tend to feel more shame. This is a finding that has emerged again and again. It does seem to be a gendered piece, and there are many reasons for that. I think there is this dominant narrative that mothers are meant to be always present caregiver, the best caregiver. Lots of the attachment research have been done on moms. So there is this piece that places moms as the main attachment figure, which is not necessarily true. And then of course, there's the media piece. I think for so long, we've seen images used in advertisements, for example, of the ever- nurturing mother, and moms are meant to be feeling very fulfilled as well. And so not just that they're there, but I think there's this narrative that mothers are supposed to feel very fulfilled by their role of mothering. And so all that means is expectations are way higher for moms.

And I think you bring up a really interesting piece around culture. I am still looking into that, but I will say that I found that some cultures, it's a bit more common to use shaming as a way to guide behavior. It's very complicated, but I reflect on my own personal experiences as a Chinese kid growing up in a traditional Chinese family, and then now being a Chinese mom that it's almost like shame can sometimes be quite motivating. If I feel shame, then I want to do better for everybody because we're more of a collective community, but I have to be really careful not to shame my kids. That's the other piece that's complicated because we tend to parent as we were parented and deviating from that path sometimes is very difficult.

I'm still learning about this. I think these are great depths to shame research that much as I know a lot of it, I think the more I hear from parents, the more I reflect on my own life and experiences, the more I'm learning about how multifaceted shame and guilt really are.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I feel like we could bring you back for a whole other podcast just on that one alone.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Yes.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Looking forward to that.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Ask me again in a year.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Angela, we're wondering if there are some resources that you can recommend to parents and caregivers who are looking to better understand shame and parenting and ways to address it?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Yeah. So I have a website that I've put together for this very purpose, it's [www.understandparentshame.com](http://www.understandparentshame.com), and I'd say that's a good starting point. You'll see parents speaking to shame and I've tried to unpack what shame is and how we can help. One of the resources I'll recommend is talk by Brene Brown. She studies shame and she speaks to this construct called a shame resilience, that we know that it's impossible to live a shame-free life. Shame is just baked into the ways that we're human. So then the solution really is to build resilience to shame, to become aware of shame, to know when it starts rearing its head, and to have these strategies that we can kick in for ourselves and for others to start to mitigate this shame that's happening.

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**Char Black:** On our podcast, we always want our guests to share their words of wisdom. So I'm wondering, Sarah, what would you say as your last words of wisdom for our listeners today?

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**Sarah:** I would say parenting shame is really hard. It is probably tempting to turn away or stuff it. I think maybe it offers an opening or an invitation. It can open us in ways that are really painful and that choosing to pursue those and stay with them can be a life-changing and immensely rewarding. That maybe in its highest potential, it's some sort of gateway into healing.

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**Char Black:** Great. Thank you, Sarah. And Angela, what are your words of wisdom that you wanted to sum up for the listeners today?

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**Dr. Angela Low:** I think talk about shame. Talk about shame because there is great comfort to ourselves and other people in having a word that we feel describes what we're feeling and knowing the others feel the same way. And that when we normalize these experiences of struggle, of failing, of making mistakes and trying again, we can take away some of its power. And the other piece I'd say is connection. Connection is the antidote. So reach out, speak to people, talk to people even when that's the last thing you feel like doing. Because I truly believe



that we were never meant to parent alone. We were always meant to parent in community with other people. It's not all on our shoulders. It is a collective responsibility. So build your village, reach out to your village in moments like this.

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**Bryn Askwith:** A big thanks to you both so much for joining us on the podcast to talk about this topic today. We hope we get a chance to connect a little bit more in the future and looking forward to some additional research and conversation around this. Thanks, Angela. Thanks, Sarah.

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**Sarah:** Thanks for having us.

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**Dr. Angela Low:** Thanks for having me.

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**Char Black:** Thanks so much for listening today. Bryn and I are grateful to have you join us each episode.

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**Bryn Askwith:** If you enjoyed the conversation today, leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now. Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Center. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham, with audio engineering by Luke Batiot. Audio production by JAR Audio.

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