

by Anna Pasternak

**A**S WE sit in a circle, some of us are weeping in empathy and others are open-mouthed in shock as we hear stories of sexual abuse, obesity, childhood neglect, addiction, self-hatred and self-harm.

Freed by our confessions, raw feelings of not being good enough or not belonging — to our family, friends and even society — are rising to the surface. As a therapy veteran, little fazes me, yet I've never experienced such a dark, uncomfortable atmosphere of humiliation and misery as 20 strangers discuss our different feelings of shame. Because shame is something we rarely address.

There's a saying that we are as sick as our secrets and most of us are adept at hiding our shame. Even the word is powerful. It suggests degradation and regret. No wonder it's taboo.

So why have we — a group of professionals ranging from a twenty-something female photographer to a 50-year-old male banker — paid £380 for a two-day residential course called Shame On You at the seaside in East Sussex? Quite frankly, who wants to delve into the murky recesses of their shame?

The reason, according to course leader and spiritual psychotherapist Andrew Wallas, is that, by definition, shame is hidden and denied. And it is unconsciously running and ruining our lives.

'Shame is toxic — it transforms joy to misery,' says Wallas. 'Shame arises from the core belief that our very being is flawed.'

There is a distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt is "I made a mistake, but I can do something about it". Shame is much more insidious and destructive. It tells us: "I am a mistake and there is nothing I can possibly do about it."

The most corrosive aspect of shame is the sense of utter powerlessness you feel in its grip.

The first exercise of the course was to pick a partner, or buddy, at random. Mine was an obese single woman in her 50s, who had once been a successful racehorse trainer. A physical disability had meant she'd piled on weight, leaving her unable to pursue her passion for horses. She was beautiful but stuck, bloated by sadness.

We had to prompt each other with the phrases 'I am ashamed of...', 'I am flawed because...', 'I have always hidden from...' and 'I am a mistake because...' and then write down each other's intuitive answers.

Encouraged not to think, but to let the answers bubble up, what surfaced was shocking to me.

I had thought I was *au fait* with my issues of shame. According to Wallas, 'individuals who appear to be outgoing, with high self-esteem, can also be secretly shame-bound'.

That's pretty much me, so I went on the weekend course assuming I would shed light on the shame I feel about being a single mother and having had failed past relationships.

And I was unnerved to discover I also felt overwhelming shame about my career. Time and again, my answers addressed an abuse of my talent. I felt self-disgust about the waste of my potential and how endless career rejection had led me to opt out from pursuing my dreams.

I have always wanted to live in Los Angeles, so when a major career opportunity in Hollywood fell through I was devastated.

**B**UT Wallas pointed out bluntly that it had been me who had sabotaged this unconsciously through a hidden belief that I did not deserve major league success.

I found it fascinating that after such an apparently simple exercise I felt huge discomfort and anxiety churning in my stomach. Acutely aware of a weird stickiness, like a physical manifestation of all my negative and shameful thoughts, I had an urge to shower or at least wash my hands. Wallas encouraged me to stay with the uncomfortable sensations. 'Shame feels like an inescapable curse,' he told me.

'But if we can allow ourselves to fall into a place of our deepest woundedness, by fully experiencing it and no longer fighting it, then it will shift.'

His exploration of shame began with his extensive work with addiction — a 55-year-old former alcoholic, he has been sober for 27 years. He left a hugely successful City career in his late 20s to pursue psychotherapy and a spiritual life, after feeling unfulfilled by the pursuit of money and burnt out by excess and ambition.

'Underneath all addiction is a pool of shame,' he said. 'Somewhere beneath our busy minds we are constantly attacking ourselves and judging other people, which comes from a sense of being flawed and broken.'

It was incredibly powerful to share my shame with the group. I found myself sobbing, racked with guilt over my feelings of wasted potential. We were told to hold eye contact with others in the group when we were speaking, which made me feel fragile and exposed, but also that I was being understood and somehow released.

Ironically, I felt ashamed to moan on about my career disappointments after another woman — a stunning artist in her late 40s — had spoken hauntingly and heart-rendingly about being raped.

Failed relationships. Wasted careers. Lost looks. Many of us are plagued by secret regrets and self-hatred. ANNA PASTERNAK tried a radical solution...

# Can I unshackle myself from shame?

But because shame is such a delicate, emotive subject, we kindly developed a strong, safe bond among the group.

As I looked around, I felt moved that I was in the company of good, courageous people, all working hard to get their lives right. This crucial feeling of safety is due to Wallas and his intuitive course facilitator, life coach Brigitte Sumner.

Wallas, who is known as the Modern Day Wizard, is part intellectual professor, explaining the internal and external dynamics of relationships on a flip chart, and part spooky emotional scanner.

He has an uncanny ability to sense emotional blocks and asks penetrating questions that unearth destructive patterns of behaviour.

He explained to me that my shame over my unfulfilled professional potential is due to a buried belief that I don't deserve success.

I'm more comfortable with a sense of failure. According to Wallas, it stems from major disappointment in early childhood when I felt I was not good enough.

He uses a combination of teaching, exercises, guided meditation and rituals in his work. For one ritual we

had to write on coloured cards five areas of shame in our life and hide them under a carpet. Later, we symbolically burned them.

'One of the mind's roles and functions is to maintain the status quo,' he said. 'The importance of ritual is that it bypasses the normal cognitive processes and touches us and transforms us at a very deep level. This creates existential shift.'

That night I went to bed paralysed with fatigue. Uncovering shame was arduous, but we all agreed that it felt like an uncomfortable relief to admit your shame. It's like finally telling the truth about a lie that you have told to yourself about yourself.

**T**HE second day felt redemptive. We did exercises in looking at and experiencing forgiveness, in which we had to see how far we had walked away from self-forgiveness in our lives.

Wallas explained: 'In my experience, forgiveness is one of the least understood areas in our culture.'

'There is a lot of resistance to it.

We get so invested in our stories of abuse, injustice or whatever that it gets to the point where we feel that if we let our grievance go it makes whatever happened OK to us.

'So it's hard for the human mind to understand that whatever we experienced wasn't OK, but it is OK to let it go. Forgiveness is the most healing energy there is.'

Tracey, 46, a teacher suffering from life-long alopecia, was asked by Wallas not to wear her wig for the course. This took immense courage.

'That shame has been in my bones and in my blood my whole life,' she said. 'There aren't many places you can go to where someone is really going to listen to your pain in an authentic way.'

'Andrew Wallas sees you to the bone and, with eyes of compassion, he holds a gentle mirror up to you that you can look in or not.'

'I've had opportunities to shed this shame before, but I've never felt safe enough to do so.'

'It was so liberating to be seen with no hair and expose myself to all those judgments and realise it's just me finding fault with myself.'

'It was a complete gift for me to put an end to my torment. With

alopecia, you have to face the whole idea of your ugliness. I really felt my beauty for the first time.'

Jonny, 38, a chiropractor, agreed that the feelings of safety allowed greater emotional release.

'I was impressed by the non-judgmental environment in which I could really explore the feeling of shame,' he said. 'Being supported in discovering and facing my personal shame of "not belonging", of always feeling an outsider, and sharing that feeling within the group was an epic relief.'

'Breaking through to the confident feeling underneath and finding an inner security about

who I am is deeply transforming.' I left feeling lighter and limitless in terms of what I can achieve. Since the course, I've been aware of feeling far greater self-worth and optimism, and a weakening of my relentless, redundant self-attack.

'Shame creates certainty,' said Wallas. 'We absolutely convince ourselves, without doubt, that we can never be enough.'

'But when the shackles of shame are dismantled, we are free to realise our full potential.'

■ The next Shame On You course, in Oxfordshire, is this weekend. [thomoderndaywizard.com](http://thomoderndaywizard.com), tel: 0845 625 0650.

