



SHAME IN MEDICINE: THE LOST FOREST

FACILITATOR TOOLKIT

One of the most effective ways to dissipate shame is to talk about it – and yet, the topic can be difficult to broach. Below are some recommendations for how to organize a conversation about shame, using our audio documentary series as a jumping-off point. We welcome you to use any of these suggestions as you see fit!

Feel free to use our episode discussion guides [here](#).

Before Getting Started

Choose your topic:

Decide ahead of time how narrow or broad you would like the focus of the conversation to be. Will this be an open-ended discussion on the topic of shame in medicine? An opportunity to discuss one particular episode, story, or theme? All of these approaches have their merits, and you may be open to a number of different outcomes or directions for the conversation. But it can be helpful to reflect ahead of time and be clear about your hopes for the gathering, and what attendees can expect, so that when they arrive everyone's on the same page. It can also be helpful to be aware of any recent events or issues in your environment that might influence the conversation. Your context and vision will drive decisions around audience, location, and more.

Questions to consider:

- Close your eyes and imagine the gathering is already over. How do you feel? What does success look like?
- What are your goals for this gathering?
- How would you like to support your participants?
- Are there any local issues or factors that might influence the conversation?



Choose your audience:

Consider the size of your audience. A casual gathering of 5 people is very different than a formal panel in front of an audience of 300. Also consider the composition of the audience. Limiting attendance to students or trainees might allow for more honesty and transparency – but fostering conversations across the medical hierarchy may also be essential. As you consider the size and make-up of your group, be very thoughtful about how you will ensure psychological safety and trust among participants (see more on this below).

Questions to consider:

- Do you envision a small, medium, or large event?
- Who is the audience? Students? Trainees? Faculty? A mix? Others?
- How might the presence of different groups of individuals influence the discussion?

Choose your location:

Think about a place that can be supportive of the type of conversation you're hoping to have. For casual and/or intimate gatherings, consider cafes, bookstores, parks, or other community locations. Many of these sites have private rooms available for hosting events. You can also consider hosting in someone's home or backyard. For formal gatherings, on-campus conference rooms or lecture halls may be what is available. You might also consider a virtual event, to allow more flexibility in attendance and participation.

When choosing a location, consider the accessibility of the space, the access needs of your participants, and make the accessibility of the space clear to potential participants. If in a public space, consider how participants may feel talking about shame with strangers around.

Questions to consider:

- Make a list of your favorite community gathering locations. What do you like about them? How could they foster the kind of conversation you hope to have? Will they be private enough for people to openly talk about shame?
- How big is your group? Some locations are better for smaller vs larger groups.
- Do you want food to be a part of your conversation? There is something about "breaking bread" together that can help a group to bond. We recommend at least water and some snacks. How does this impact your choice of venue?
- What kind of diversity are you hoping for? Make sure that the venue you choose will facilitate inclusiveness and make all your invitees feel comfortable.



During the Conversation

Create psychological safety:

The topic of shame can itself be shameful, which makes discussing it difficult. Some people may not feel comfortable discussing the topic—especially their own experience with the emotion—and others might find themselves feeling blocked or defensive. This might be especially true if there is a power differential in the room (e.g. boss/employee, director/trainee).

Here are some tips on how to create an environment of psychological safety to facilitate an open, authentic conversation.

Start with introductions:

Introduce the facilitators, and if the group is small enough, consider allowing a few minutes for everyone in the audience to introduce themselves. If you choose to do an "icebreaker" question, go for something open ended which builds personal context.

Sample icebreaker questions: Where do you feel most at home? Who is someone that inspires you? What's the story of your name? Do you prefer oceans or mountains, and why? What is the worst reality TV show you've ever watched?

For icebreaker questions, it's all about grounding the group and beginning to establish a space for listening, so it's okay to keep things light.

State a goal or intention for the gathering:

Let your audience know what you're hoping to get out of the gathering, and consider inviting the audience (or panelists) to share a bit about what their goals are in attending.

Acknowledge the sensitivity of the topic:

Acknowledge that shame is a difficult topic to discuss, and encourage the group to arrive with an open mind, patience for their colleagues, and varying levels of comfort/experience in talking about shame. It is also important to normalize it. As you acknowledge its difficult nature, it can be helpful to also frame it as a normal human emotion that 1) is stigmatized in our society, and 2) is something we can and should be able to talk about.



Set conversation agreements:

If the group is small enough, you might invite the audience to design its own parameters for the conversation. Be sure to establish agreements around trust and confidentiality that make sense for the format (e.g. not sharing anyone else's story outside of the space or de-identifying people in conversation). For more tips about how to establish these "basic conversation agreements," check out **this resource** from the organization Living Room Conversations.

Get embodied:

Consider a grounding meditation before and/or after the event to help audiences transition into a mindset of openness and receptivity and prepare themselves for whatever emotions may come.

Sample meditation: Take a few deep breaths. Feel your body in the chair, or your feet on the ground. Rub your hands together. Rub them fast enough to generate some warmth. Place your hands over your eyes and feel the warmth on your face. Now shake your whole body out.

Discuss:

Start with broader, less personal questions, and let the conversation evolve toward whatever level of intimacy or vulnerability feels right. The clearer the original invitation was, the more organic the discussion will be, because people will be on the same page about what to expect. As facilitator, be ready to chime in and serve as a guide, but also don't be afraid of silence and be careful not to monopolize the discussion.

Questions to consider:

- Do you want to play an audio clip or entire episode out loud, have people listen to episodes beforehand, or incorporate any other creative materials? Other works of art inspired by the topic, such as film, podcasts, photography, poetry, music, etc. may be helpful for grounding the conversation.



Facilitation Tips

- Some people will want to participate but may not be prepared to talk about their own shame experiences. To feel like a meaningful participant, they may be pressured to share. You can address this at the outset by encouraging people to participate in whatever way is most comfortable. This may include sharing their own stories, offering general reflections, or recounting how they supported other people experiencing shame. It can also be helpful to remind participants that it is 100% okay to just listen.
- In moments of discomfort or tension, return to your body by taking a deep breath or pressing your feet into the ground. Everyone is here because they wanted to dig into these topics together. Discomfort is a sign that you're in uncharted territory!
- Be mindful of the power dynamics in the room. If one person is dominating, consider explicitly inviting others who haven't spoken yet to contribute their voices: "Is there anyone we haven't heard from as much that wants to share?"
- If you find yourself taking up a disproportionate amount of space as "host", try stepping back. You may even want to name that dynamic explicitly: "I feel like I've been talking a lot. I would love to hear from other people!" If you say something like this, make sure you actually do talk less.
- If it feels right, try asking specific follow-up questions to people to get beneath opinions and closer to primary emotional experiences: "How did you feel when that happened?" "Can you say more about X?" "It sounds like you have a strong opinion on that. Where do you think that opinion comes from?"
- Sometimes a simple observation will be even more effective than a question at prompting elaboration. "It sounds like that experience still brings up emotion for you now." Let the person sit with that and respond how they want.
- When contrasting opinions or perspectives arise, often intentionally naming them can be incredibly fruitful in deepening the conversation: "It sounds like R sees it this way while T sees it that way. Am I right about that? Can either of you say more about that?"

- At times, you may find your own emotional reaction. If you feel like you can, name this explicitly and try to reflect on where this is coming from. When held with self-compassion and awareness, being open and vulnerable paves the way for others to be as well. If you find yourself triggered, angry, or frustrated by what others say, try to reconnect to curiosity. What about their perspective made you angry? What questions do you have for them?
- Keep track of time. You may even want to ask someone else to do this as "timekeeper". However you choose to do this, try to stick to the timing everyone initially agreed upon. If anyone wants to, they can stay longer, but no one should feel pressured to do so.
- At the end, offer participants the opportunity to follow up with you or encourage them to engage with a trusted confidant or a professional (i.e., therapist) if they need to process the topic further. If you sense that a participant is distressed by the discussion—and if it is appropriate given your role—consider checking in with them at some point afterwards. Offering participants a way to provide feedback about the session (ideally anonymously) can be a very helpful mechanism for future improvement and identifying any distress that may not have been apparent during the session.

Additional Resources

Bynum, W.E., Adams, A.V., Edelman, C.E., Uijtdehaage, S., Artino, A.R., Fox, J.W. Addressing the elephant in the room: a shame seminar for medical students. *Academic Medicine.* 2019;94(8):1132-1136.

Bynum, W.E., Uijtdehaage, S., Artino, A.R., Fox, J.W. The psychology of shame: a resilience seminar for medical students. *MedEdPORTAL.* 2020;16:11052.

Dolezal, L., Gibson, M. Beyond a trauma-informed approach and towards shame-sensitive practice. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 9, 214 (2022).

Case, G.A., Pippitt, K.A. & Lewis, B.R. Shame. *Perspect Med Educ* 7 (Suppl 1), 12–15 (2018).

Christine Sanderson, Counseling Skills for Working with Shame.

