Chapter 1
Shame, Guilt and Anger
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“We cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.”
Albert Einstein

My interest in anger, guilt and shame began when I discovered that the reason why it is often challenging to deal with these emotions has to do with how they are connected to a certain way of thinking. This way of thinking is a part of most contemporary cultures and can be seen as “a culture within a culture”. Behind this thinking there are feelings and needs that we sometimes forget, because we focus more on who is right and who is wrong than on what we need. By becoming aware of what we need we can discover new ways of thinking and relating.

The assumptions this book is based on are:

- Shame, guilt and anger are life-serving signals.
- We have misinterpreted these signals.
- We need to reinterpret them if we want to be able to manage them in ways that work for us.

As long as we are looking for someone we can blame our emotions on, we will miss the important messages in them. We need to realize that we have misinterpreted shame, guilt and anger and make new interpretations of what they want to tell us. When we listen for what needs are behind them, they are no longer as challenging to handle. The moment we connect with the needs behind these feelings they are transformed and this makes it easier for us to connect with others and ourselves.

What makes the exploration of anger, guilt and shame interesting is that they are so intimately associated with learned ideas about what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, abnormal and normal. One can see these emotions as “residuals” from a way of life that is not adapted to the way life works. At the core of these residuals are natural feelings and needs.

Because we have been trained in a way of thinking that is not in
harmony with life itself, anger, shame and guilt inevitably become such residuals. They are all useful signals to us in living and it is important to become aware of them, because they help us to become aware of the systems that have created them. In this way they also show us when, and in what way, we are affected by these systems.

We may think it is up to each individual to learn how to deal with these emotional states. Or maybe we blame these emotional states on “the system”. What I am most interested in is that they can give us information on how we can make changes and start living in ways that do not have these “residuals” in the form we see them now. How can we build an internal climate, and extend this to our families, schools and other social structures that serve life fully? A first step is to develop a language that focuses on people’s inner processes, rather than on what somebody is doing rightly or wrongly. This will make it easier for us to live in a way that takes everyone’s needs into account.

Our Way of Thinking Creates Problems

“Anger can be valuable if we use it as an alarm clock to wake us up—to realize we have a need that isn’t being met and that we are thinking in a way that makes it unlikely to be met”. Marshall Rosenberg²

Many times we see anger, shame and guilt as a problem, or something we want to get away from. Imagine a person who has the habit of smoking in bed. Since he cannot stand the noise from the smoke alarm every time his bed catches fire, he moves from house to house.³ We act in the same way when we see anger, shame and guilt as something that we at all costs want to get away from. Instead of focusing on trying to get rid of them, we can relate to them as an internal alarm system that tells us “there is a fire” somewhere. They signal us that we need to be extra alert, not to get rid of the feelings, but rather to listen to what they want to tell us.

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³ From the article Anger and Domination Systems, by Marshall Rosenberg. www.cnvc.org
Anger, shame and guilt are signaling us that we have needs that are not being met. The thinking that stimulates these emotions rarely helps us in meeting the needs the alarm is signaling us about. It rather distracts us, as we begin to look for who has done wrong, rather than to focus on what we need.

Shame and guilt are stimulated by the idea that there is something wrong with us, or we have done wrong and ought to have behaved differently. When we get tired of feeling guilt or shame, we change the focus to finding faults in other people and then we get angry. Adrenaline starts to flow in our body and we might feel vibrant and alive. It can make us believe that we are in deep connection with life, although we are not even connected with our needs. Because we are missing out on what we need, there is a great risk that we will act in ways that will not only not serve others, but in the long run are also detrimental to ourselves.

When we’ve been angry for a while, we often switch back to guilt or shame, especially if we have learned that there is something wrong with being angry. If we have been threatening, demanding, and in other ways showing what we think is wrong with another person, many of us will start being ashamed and start blaming ourselves. We judge ourselves for behaving inappropriately, immaturely, carelessly, or tell ourselves that we are stupid and selfish.

When we have “turned on ourselves,” long enough and become exhausted by thinking that we are bad, the pendulum swings back again, and we direct ourselves outwards with our judgments and demands. It becomes a vicious circle that is difficult to get out of.
A United Minds survey of shame shows that we often feel a lot of shame after having been angry.\textsuperscript{4} Especially when the anger has been directed at our children. The author Alfie Kohn captures this parental wavering when he quotes a parent who says, “first I am so permissive that I hate my children. Then I become so punitive that I hate myself”.\textsuperscript{5}

Most people would be surprised if they began to examine exactly in what way anger ignites violence between people. They would discover that the anger, despite its explosiveness - and contrary to what they might have thought - is not what most often leads to violence. Behind people’s acts of violence, there is always an experience of humiliation and that some of our common human needs, often of respect or acceptance, have not been met. Nobody explodes into violence without having experienced being “disrespected” in one way or another. We do not know how to endure the shame and humiliation, with the result that violence seems to be a good option. War is not the expression of explosive angry outbursts but most often a strategically played game. Officers who act impulsively and in strong anger are usually demoted or punished. Men who beat the women they live with often plan when and how to do it. Research on domestic violence shows that rarely is this violence the result of a sudden outburst of anger.\textsuperscript{6}

\section*{Natural Versus Cultural}

Young children are innately vulnerable. This innate natural vulnerability can be seen as a thermostat for our interdependence with our environment, that reminds us of the vital needs of mutual respect, integrity and community. Our vulnerability makes us aware of both internal and external factors and helps us learn to live in harmony with other people. We can see this innate vulnerability as a kind of fine-tuned shame.

When we feel shame, muscles in the neck and shoulders weaken. This leads to the head and eyes turning down and away, the neck and

shoulders sagging. Shame can also lead to heat flashes in our face and all over the body - as well as redness in the face. With strong shame our stomach tightens. We can respond in many ways to these effects on our system. Sometimes we laugh nervously, and sometimes our mouths get stuck in a nervous smile. At other times it is hard to find words and our mouths dry out.

When shame switches to anger, the bodily reactions change. We get tense jaws, tense facial muscles, an even redder face, a higher voice capacity and tense, restrained lips. The physical reactions depend partly on how much anger is held back and how much of it is expressed.

In contrast to anger and shame there are no common physical reactions when we say that we feel guilt. The psychologist Silvan Tomkins has conducted research on human emotional expressions and did not find anything specific that happens in the body when we feel guilt.\(^7\)

The word guilt is used to describe a variety of emotions that have different effects on our bodies. When we feel guilty, there are many commonalities in our way of thinking. We think that we should do something other than what we are doing and that if we do not change our behavior, we deserve to be ashamed. Since the word *should* often leads to guilt, we can use it as an eye opener to realize that we are carrying guilt at a certain moment. It is when our natural vulnerability is merged with our culturally influenced way of thinking that shame becomes uncomfortable. Maybe it’s time for us to recapture the core of interdependence that exists in shame, guilt and anger, instead of letting them lie in the way of our connection with each other and ourselves!

Shame chokes us, so we say nothing when we need to. Guilt scares us, and we do not do what needs to be done. Anger blinds us so that we do things that we later regret.

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7. Tomkins used to call guilt, moral shame. He made the assumption that guilt had its source in shame. Nathanson, Donald L (1992), *Shame and Pride*. W.W. Norton&CO.
An Approach for Change

In this book, I use an approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to get closer to understanding shame, guilt and anger. This means that I use the assumption that behind every human action there is an attempt to meet a need. Even when people blame, threaten or use violence, we can see them as attempts, albeit tragic ones, to meet needs.¹

We can use NVC to transform shame, guilt and anger into emotions that will more easily help us to get in touch with what we need. Instead of trying to avoid these feelings, we can connect them to our needs and thereby get in touch with what is going on within us at a deeper level. When we do so we find more ways to deal with shame, anger and guilt than to shy away from relationships or to blame ourselves or someone else. Neither do we need to try to get rid of the feelings by rebelling against them.

There are many ways to approach shame, guilt and anger, and NVC is what has so far given me the most hope. What makes me hopeful, is that with NVC, I can find the natural driving forces behind the anger, shame and guilt, and do not get stuck in talking about right or wrong. To do that, we need to be willing to explore our view of human nature. Chapter three therefore describes how the different elements of NVC can be used in this exciting exploration.

The following poem speaks to the vulnerability that arises when we are making new choices, such as the ones I suggest in this book. I also enjoy the reminder of how embracing shame gives me the power and possibility to be real!

¹. Isdal, Per (2001) Meningen med våld. Gothia förlag. Isdals definition of violence: “Violence is any action that is directed towards another person, which hurts, scares, violates or abuses another”