

Ep 41_ Healing the Trauma of Chronic Shame

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SPEAKERS

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Hello and welcome to Second Adolescence. For those of you who might be new to the show. Second adolescence is a podcast all about queer healing and liberation and the experience of Second Adolescence. You might be wondering, okay, so what is second adolescence? Well, I work with second adolescence as a sort of developmental life stage we queer people navigate in adulthood after growing up in an anti queer world. I'm your host, Adam James Cohen, a human who went through his own second adolescence, and a psychotherapist who spends much of his days talking with other queer folks about theirs. After an extended summer break, we are back with a new season of the show. And this season is going to be a little bit different. The first 40 episodes of second adolescence featured a new guest each week being interviewed about their own story, letting us all into their own journey of second adolescence, of healing of liberating themselves from the limiting structures that many of us were raised within. And these individual stories are going to continue to be a core component of the show from now and into the future. But also this season, I'm gonna be bringing in some experts and artists and healers to talk about things that are helpful for all of us on our own journeys of finding our most free and liberated selves. And you're also going to hear a bit from me, like here on today's episode, it'll just be me talking to you. I've been asked by a good number of listeners to hear more from me to elaborate more on what I talk about when interviewing guests and what I share on Instagram. And so yeah, I'm gonna start doing that this season and in future season. So each time that I come on for the solo episodes, I'm going to be sharing about a particular aspect to our experience as queer people seeking to grow and heal. In our second adolescence, I'll be pulling in influence from my work in my psychotherapy practice information informed by the Greater psychological healing and social justice communities from common themes woven through many past podcast guests stories, and my own personal experience as a queer person in this world, navigating life and trying to heal. So let's dive into today's topic. As a psychotherapist, I talk every day with people about their internal worlds. And for so many of the queer people I've worked with over the years, I consistently see among them, high rates of inner criticism, anxiety, both social anxiety and generalized anxiety, fears of intimacy, hyper fixation on body image, perfectionism, and what I've noticed for most of these folks is that when we go underneath those symptoms, to explore the root of them, we tend to always get to a common place. And that is shame. This silent shame that many are often unaware, they are

still carrying. Many of us love Brene Brown, she's this notable shame researcher. And I think that she offers a really great definition for shame that I think could be helpful for us to ground this conversation in today. She describes shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. Let me say that one more time. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging? I mean, this right here is so a part of the queer experience in our culture. And in our world for far too long, queer people, we no shame for many of us, it is just sewn into the fabric of our being. Growing up in a world that makes us feel like we don't belong will do this to you. And many of us grew up and during so much shame to a point that we suffered through what I call chronic shame, which is the experience of enduring repeated infliction of shame consistently over a period of one's life. Shame for many of us started as children with the feeling of that unexplainable differentness about us, that's something I hear so often from queer people, is maybe our first notions that we might have queerness within us, when we look back at our queer journey, a first place that starts before we often have that conscious awareness of our queerness is this, this feeling of different this this internal sense, even at that unconscious level that we were not like our peers or we're not like how we quote unquote, should be, most of us grew up in a culture of heteronormativity and cis normativity white supremacy, like so many systems of norms that just perpetuated these very limited norms for who the ideal person was. And regarding queerness you know, many of us are exposed to consistent direct and indirect messaging of anti queerness from the world around us on both the micro and macro scale comments made by peers on the playground or in the school halls or things family members said at the dinner time. For things we saw or didn't see in media, you know, films, television, etc, words shared by religious or community leaders and legislation that was proposed and upheld. Each time our younger selves were exposed to these messages, shame very likely got activated within us even before we had conscious awareness of our awareness. But then that dial really got turned up for those of us whether in adolescence, maybe even childhood, or even kind of in adulthood, when we started to have this conscious awareness of queerness, whenever we were exposed to any of these messages of anti queerness, gosh, yeah, that dial just got turned up even more. And that shame became something even more complicated because it likely also came with this feeling of panic or fear. Like for you the listener, can you remember this feeling like can you remember what it felt like at different points in your life when you were younger, when someone either said something anti queer directly to you, or around you, you know that feeling in your body. Each time that happened for our younger selves, it just laid another layer of shame onto us. And this was happening day after day, week after week, year after year throughout childhood adolescence and into young adulthood. For folks with other aspects of identity is marginalized in our culture, this shame was compounded even more. And shame is an insidious emotion that when experienced often can have such damaging effects. And a main impact of chronic shame is in what it does to people's core beliefs about themselves. You know, our core beliefs about ourselves are a set of deeply held assumptions about who we are, how we are perceived by others and our place in this world. And these inform everything, they become the foundation from which we view ourselves, how we show up in relationships, how we choose to engage or disengage within the greater world. And so for folks, and during chronic shame, our core beliefs got messed up, and are what led to those symptoms I talked about earlier that I see so many queer people coming into therapy wanting to experience relief from that inner criticism, that anxiety that perfectionism struggles in relationships, it all can come back to shame. In you'll see the title of this episode is called the trauma of chronic shame. And this is intentional and speaks to a perspective on the queer experience that it really seek to invite all of us into. I propose that growing up enduring chronic shame is an experience of trauma and not only trauma, but a particular class of trauma called complex trauma. Okay, so what is complex trauma? Well, complex trauma differs from acute trauma, which results from a single incident a

one time experience of something deeply distressing, disturbing or harmful. complex trauma, on the other hand, really results from this long term, repeated exposure to traumatic experiences. And complex traumas are often interpersonal in nature, meaning like another person or persons caused them or are a part of them. And for this reason, these experiences can severely impact how we relate to and with other people in ourselves. And trauma of any kind alters the chemistry and structure of the brain and disrupts our neurological development and our identity development, which in turn really dramatically affects our social and emotional development, particularly when we experienced complex trauma in childhood and adolescence, you know, these are times when that brain is in the thick of critical development, it's so vulnerable to the impact of trauma. And so for many of us, I really propose that growing up queer in an anti queer world is an experience of complex trauma, that chronic shame is an experience of complex trauma. And what I'm talking about here is really just this basic level of simply being a queer person navigating an anti queer world. And what happens on purely the psychological level, I'm not even talking about the added forms of trauma that far too many of us unfortunately, also experienced when growing up, you know, sexual abuse and violence, physical abuse and violence, social abuse and violence. What I'm seeing is that the trauma of chronic shame, even for the queer person who stayed closeted, and no one knew or ever caused direct, intentional, anti queer harm to them, like even for them, they are survivors of complex trauma. The toxic shame caused by internalized anti queerness is the weapon of traumatic harm that we all injured. And so I invite all queer people to experiment with identifying as survivors of this kind of trauma, see how that feels. And there's a couple reasons for this. First of all, this framing can really allow other people to better understand what our experience was growing up in an anti queer world, really just how difficult it was, but it also gives ourselves some much needed compassion to hold and validate what we went through. why it was so hard, and how it might still be affecting us. Being able to have this kind of compassion to ourselves is truly what I believe to be a critical step in healing from chronic shame. And this, I believe, is the ultimate guiding task and our second adolescence, chronic shame is the core psychological wound of a queer person growing up in anti queer world, and is the underlying thing we have to address in our second adolescence. And so Okay, what does it mean to heal from chronic shame? And how do we know if we are still suffering from its effects? Great question. Sidenote, where's the other person? I'd love to interview someone. This is so silly that I'm just talking at you. But I'm pretending that I see you all in the room around me. And I'm looking around, so we're just going to roll with it. But yeah, so this question about how do we know if we are still suffering from chronic shame? Here's something I want to invite you to think about. We know chronic shame infects our core beliefs about ourselves, making us believe we are, you know, some version of not good enough or wrong or not okay, in some way. As humans, we have this innate desire to adapt to our circumstances in order to survive. This is just built into our evolution. And so when we experience trauma, like chronic shame, the mind seeks to help us adapt to this in a way that helps our survival. And so we develop various kinds of unconscious survival strategies that our mind thinks will keep us safe. Okay. So for example, in response to enduring the traumatic impacts of chronic shame, those survival strategies are going to be some attempt at protecting us from being perceived by others as the thing or chronic shame, fear as the most unworthy of love and belonging. And so in response to chronic shame, and in defense of that we might in turn develop such things as a strong inner critic inside our minds, you know, this way of thinking about ourselves that we'll beat up on ourselves often because it wants to warn us from doing things now, or in the future that will cause embarrassment, ridicule or rejection. Or perhaps we may develop a highly anxious mind and nervous system, because we inherently don't feel safe and being on guard always on the watch for something bad to happen protects us. Or we may seek to counter our internalized shame by seeking perfectionism you know, getting those straight A's in school, getting into the best college getting the best job having the best body all in an effort to give ourselves the value and

validation. Our shame makes us believe deep down and we don't possess or in relationships, we may unconsciously keep ourselves out of intimate close relationships because we hold a deep seated belief that we are unlovable and instead of facing the potential for rejection, we keep ourselves safe by keeping others out. To either these feel true for you, or have they felt true for you at any point. Each of these are our minds attempt to protect against the deeply internalized limiting belief that our younger selves developed as a product of anti queer induce chronic shame. And in healing from chronic shame, and unlearning these internalized shame beliefs, this is the first step to really identify the survival strategy that we perhaps learn to use in response to shame and explore how that may still be showing up for us today. And then we have to ask ourselves, okay, how much do we still need this survival strategy? How much is it still serving us to have this intact and in this process, you might find it, it can be a little complicated, because very likely this survival strategy, if so intact, is both serving us and keeping us from the life we want on the other side of things. So it's a mixed bag here. But if we want to get to the point of wanting to let go of this survival strategy, a next step will be to first give space to compassionately understand what the strategy was trying to do for you. In a way I invite people to do this is engage with this strategy, almost as if you were talking to a friend you know, it can be helpful to internally or even externally, if you're wanting to just talk aloud, communicate with this strategy and reflect your awareness of what it was doing for you. So here, let's use my survival strategy in response to chronic shame as an example, what I did, I learned to keep myself quiet and small, out of fear of people seeing the true me, which I believed would be something they would reject. I mean, yeah, woof. What a party it's been with that but work in progress. I'm feeling great about where we're at. But in working with this strategy, and really looking at okay, that my strategy was to keep myself quiet and hidden and small, I might create space, whether I'm writing a letter to this strategy, or I'm verbally kind of talking aloud, or thinking in my mind, I might first really let it know what it's done for me, so I might let it know how I understand how it was trying to help and how making me believe that I needed to stay Quiet, hidden and small was its attempt at sheltering me from even more painful shame. And so we're reflecting its intention. But then after we do that, we can let the strategy know, we actually don't need their help anymore. So I might say, I know you were trying to protect me and I needed protection then. But I'm letting you know now that things are actually different for me today, I don't need your protection, I've learned that it is safe. And okay, and actually important for me to not hide to not stay small, I can be seen now. And it will be okay. It might actually be good for me to be seen. And so I'm going to be letting you go. But gosh, I thank you for what you've done. For me. That's, you know, that's just one example. But that's a general approach to how we might be in relationship with these survival strategies. And working with them in this way can be a really big part of our own healing. And yeah, often working first with them can then help us discover more quick more clearly more clearly, lol, more clearly what specific internalized shame base core beliefs about ourselves, the strategies we're working from, so like, the strategy is on the surface level, but then underneath that might be this core belief about ourselves. And that core belief that getting to this, this is where we really want to ultimately go. And because that's the thing, we want to eventually unlearn and let go of this kind of core shame belief about ourselves, you know, in common, limiting shame beliefs I see for folks are such things as if people knew me, they would reject me, or it is unsafe to let people in to know who I really am, or simply, I am broken. I see that one a lot. I am broken, I am unlovable. All of these limiting internalized anti queer beliefs get in the way of our access to finding our most true and free selves. So that is why in second adolescence, we have such the opportunity to challenge and eventually unlearn the limiting self beliefs caused by anti queerness and chronic shame. Unlike most healing, there really isn't a singular path to what heals chronic shame and these internalized limiting beliefs. I'm kind of highlighting this first approach of kind of looking at survival strategies and kind of the way that chronic shame can manifest in that way. But healing really is the product of several multiple things, many things

that interact and interweave with one another. Like it could be this more focused internal work at looking at internalized beliefs and survival strategies. It could also be learning to let ourselves do the things that feel playful and most fun for us now as adults and giving our younger selves, the gifts of that fun experience. Healing also, of course, exists in finding queer community that helps us feel more okay and who we are. And gradually, just by being in relationship with people, we can let go and unlearn some of this shame. There's so many different ways, big and small, loud and quiet. And I'm sure you the listener, you might even be thinking about some of the things and some of the experiences and people that have been a part of your own process of healing and letting go of shame. And that is great. The whole purpose of our lives on the other side of coming out is to continuously find ways to heal from chronic shame, and just feel fucking great. And you'll hear this theme throughout the rest of this season, healing from shame. And if you listen back to past episodes, you'll for sure hear it in just about every prior guests own journey. It's it's really everything. And it's continuous. There's something about healing, and unlearning limiting beliefs caused by chronic shame and anti queerness that everyone should know. And that is that the healing kind of never stops. You know, these beliefs are so ingrained and are so powerful because they are essentially kind of fears related to our enoughness in the eyes of others. as social beings, we are hardwired to perceive threats to our enoughness in the eyes of others as threats to our survival. And so these beliefs are just so deeply in there and are so protective. And there's such resistance to letting go of them completely. And so they may persist existing within us. And in times of significant stress or when we fall off course from our you know, active care and nourishment of ourselves, they can really come back and strength. But something that I tell all my clients about healing and really want to scream from the rooftops is that our goal is not to complete the work and be healed. Our goal is to get better at doing the work of healing. Our goal is not to completely remove our suffering. I mean, yes, great. If you can do that, hell yeah. And if you can completely remove your core limiting beliefs and have them never get activated in you ever again. That's rad and give me a call and let me know how you did it. But you know, often they're just they they show up, they show up every now and then. But our goal is just really just to keep doing the healing work and the preventative work to reduce their grip on us and to get more and more skilled noticing when these limiting beliefs, these wounds of anti queerness within us get activated and attempt to influence our thoughts and feelings and behaviors. When we increase our ability to catch them, we increase our ability to then intervene. And here, we can really pass the reins of power to a more intentional, grounded part of US no longer letting anti queerness dictate how we show up in this world. Okay, there's way more to say about shame and healing from shame and how this manifests in our beliefs about ourselves and our ways of being but I can hear there's, there's a air show of planes coming in the air. I don't know if you can hear that behind me, but I can hear that they're about to come. And so this is a good place to kind of wind down. And so let's put a pin in this conversation for now. But I really want to invite you to digest and reflect and continue exploring where shame may be still operating within you, perhaps keeping you from a life you're wanting and explore what it can mean to shake it up. Thank you so much for being here. More to come. See you next week. This is great. Thanks. Hey, thanks for joining us for today's conversation. Feel free to head on over to secondadolescencepod.com for show notes and more. And you can connect further by following the show on Instagram at [@secondadolescencepod](https://www.instagram.com/secondadolescencepod). If you're interested in being a future guests on the show and you want to come on and share about your own second adolescence visit secondadolescencepod.com/beaguest and you can submit your interest there. Alright, that's it for me for now. Whether it's morning, afternoon, night, wherever we're finding you and your day, go on out there and keep doing things that would make younger you absolutely thrilled. That is what it's all about. All right. Take good care.

