

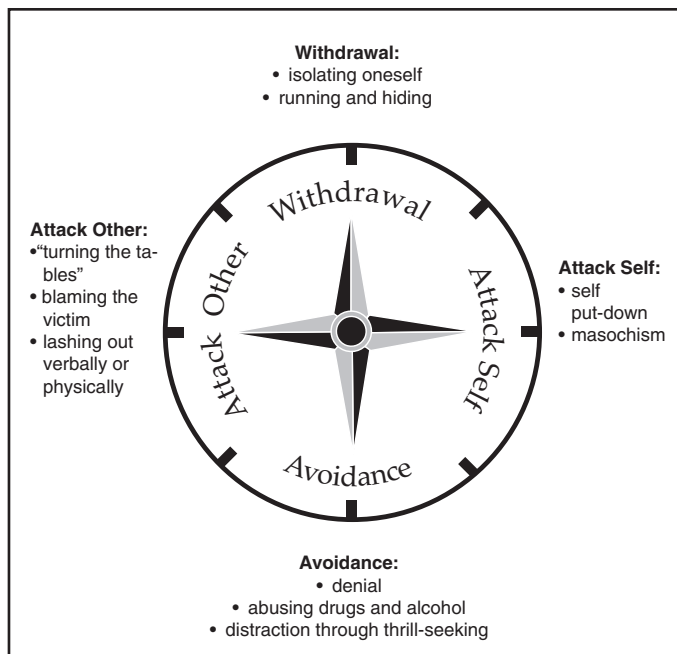
Compass of Shame

by Harold Grossman, MD, FRCP(C)

In the 1960's, Dr. Sylvan Tompkins investigated, through the use of video tape analysis, the primary instinctual affects (emotions of the moment) of infants. He described nine innate primary affects which he said were truly constitutional rather than learned responses. Two are positive: *Joy and Excitement*. One is neutral: *Startle*. The negative six affects that one can observe are: *Fear, Disgust* (tongue out), *Dissmell* (lifting away of the nose), *Rage, Despair*, and most importantly, *Shame* (eyes averted, head down). Shame is supposed to be a protective response to keep us connected to the group rather than wondering off dangerously by ourselves. It has been given to us to help us survive and to eliminate it would not be safe.

When confronted with shame in our adult years, those of us with good self esteem and a background of being loved and accepted, process the experience differently than those who do not have these inner resources. The most mature of us begin an inner search of memories for times when we felt truly accepted and loved, and are able to recover our equilibrium and even learn something more about ourselves and about the part that was exposed.

Those of us that cannot digest the shame in this way respond in one of four different defensive directions, a concept organized by Dr. L. Nathanson, he calls **“The Compass of Shame”**. Each pole represents a scripted set of things to say to oneself and ways of behaving towards others.



At the *North* end of the Compass is “Withdrawal”. It is hiding from others and living in fear of exposure of what we perceive as a defect or weakness. It leads to isolation and gradual absorption into a darker insulated world. It would tend to defeat our human need to belong, for sake of survival.

At the *East* end of the Compass is “Attack Self”. With this set of behaviours we diminish ourselves in the presence of others. In a sense it is “heading off at the pass” the fear of rejection. Unlike Withdrawal, we can stay connected, as it is not hard in this competitive world to find a person who wants to feel like a winner by connecting to a loser. In its safety it just worsens the pain and degrades the soul. There is a danger in living at the North and East poles. Because the feelings are not processed, they can build up inside and can lead to explosions

or extreme violence (a notable example was the story of the murderous teens in the shootings at Columbine).

At the *South* end is the opposite of “Withdrawal”, what Dr. Nathanson calls “Avoidance”. The goal of this strategy is to hide the feelings of shame entirely from consciousness, if possible. The use of alcohol and other illicit drugs leading to addiction is a way of avoiding the feelings. It is said that shame is dissolved in alcohol, melted by narcotics and boiled by cocaine and amphetamines.



Another strategy used at this pole of Avoidance is to call attention to oneself in ways meant to distract others by “showing off” or being exhibitionistic. It is also at the core of a theory about the development of Narcissistic Personality Disorders, whose self aggrandisement is seen as an avoidance of shame to the point of complete unawareness. Like the East pole, people remain connected with others, although in a way that is devoid of true intimacy (i.e. the sharing of vulnerabilities). It creates a hollow, false sense of self and, like the addiction strategy, seems never to be enough to satisfy the underlying need.

At the *West* end is the “Attack Others” pole. Simply put, this strategy refers to the bully who metes out their own inner sense of shame on another. It is these people who prey on the vulnerable, leading to damage that scares people - often for the rest of their lives. Even the most stringent of rules to contain their behaviours does not solve the problem that promotes these actions. Until the matters of shame are addressed, these people remain a risk to those in their sights.

At all points in this “compass of shame” there is significant damage to the individual and to others around them. Humility can be a path leading away from the poles of this compass and bringing us to healthier ways of living and relating. We can move from shame to humility when we allow ourselves to feel accepted and loved with all our flaws, all our vulnerabilities and failures. Humility can enable us to preserve our attachment to relationships and groups that mean safety and security to us. By striving for humility, we can make the choice to be autonomous and authentic, without diminishing ourselves or destroying the possibility of relationship in our interpersonal worlds.

