



PSDP—Resources and Tools: The compass of shame

Introduction

Many families can experience powerful feelings of shame and stigmatisation as a result of needing social work support. This is likely to be exacerbated for families facing multiple disadvantage-related issues such as 'race', ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation and poverty, which frequently coalesce for families who come to the attention of statutory social work services.

'The compass of shame' is a visual tool which can be used to explore the influence of shame in families' interactions with social workers. If your organisation has adopted restorative practice, you will be familiar with the model and its relevance to social work.

Feelings of shame can, if unacknowledged, impact negatively on a family's ability to engage in a positive working relationship with the social worker. This learning tool explores the impact of shame within social work with children and families. It presents the compass as a diagram to highlight the different ways that shame may be presented.

Guided questions are then included, to help you think about how you might draw on these ideas in supervision and with your team, to inform your practice with children and families. These questions focus on you as the practice supervisor, supervisees, and children and families.

The impact of shame

Nathanson (1992) says that shame is a critical regulator of human social behaviour. It can occur any time our experience of positive emotions like joy, excitement or pleasure is interrupted. This means you don't have to do something wrong to feel shame. Victims of crime can feel a sense of shame, even though the offender committed the 'shameful' act.

Given the powerful feelings of shame and stigmatisation that many parents feel as a result of needing social work support, it is important to explore this issue from their perspective.

Gibson (2014, 2015 and 2019) has undertaken a range of research exploring shame from both a social worker and service user perspective, and has studied the notion of shame and shaming parents within the child protection process.

His research identifies the structural and systemic reasons that embed parental experiences of shame into the process. It also highlights the societal processes that support practitioners to shame and even humiliate parents.

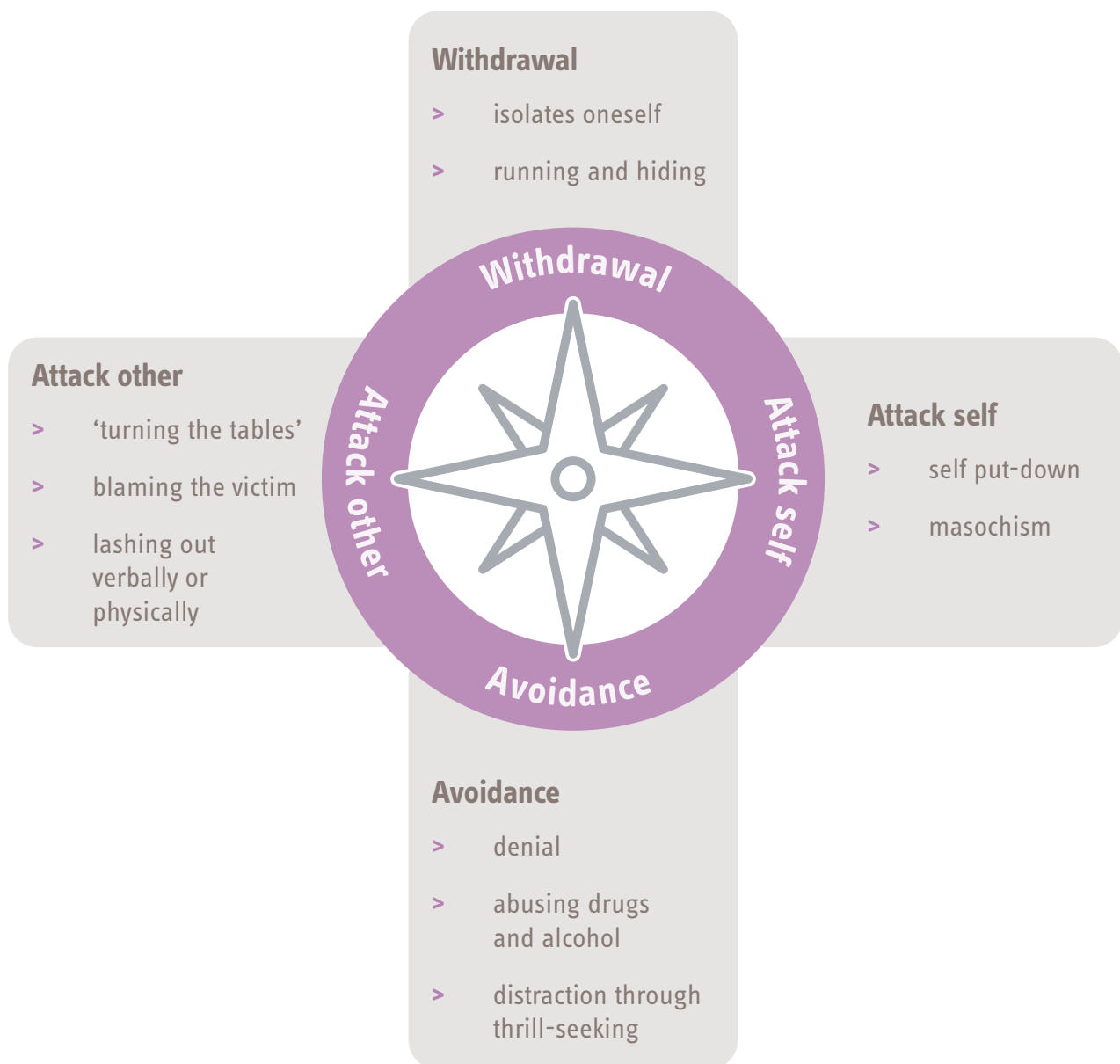
Gibson acknowledges that whilst shaming may often be unintentional, it can become an outcome of practice, stating that, 'Social workers can be considered to be doing a good job at the same time as shaming a parent.' He also helpfully considers ways to achieve 'shame-reducing' child protection social work practice, in order to improve assessments and intervention.

Given the complexity and emotional labour of the work, along with the psycho-social domains of the role, shame is arguably a factor that impacts on social workers, too. This is supported by Gibson who recognises this as being intertwined in notions of guilt and feelings of shame within their work with families. He also explores the impact of shame on social workers' wellbeing. Arguably, if the issue of shame remains unexplored for all stakeholders in social work practice, it can make the change process more difficult for people.

This tool helps to explore the three positions of the practice supervisor, the social worker, and children and families.

The compass of shame

Nathanson (1997) devised this model to explore the theory of 'affect', the notion of shame, and the ways people react when they feel it.



Guided questions - using the compass of shame in supervision

The behaviours presented in the model above may be seen when people are experiencing shame. Usually people who have adequate self-esteem readily move beyond their feelings of shame. This emphasises why positive regard and building self-acceptance is important in working with people who need to change.

The questions overleaf invite you to consider how the compass may play out in supervision from three different perspectives.

Guided questions - using the compass of shame in supervision

Self

Thinking about the behaviours listed below, what do you recognise in yourself? What might others see? What might you need to consider in terms of seeking a supportive response from others?

Withdrawal

What might others notice? How might you feel if you are withdrawing? What might the trigger be?

Attack self

What would others see or hear if you are attacking self? What might lead to this?

Avoidance

How might this manifest for you? What would others notice? How might this play out in your supervision role?

Attack other

What circumstances might lead to this? What might you notice yourself thinking and feeling if you are attacking others? What circumstances leads to this happening in supervision situations?

Supervisees

Withdrawal

Thinking about individual supervisees, what might you notice if they are withdrawing? Is this a physical or emotional presentation, or both? How might you explore this with them?

Attack self

What behaviour might you see and hear from supervisees? How might you establish what they might need from you in this moment? How might you explore this with them?

Avoidance

What might you notice if supervisees are being avoidant? How might this show for different individuals? What might you need to do to acknowledge this?

Attack other

How might this manifest for different workers? What might you notice, see, hear and feel in their presentation? How might you go about exploring this with them?

Children and families

Withdrawal

How might this behaviour present itself during engagement with families? How might you know that this is a factor in supervisees' work with families? What might you hear in supervision to indicate that a child or their parents are withdrawing?

Attack self

What sort of questions might you ask in supervision to explore whether this is a factor for families? What might social workers see or hear that suggest this is happening? How might you support them to explore this with families?

Avoidance

What behaviour might a worker experience to indicate avoidance from families? How might you explore this in supervision? What might you notice in the worker's narrative that indicates the family are avoiding them?

Attack other

How might this behaviour be evident in a social worker's experience of supporting a family? What might you need to do to help them make sense of this in their work?

Other ways you can use this tool

Present the concept and model in a team meeting and pose some of the guided questions to the team.

Bring the model to a supervision session and explore how it may relate to a particular child or family.

Use the model in a group supervision and invite different participants to take the position of different family members to explore their position in relation to the quadrants.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

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