

SHAME AND NON-PATHOLOGIZING PRACTICE

BY MICHAEL TOWERS, RCC-ACS, AND CLIENT IDENTIFIED AS "EL"





Shame shows up in therapy rooms as a debilitating felt experience that convinces clients that they are, at their core, the problem. For therapists committed to non-pathologizing, collaborative care, a central question emerges: how can we help untangle clients from shame's grip without reinforcing the very pathology that constrains them?

Drawing from non-pathologizing practices, this article explores a collaborative metaphor developed with a client, EL, that positions shame not as an internal defect but as a response to system-based rules and power dynamics. The metaphor of explosive devices — mines, C4, and grenades — offers a vivid, clinically useful language for locating, deconstructing, and re-authoring shame in ways that preserve dignity and agency.

FROM "THE PROBLEM PERSON" TO "THE PERSON AND THE PROBLEM"

A key non-pathologizing principle is the refusal to see the person as the problem. Instead, problems are understood as separate from people, exerting influence on them and their relationships. In this frame, shame is positioned as an externalized problem rather than an inherent character flaw.

Yet shame is often deeply embedded in identity. Dominant narratives — shaped by family, culture, institutions, and broader sociopolitical forces — invite clients to interpret system-based rules as reflections of who they are. When clients “fail” to live up to these rules, they are frequently invited to conclude that they themselves are defective, lazy, irresponsible, or unworthy.

Non-pathologizing practice therefore involves more than externalizing shame. It also requires identifying and deconstructing the dominant system narratives that authorize shame to speak with authority about a person's worth. The therapeutic task shifts from symptom

reduction to reshaping the client's relationship with these narratives and the systems that carry them.

SYSTEM RULES AND THE MECHANISM OF SHAME

Within this perspective, shame is understood as a result of behavioural compliance originating from some system rule. Shame appears when a client is judged — by self or others — not to be adequately following rules around performance, gender, family loyalty, productivity, health, or “good” decision-making

Therapeutically, this means that before attending to internal states of preferred identity, the therapist collaborates with the client to name:

- The rule being enforced — for example, “You should always make the optimal decision,” or “You should be doing intentional exercise for retirement health.”
- The system(s) that generated and benefit from that rule — for example, family, culture, economics, professional standards, health authorities.
- The impact of those rules on the client's sense of identity, choice, and freedom.

This focus invites critical inquiry rather than self-blame. Clients explore whether they wish to continue giving credence to these rules or whether alternative, preferred rules might better reflect their values, hopes, and commitments.

EL'S EXPLOSIVE METAPHOR: MINES, C4, AND GRENADES

The collaborative work described here was co-constructed by the author and EL, a client whose metaphor of explosives offers a vivid language for deconstructing shame. EL identifies three main “devices” — mines, C4, and grenades — each representing different shame dynamics and system rules.



Mines: Historically placed, often implicit rules laid down by families, communities, institutions, or social contexts. These mines are strengthened each time they “explode” and can be repeatedly weaponized by others.

C4: Targeted, intentional activations of shame by someone who knows the rule set within a relationship and deliberately engages an “if... then bad” judgment.

Grenades: In-the-moment shaming comments thrown into conversations, often by people on the periphery of the client’s life, which may trigger other, more entrenched explosives.

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This metaphor helps clients locate shame not in their inherent being but in the intersection of rules, relationships, and contexts. It also normalizes the inevitability of contact with shame while emphasizing the possibility of minimizing harm and reclaiming agency.

DIFFERENTIATION AS PROTECTIVE PRACTICE

Within this metaphor, differentiation functions as the primary protection against shame’s devices. As clients clarify who they are and how they want to be known, they become less susceptible to behavioural compliance

pressures embedded in external rules. Differentiation involves choosing one’s own ruleset rather than passively inheriting or submitting to those of powerful systems or relationships.

For example, around “optimal decision making,” EL recognized that historically imposed rules from family and economic anxiety had overshadowed EL’s own already existing criteria — such as “Does this choice inspire me?” — for discerning good decisions. Through collaborative reauthoring, EL began to privilege personally meaningful rules over inherited ones, reframing past “failures” as moments of systemic pressure rather than evidence of personal deficiency.

In practice, differentiation may include inviting clients to articulate preferred questions they want guiding

their choices, identifying whose voices have historically dominated their decision-making, and discerning which voices they now wish to centre.

MAPPING AND DISARMING THE MINES

EL's description of how mines are disabled offers a practical map for therapists. Clients first recall the dangerous terrain ("I remember this path was dangerous but am not sure why"), then gradually name the rule, the systems that support it, and the pain it has caused. As the mine is more fully described, related triggers and system connections become visible, allowing clients to study whether they genuinely believe in these rules.

Several steps emerge in this process:

- **Identification:** Naming the mine, its rule, and the systems that laid it.
- **Marking:** "Painting" the mine — clearly signalling, "Careful here," to acknowledge a minefield and reduce the element of surprise when it is stepped on.
- **Deconstruction:** Actively studying and contesting the rule, considering alternative meanings, histories, and values.
- **Re-rulemaking:** Constructing new, preferred rules that reflect the differentiated self, represented as building a deck above the mine.

The deck symbolizes reclaimed space where the client can sit, rest, and enjoy the view, no longer navigating with the "crutches" of coping mechanisms that were once necessary to survive unsafe terrain. Shame remains possible, but its capacity to dictate behaviour and identity is dramatically reduced.

For counsellors, this process aligns well with collaborative, strengths-based approaches that emphasize contextualizing distress, honouring

survival strategies, and privileging client meaning-making.

WORKING WITH C4, GRENADES, AND OTHER DEVICES

EL extends the metaphor towards C4 and grenades, envisioning ways to rewire these devices so attempts to activate shame instead connect with the client's own ruleset and differentiated stance. For C4, the therapeutic focus includes preparing responses that draw

on new rules rather than old compliance structures, effectively redirecting the emotional "charge" towards affirmation of self-authored values.

Grenades, by contrast, are managed through immediacy and boundary-setting. EL imagines a bell dome dropped over the grenade or shield to contain its impact, suggesting interventions such as emotional distancing, humour, or explicit challenge when shaming comments arise. Additional devices, like flashbangs, capture disorienting interactions (for example, gaslighting) that cause clients to step back onto their own mines, further underscoring the importance of mapping and marking.

Counsellors might invite clients to:

- Identify who typically throws "grenades" and in what contexts.
- Experiment with "bell dome" or "shield" responses, such as naming the shaming move, changing the subject, or exiting the interaction.
- Notice when flashbang-like experiences lead them back onto old mines and use this as an opportunity to deepen mapping and differentiation.

These practices situate clients as active agents who can design protective strategies that fit their relationships, cultures, and bodies.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR NON-PATHOLOGIZING WORK

This collaborative metaphor illustrates a non-pathologizing practice that prioritizes relationship to shame over symptom management. Rather than targeting shame as an internal defect

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to be soothed or corrected, therapy focuses on:

- Locating shame within system-based rules and power relations.
- Supporting clients' differentiation and rule-creation.
- Co-constructing rich metaphors that honour clients' language and experiences.

For counsellors in British Columbia and beyond, EL's analogy around explosives offers a flexible, accessible language for working with shame that can be adapted to diverse contexts and client populations. It invites therapists to position themselves alongside clients as co-investigators of the terrain, rather than as individuals tasked with fixing a defective self, thus aligning practice with an ethics of dignity, agency, and freedom. ■

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