

## Coping Behaviors and Defending Behaviors

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### Discovering the Masks Worn for Protection

Gershen Kaufman, one of the first psychologists to study and write about shame in the 1980's, states:

To feel shame is to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense. Whether all eyes are upon me or only my own, I feel deficient in some vital way as a human being. And in the midst of shame, an urgent need to escape or hide may come upon us.

Whenever a person's sense of dignity has been violated, the need to protect the self from further harm becomes essential. Kaufman and other psychologists go on to describe the common behaviors that people resort to in order to cope with shame. These include hiding, isolation and rage. To avoid further exposure, people will begin to protect themselves by creating a variety of personas or masks.



During the *Journey to Wholeness* class, after drawing their school experiences, I then asked the group of learners to draw the masks they wore for protection.

I played quiet, peaceful music in the background while they worked.

I added colored markers and glitter glue so they could have a sense of play while they drew. All the while they were working, they were sniffing the markers, which were scented, and joking with one another.

Notice how the masks take shape.



## Understanding Coping Behaviors

As you will see as this article unfolds, the four masks that the learners created seemed to each represent one of the four coping behaviors described as the Compass of Shame by Donald Nathanson (312). It is important to understand why these behaviors emerge in all human beings seeking to avoid public humiliation.

No one can tolerate for very long the negative feelings of shame affect, which is considered to be the most uncomfortable of all of the affects. While a passing experience of embarrassment can easily be laughed off, ongoing repetitive shame sequences are simply too traumatic for the individual, especially in childhood, to endure without the self responding. In order to protect both a sense of inner security and maintain one's self-image and self-worth, each person develops a number of coping behaviors and defense strategies against shame, especially internalized shame. The types and sequence of defending responses are specific to the individual and are probably influenced by a number of factors including the person's cultural background, temperament, environment, and personality structure (Kaufman, 70; Nathanson, 313).

Nathanson organizes these reactive strategies into a four-directional model that he calls a "compass of shame." Behaviors can move from fairly mild to pathological responses within each category. I like the organization of these four "patterns of defensive scripts" and will use this structure, combined with insights from the other models, to place and describe the behaviors that the study participants presented in their interviews.

One important point to make before describing the four-point compass of shame is that Nathanson discusses humor and comedy at great length as a coping strategy of *acceptance* rather than *defense*. This is important because several of the adult learners used humor as a way to cope with or disarm situations. However, I would say that based on fifteen years of experience working with a core group of these learners, that some used humor as a form of deflection and acceptance and others used it as a form of "attack self."

According to Nathanson, in each system of responses, shame is experienced differently, and the purpose of the pattern is to make the experience of shame feel better. He suggests that we all use strategies from each of the systems from time to time. Like poles on a compass, they contrast and compare.

As the Mask drawings emerged, each seemed to represent one of the coping archetypes.

