

Facing Anger, Facing Shame: Facing History

Coming to the Table National Gathering

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Content Handout

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Facing Anger, Facing Shame: Facing History

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Facing Anger, Facing Shame: Facing History

INTRODUCTION: The Linked Descendants Working Group is focusing on the emotions anger and shame because of how frequently members of the group talk about experiencing them, painfully so, while doing research - researching their family history, learning more about slavery, or studying U.S. history in general.

Context is critical in how we talk about emotions and what tools we choose for working with them. In this handout, the context is individuals researching and studying history related to enslavement and their experiences of anger and/or shame in response. Specifically, they might be:

- Hearing about history from family members, including slavery
- Researching or studying history, including slavery
- Finding and reading historical documents with a personal or family connection related to slavery
- Making sense of family connections including slavery, through reading documents and/or creating family trees
- Writing the history of a family, a region, or a time period when slavery is included
- Talking about family history with slavery included, the history of slavery itself, or U.S. history, including slavery, with family or friends, or in a public setting

We are not talking about anger and shame in other contexts, and the tools suggested here for working through anger and shame may not be appropriate or useful in other contexts.



Facing Anger:
Facing History

Facing Anger: Facing History

ANGER

Definition: Anger is an intense feeling, generating intense thoughts, language, or action. In the course of researching or studying history, anger can be experienced in several forms, singularly or in combination.

- Attacking – desire to hurt, to punish, to make something go away
- Defensive – response to fear, to attack
- Outraged – response to violation of values
- Frustrated – response to not being able to achieve goals
- Protective – desire to prevent harm to others

Unique personal indicators of anger: It is important to recognize the feeling of anger and not confuse it with other emotions such as embarrassment, shame or fear. For many people, the indicators of feeling angry are listed below, but each of us must identify our own personal indicators.

- Hot face, neck, body; raised heart rate, blood pressure; sense of bursting pressure in the chest
- Explosive feeling, strong desire to move or act
- Outburst of strong language

Facing Anger: Facing History

Being able to identify anger as such allows us to

- Better figure out the cause
- Choose how to work with it in the moment and over time.

Causes of anger: What might cause us to feel angry in the midst of researching, learning, reading documents, developing a family tree, drafting an essay or story, preparing to talk with family, friends or the public? There are as many specific causes as there are Linked Descendants, but what follows are some possibilities.

Facing Anger: Facing History

For descendants of formerly enslaved people – anger might be

- Fury at the hurt, torture and brutality exercised on the ancestors' bodies, minds, hearts, spirits, dignity, humanity and rights
- Rage at injustice which continues in the present
- Frustration at not being able to protect beloved ancestors from physical harm, family separations, assault and rape
- Outrage at the de-humanizing, de-valuing, lawless, exploitive, oppressive behavior of enslavers and the white supremacist society
- Blood boiling over specific harms done to specific, individual ancestors, e.g., rape, being sold away, being beaten

Descendants of enslavers – anger might be

- Outrage at the gross immorality of our ancestors' involvement in slavery, slave trading, racial terror, violence
- Rage about our ancestors' compartmentalization and denial of feelings and values, allowing them to support ongoing complicity with an immoral, inhumane institution
- Shock at the brutality practiced by "good Christians," "upstanding citizens," and "Founding Fathers"
- Fury at the exploitation for the benefit of the elite, which continues in the present
- Horror in learning of specific harms done by named ancestors against specific individuals they enslaved, e.g., starvation, rape, selling away, beatings, torture

Facing Anger: Facing History

What to do with anger: Anger is a difficult, painful emotion because of how it makes us feel, how it can stay with us and keep us stirred up, for an extended period of time. It can be hard to know what to “do with it.” A few words on this point.

- **Validity:** Anger is always valid , obviously so in response to the kinds of horror, brutality, hypocrisy and immorality we come across as we face history.
- **Right and necessary:** Anger is never “wrong.” In the moment anger in response to another instance of brutality can shore up our sanity and our sense of rightness. Ongoing anger in response to ongoing horror, injustice, and inhumanity is right and necessary to drive toward justice, toward eliminating ongoing harms and trauma.
- **Recognition and processing:** Anger needs to be recognized, processed, and expressed, and can eventually be harnessed as energy for change. It can be managed in a given moment or a given context, but should not be suppressed, at the risk of our mental and physical health.

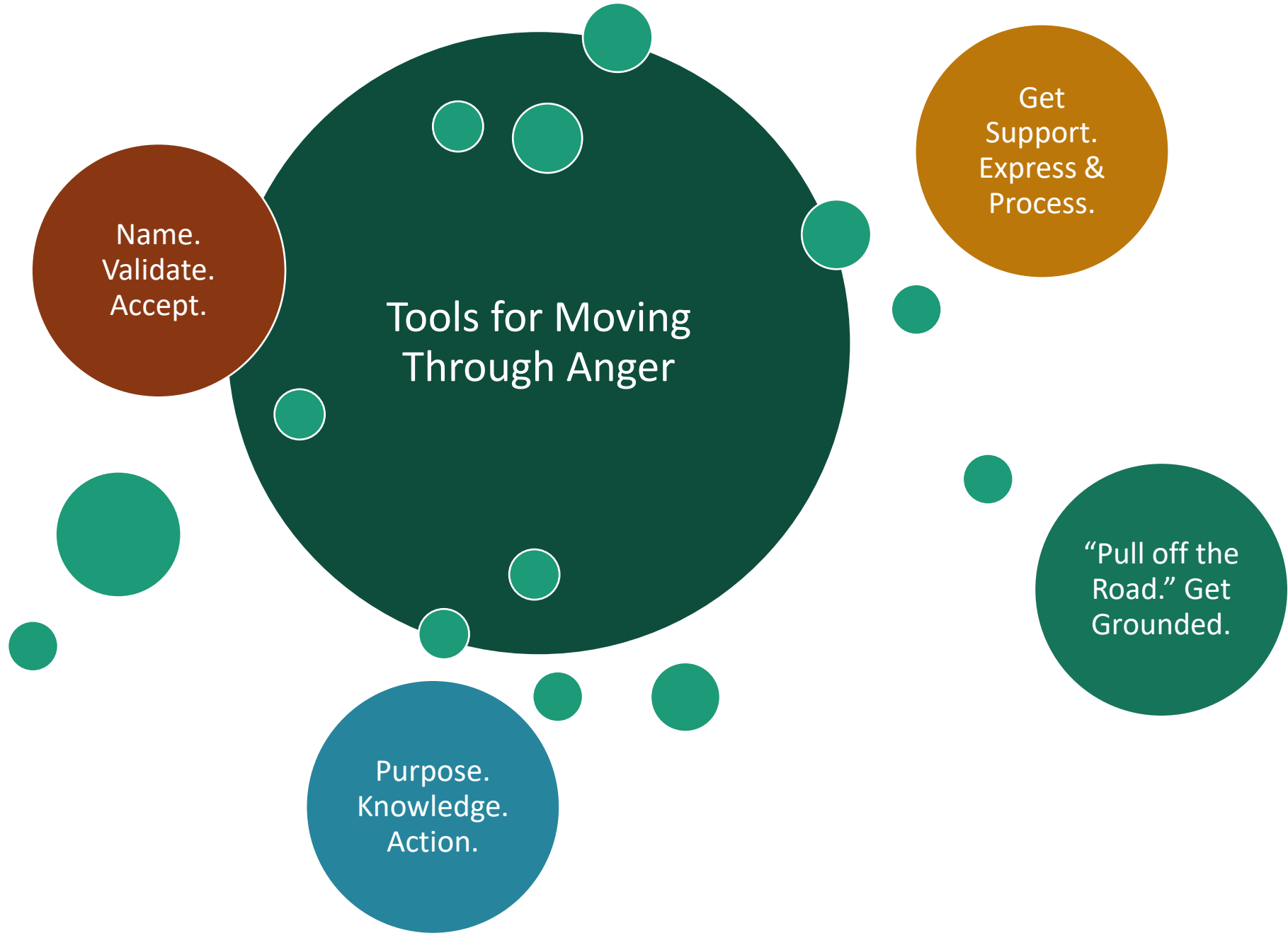
Each of us may find we need one way of working with anger in the moment, in company, or in public, and other ways of working with it in private, with support, over the longer term.

- **Impact of other people’s reactions:** Other people may find our anger uncomfortable or frightening. Those reactions are real and it’s useful to have strategies for navigating those moments, but someone else’s discomfort or fear must never invalidate the our own feeling, its causes, the need for processing it, or the ways we can eventually turn anger into action.
- The stereotypes of “the angry Black man,” “the angry Black woman,” “the angry b***h” are real, harmful, and not to be ignored. Hence the need to have tools and practices for working with anger in the moment and over time. As important is the need to honor anger as a clarion call for speaking truth and seeking justice.

Facing Anger: Facing History

Potential risks: We will get further into this point in the next section about tools for working with anger and shame. Considerations for now are that there are a couple of potential risks with anger.

- One risk is that a strong emotional response in the moment could result in harm, harm to ourselves, to others, or to documents. Researchers who have pounded on desks and punched walls, injuring the hand they write with. Others have been tempted to throw a valuable research source through a nearby closed window. People have torn up or burned infuriating documents. Enough said.
- There is a different risk, which comes from not being able to recognize and work with ongoing anger related to our research. That is the risk of becoming stuck in anger, of ending up responding to everything angrily, and of losing creativity and insight.



Name.
Validate.
Accept.

Tools for Moving
Through Anger

Get
Support.
Express &
Process.

"Pull off the
Road." Get
Grounded.

Purpose.
Knowledge.
Action.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

INTRODUCTION: There are many tools for moving through anger, and each of us needs to find the toolkit that works best for us. Remember that, in this context, we are focusing on anger which can come up as we research our families, study history, learn about slavery – we are in the midst of reading books, taking courses, reading documents, developing family trees, drafting essays or stories, preparing to talk with family, friends or the public.

Of course, anger comes up in other situations for other reasons, and the tools we offer here may not necessarily be effective or appropriate in those circumstances.

Phases: Many of us need to move through anger in two phases, depending on what's making us angry, where we are at the time, and who's around us. The first phase is the first few moments, when the anger first hits. If we're in public, among strangers, or in the midst of a complex task, the first phase of dealing with feeling angry is to keep ourselves safe until we can find privacy or friendly listeners and a pause in the task. Then we're ready to use other tools for processing the feeling.

- **Short-term Control ≠ Suppression:** Very important note – if we have to control anger briefly, we must go back to it and process it. Momentary control to ensure safety is not an excuse to bottle up anger and deny it happened. **Suppression is harmful.**
- **Tools for the first few moments and tools for more in-depth processing:** Painful emotions like anger may require us to have two sets of tools and practices to call on. We may need one set to get us through the immediate moment, the first tidal wave or creeping edge of emotion. Then we may need other tools and practices to work with and move through anger over time.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

Which tools and practices will work best in the moment will be influenced by context – where we are, who we're with, and what else is happening.

For example, finding a news story about an ancestor's involvement with a lynching while you are working in the city library surrounded by other readers, families, older folks and children may call for one kind of in-the-moment management approach, and coming across the same story among your family papers while sitting in your own attic, call for another.

Is there a “right” way to work through the tools? No. The tools for moving through anger are presented in a sequence that looks orderly. In real life, of course, our emotional reactions are messy, mixed up together, and iterative, so we use the tools however they fit ourselves and our circumstances. We might be using some tools simultaneously, in parallel or in combination.

There most definitely is not a “last step.” We will go on moving through anger as long as we go on researching difficult areas of history.

➤ We do make one strong recommendation: Do not leap into action first thing. Take the time to process the anger you feel, clarify the purpose of your overall research work, and brainstorm with other people before deciding to act.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

Name. Validate. Accept.

- ❖ Name the feeling; learn to recognize it.
 - Learn what anger feels like for you. Pay attention to the different shapes and sensations it has. They may vary depending on whether your anger is attacking, defensive, outraged or protective. Learn to notice the beginnings of anger, before it overtakes you, if possible. Also become familiar with what anger is like at its hottest, perhaps by reflecting on it later.
 - Name the feeling as soon as you can. “I’m angry.” “This is anger.” “I feel angry.” It may help to repeat its name.
- ❖ Validate the feeling; remember it is normal and useful.
 - Remind yourself that it is fine to feel angry. Anger is a legitimate and understandable response to learning about something horrific and disturbing.
 - Keep in mind that anger is energy. It is energy you can put to work when you are ready.
- ❖ Accept anger; respect it.
 - With validation comes acceptance and respect for the emotion. In white American culture, anger is often misunderstood, feared and rejected, especially the anger of BIPOC men and women or white women. Respect the legitimacy, reasonableness and power of anger. Put the power of anger to work serving the greater purpose of your research.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

Get Support. Express & Process

If you are a person who benefits from having the support of someone else at painful moments, you may want to reach out to your support system either in the first moments of feeling angry or at a later time when you process the anger in more depth.

♥ Get Support.

- Pick support people with care, choosing people who can listen with understanding and some neutrality. Make sure it's OK to reach out to them to move through anger, in the moment or for in-depth processing.
- Reach out and connect. Do not let anger isolate you or make you lonely.

♥ Express the anger.

- In a safe setting, express your feelings in words, shouts, noises. Move, pound something. Sing or make music. Let the anger flow through and out of you. (You may take this step alone or with a supportive person.)
- Take care of and be gentle with yourself, even when the feeling may be rough or jangly.

♥ Process the anger

- When you're ready for processing in depth, try some of these tools: conversation, making notes, writing a letter you do not send, journal, music, poetry, song, movement, to explore the anger in more depth. Dig into what caused the anger. What more can you understand about that cause, including what the cause means to you. How did it connect to other issues or experiences? What story would you tell about it?
- Feel the energy and potential of your anger, the ways it can help you uncover and reveal truth, find allies, and work for change, justice and equity. Put it to use.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

“Pull off the Road.” Get Grounded.

This is a tool you could use in the first moment of feeling anger, fury and rage.

🕯 “Pull off the road”

- Keep yourself safe. Some locations are not safe places for a full-blown expression and processing of anger. In those cases, move to a safer location – your car, a bench outdoors, your home.
- You may need a tool to divert the anger long enough to get to a safer place or to connect to your support team. Options include repeating a mantra, making notes among your research papers, humming a powerful song – find one or more approaches to get you through the immediate moment.

🕯 Get grounded.

- Depending on your experience and how your learning or research process works, you may be able to anticipate times and settings when you could have a rush of anger. For example, going through deeds of sale at the courthouse could be a “hot spot” for you. Consider what in-the-moment tool would ground you until you could apply the Get Support. Express. Process tool.
- Keep your purpose in mind. See the Purpose. Knowledge. Action tool.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

Purpose. Knowledge. Action.

★ Purpose.

- ▶ Think through the deeper purpose behind your studying and researching. What motivates you to learn more about slavery, about U.S. history, or about your family history? What impact do you want your work to have? What do you want to be able to do with what you have found out? What change in the narrative or in the social system are you going after?
- ▶ Think about how feeling angry in response to research or study serves that purpose and how you can harness the energy.
- ▶ Remind yourself of your purpose when you need to replenish your reservoir of energy to keep working.

NOTE: This is not to say you should ignore or suppress anger whose connection to your purpose is not immediately obvious. Move through whatever experiences of anger you have while researching and studying.

★ Knowledge

- ▶ Some people find that learning more about the incident or situation that angered them is a helpful for processing . Learning more gives more perspective, helps reveal the bigger picture of causes and effects, or grounds them in a time, place and culture.

Tools for Moving Through Anger

★ Knowledge

- Sometimes knowing more about the historical context helps focus and direct anger's energy.

★ Action

Do something with the anger. Put the energy and the knowledge to work to have an impact or make a change. There are lots of options.

- ✓ Write: A letter that is never sent, journal, stories, op-ed, family history, letters to legislators, essays, a book
 - Blog with *BitterSweet*
 - Write with the Linked Writers pods
- ✓ Speak: Conversations in the family, with friends. Public presentations or dialogues
- ✓ Learn more in Coming to the Table groups
- ✓ Keep researching
- ✓ Perform community service, especially with groups most harmed by slavery's legacies
- ✓ Work with social and racial equity organizations
- ✓ Take reparative action



Facing Shame: Facing History

Facing Shame: Facing History

SHAME - Characteristics of Shame

Definition: Shame is an intense feeling that **we** are bad, unworthy, or unwanted because of **who we are** . We feel stigmatized and judged. What's really painful about shame is that it is linked to our sense of identity and our self-image. The experience of shame can be overwhelming, immobilizing, even toxic or traumatic.

Shame and Silence. Families, communities and nations tend to try to keep shameful actions secret, to keep quiet about them and to enforce silence on everyone. The shame may be known intuitively, but because of the rule of silence, there are several consequences. The sense of shame intensifies. The perpetrators may become “invisible.” The wrong people take on the feeling of shame; even the victims feel shame. Those around the perpetrators feel shame by association; descendants “inherit” the shame.

When the silence is broken, the shame can begin to lift for victims and descendants and for anyone else who mistakenly took on shame. Uncovering the truth and making it widely known helps with healing. Support needs to accompany the ending of the rule of silence.

Shame and Purpose. We encourage you to see that one purpose for our research into family history and our study of the history of slavery is to tell the shameful stories and help everyone to heal.

Reasonable vs. unreasonable response. Shame may be a reasonable response when we ourselves have done something that deeply violates our own values and expectations or those of our society. But shame is not a reasonable response to situations in the past when we are not the perpetrators of the violation.

Facing Shame: Facing History

Indicators of shame. The physical manifestations of shame, the indicators that shame is the feeling we have, include a tight or queasy stomach, nausea and digestive upset, tightness in the chest or throat, flushing skin, and lethargy. We might feel shame as a stress response.

We may also shrink into ourselves, hold our arms tightly against ourselves, avoid eye contact, or weep.

Our self-talk and visual imaginings (or memories) may circle around what others would do or say to us or about us “if they knew.” We may withdraw and try to disappear. Ironically, we may slide into anger to generate some kind of feeling or protect ourselves from continuing to feel shame.

Inter-generational shame: Where there is intergenerational or historic trauma, there may also be intergenerational shame. Thinking about the experiences of enslaved people and how intergenerational shame might be set in motion, consider an enslaved man traumatized by the sexual exploitation of his wife, shamed by the feeling he is not strong or brave enough to fight off their overseer and protect her. Their story might never be told, but the trauma and the shame remain and may be passed along to their children and their later descendants. One reason the story might not have been told was that the family considered the assault to be stigmatizing, and they feared that the family would be considered unworthy of respect in their own community.

Beyond a specific incident, it is also possible to feel ashamed over several generations about the larger, ongoing oppression, loss of dignity and loss of humanity that the enslaved ancestors experienced.

Facing Shame: Facing History

Victim shame. Along similar lines is “victim shame,” when the victims of violence, abuse, rights violations, discrimination, oppression and other harms blame themselves for the harm they’ve suffered. They may believe they were at fault somehow, or they may be ashamed by the way others judge them and what others say about them as victims. The community may name, blame and shame the victims.

“Victim shame” may also be intergenerational. Either the original victim took on shame for what was perpetrated against them, or people in later generations become ashamed about what their contemporaries might think about the ancestor.

Over-identification: Another form of inter-generational shame occurs among descendants of enslavers, when one or more descendant generations identifies strongly with an individual ancestor or an extended family line who were perpetrators of atrocities. The descendants’ sense of themselves is so invested in the positive reputations of their ancestors that they merge their ancestors’ identities with their own. When the crimes and atrocities perpetrated by the ancestors are made public, modern-day descendants experience the negative disclosures about their ancestors as if they were shameful disclosures about themselves in the present. If the ancestors’ image is tarnished, their own image is ruined as well.

For example, when there was a public account that a Founding Father, an enslaver, had repeatedly fathered children with an enslaved woman, many of his descendants were so shamed that they became strenuously defensive, as if they were the ones being accused of rape and abuse.

Facing Shame: Facing History

Shame vs Guilt: Shame is different from **guilt**. Guilt is what we feel about **something we did**, not about who we **are**. In researching history, we might feel guilty about something someone did in the past. We may come across evidence of our ancestors enslaving Africans or selling children away from parents, and feel guilty about what they did. But when we feel guilty, we don't connect the harm directly to who **we are, to our identity**. We may be able to disconnect from those deeds. We didn't do them, so the harms have nothing to do with us. We hear people say, "That was in the past. I didn't do any of those things. Why should I feel bad about them?"

On the other hand, it's possible we've had painful feelings that we called guilt but come to recognize that they are feelings we have about who our ancestors **were** rather than what they **did** and we do feel directly connected with them and their actions. At that point we may realize we're feeling **ashamed**, not guilty.

Shame, Expectations & Identity: Shame is related to **who we are**, who we expect ourselves to be or what we think others expect us to be. When we cannot live up to those expectations, we feel we have failed and **the person we are** is unworthy of regard, within ourselves or from others. Shame becomes part of how we see ourselves, part of our identity.

Facing Shame: Facing History

Violations of Expectations: Families and communities often have a deeply held, invisible web of expectations about how their members will be, what they will do and how they will be seen by the group and by the outside world. Any variance from or violation of those expectations is a reason for shame to be inflicted by others and by ourselves.

For example, our families may expect husbands to be providers and protectors for their wives and children. Or they may expect heads of households to be moral leaders and upstanding members of their faith communities. When our research reveals enslaved men who were not allowed to marry the mothers of their children, men who ran away after too many beatings, or when our research shows us heads of households who preached on the Sabbath and raped enslaved women in the quarters at night, our expectations of how our ancestors “should” have behaved are violated. We cannot reconcile the behavior we’ve uncovered with the expectations we had for the kind of people they were. We may feel shame.

Not grounded in reality. However, shame is not necessarily grounded in reality. Our expectations in the present may be unrealistic and out of touch with life in the past. The more thoroughly we know history, the more realistic our expectations about people in the past can be. We understand that a man sold away from his family could not protect them. We have some insight about a man whose land holdings lost 90% of their value and who could only pay his taxes by selling enslaved children away from their families, behaving rationally within an inhumane, immoral system.

We are not our ancestors. Most important, we are not our ancestors or our family line. Whether our ancestors were enslaved or perpetrators of enslavement, whatever they endured or whatever they inflicted on others, we are not them. We may be proud of their strength, we may be proud of other of their achievements, but we are not our ancestors.

Facing Shame: Facing History

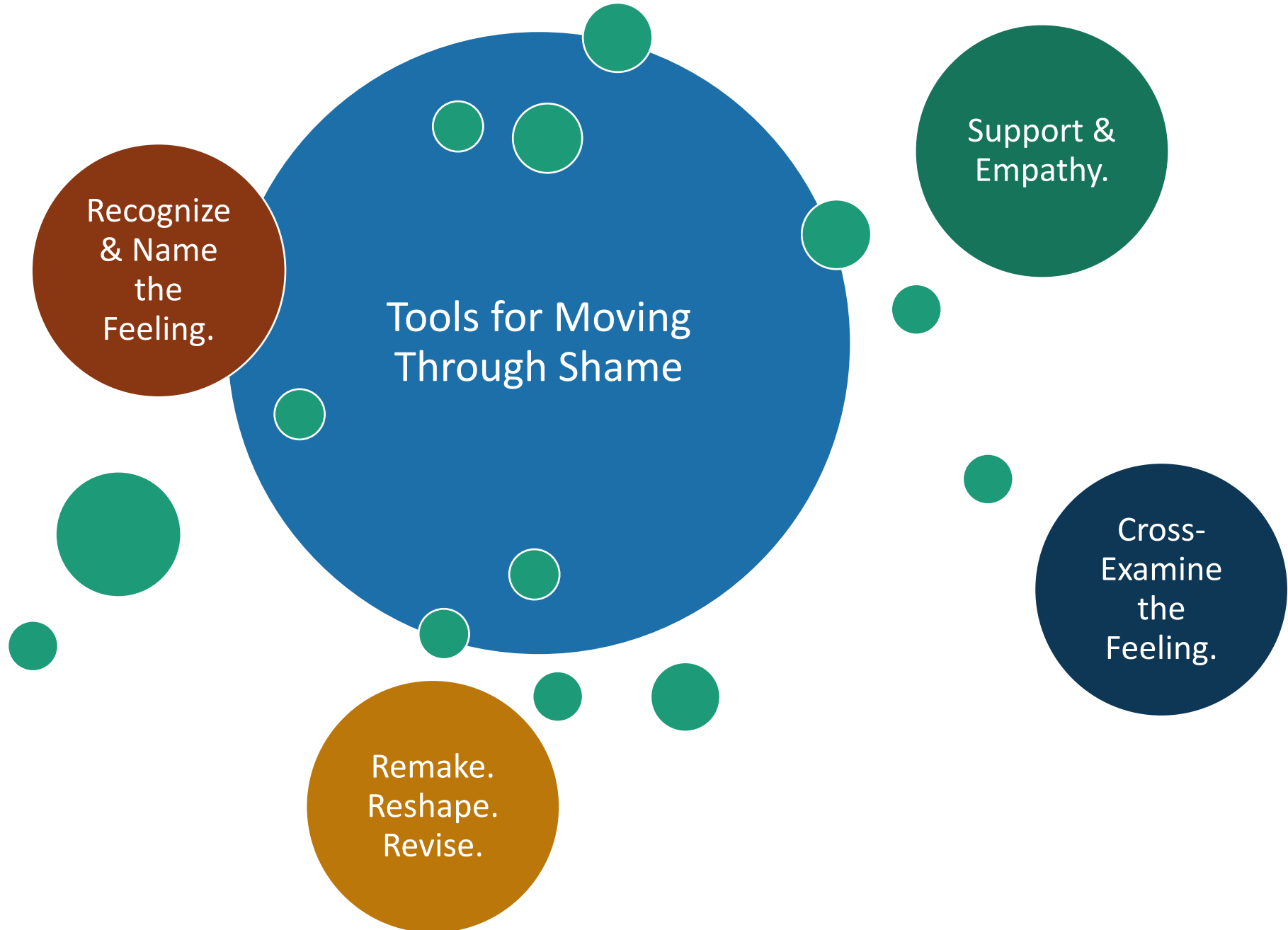
SHAME – Reasons for focusing on shame.

Reasons for focusing on shame. The Linked Descendants Working Group prioritizes exploring whatever shame our members feel for several reasons.

- **The shamefulness of shame.** Shame is one of the hardest emotions to identify and talk about. It's shameful to have shame, much less to talk about it.
- **Inexperience in moving through shame.** Because shame is less talked about, we also have less experience coping with it. We're less likely to know someone who has actively worked through feelings of shame.
- **Intergenerational shame = intergenerational harm.** When there is intergenerational shame along with intergenerational trauma, multiple forms of harm are passed from generation to generation. Researching and learning our histories can be part of the process of reducing the impact of that shame or letting go of it altogether.
- **Cumulative and overwhelming.** Even within just one or two generations, shame about people and events we are researching can become cumulative. Each new atrocity we learn about, each disgraceful belief, attitude or action among people in the past, can add to a burden of shame. We can feel shame about ourselves, about our family, about our community or our nation, as an overwhelming, crushing weight.

Facing Shame: Facing History

- **Risk of acting in on ourselves.** As shame accumulates, it can lead us to act in on ourselves. Acting in includes sadness or moodiness, withdrawal from socializing, from fun or work, from meaningful activities and connections. Shame can run into depression. We may stop taking care of ourselves and not see the point in anything, since we feel so worthless.
- **Shame can be disabling.** In short, shame can become disabling, interfere with moving on, and prevent us from making any of the personal, family or social changes that our research is pointing us toward. For a handful of people, shame can turn into “white dithering.”
- **“White dithering.”** “White dithering” is the condition in which a white person, so overcome by their discovery of enslaver ancestors and learning about the horrors those ancestors committed or condoned, talks at length about their shame but never moves on and never takes any form of responsibility for addressing the harms the ancestors perpetrated. They talk and dither, talk and dither.



Tools for Moving Through Shame

Recognize & Name the Feeling.

Support & Empathy.

Cross-Examine the Feeling.

Remake. Reshape. Revise.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

INTRODUCTION

Moving through shame takes time and commitment. The energy-draining, depressive experience of shame can make it especially hard to address. It can be tempting to sink into it, absorb shame into our identity, become a “ditherer,” and go no further.

Keeping the facts and feelings related to shame hidden and secret is what gives shame power. Telling the story of what happened, however shameful it has felt, takes away shame’s power. Empathy and support enable us to tell the stories. Having clarity about who perpetrated the harm, who is in fact responsible for it, is the essence of the stories and central to healing from shame.

There are important reasons for students of history and family history researchers to take the time and make the commitment to moving through whatever shame creeps into our hearts as we do our work. First, we need to have all our psychological and physical energy available to take action in response to what we learn about the past. We need to not get stuck within ourselves so we can move into the world and make change. As Linked Descendants and members of Coming to the Table, we want to help heal the harms done in the past and make healing available to others. To those ends, we need to “get out of our own way,” so to speak, and move through shame.

Since we all respond to emotions differently, each of us can work with the first three tools for moving through shame in the order that makes most sense. We may use some of them in parallel. The fourth tool, especially its action component, might be saved after some time has gone into working with the other tools.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

NOTE 1: Two of the tools, “Cross-Examine the Feeling” and “Remake. Reshape. Revise.” are likely to be more useful for descendants of formerly enslaved people and descendants of enslavers rather than for people studying the history of slavery. They assume a direct and personal connection to slavery.

NOTE 2: There is an “A” and a “B” set of “Cross-Examine the Feeling” and “A” and “B” sets of “Remake. Reshape. Revise.” The “A” set of tools acknowledges the experiences of the formerly enslaved people, and the “B” set addresses the work the descendants of enslavers need to do.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Recognize & Name the Feeling

- **Naming.** The first step in working with a painful emotion is to identify and name it. It may be embarrassing, even shameful, to say out loud that we're feeling ashamed, but naming the feeling pulls it out into the light of day, makes it more familiar, and begins to take away its power.
- **Recognize triggers.** Since the history of slavery in the U.S. is a story of so many atrocities, there are many opportunities for learners and researchers to feel shame. It will be useful to recognize what triggers the feeling of shame. Are we triggered by the fact of slavery's existence? Are we most disturbed by the violations of our ancestors' professed values and beliefs? Do the attributes of specific individuals disgust us? Are we shamed by specific atrocious acts?

An experienced historian and writer, working on a book about the slave trade, disclosed recently that what most quickly plunged him into shame and disgust about the individuals he was researching was the coldness and inhumanity revealed in what they wrote and what others wrote about them. He also stated that months after finishing the book, he is still moving through all the painful feelings, including shame, that came up as he worked.

Learning what triggers you means knowing what is most painful or disgusting to you and what can make you feel ashamed of yourself or your people.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Recognize & Name the Feeling

- **Recognize how shame feels.** It is also useful to become familiar with how shame feels for each of us. It may arrive in a jolt; it may descend like a fog; it may creep into our bellies, filling us up until we feel an ache, a sense of suffocation, or a great weight within or upon us. However it shows up, the more readily we recognize the feeling, the faster we can name it and begin dispelling it.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Support & Empathy.

- ♥ As in addressing all painful emotions, it is important to have one or more confidants for support and processing.
 - As you choose people to support you, be discerning about them and your relationship to them. You need people who can listen with open hearts, empathize with you, and not make you feel judged or ashamed as you talk through your shame. You need people who have no expectations of or demands to make on you.
 - It is also helpful if they are well grounded, not so gentle-hearted that they either become swept up in your feelings or are unable to give you a nudge to keep moving through your processing.
- ♥ Along the same lines, when you are processing the feeling of shame on your own, show yourself the same kind of non-judgmental empathy that you need from another person. Be understanding of your feelings and kind to yourself.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Version “A” - Cross-Examine the Feeling – Suggestions for descendants of formerly enslaved people

NOTE: Version “B” is more suitable for descendants of enslavers.

The assumption is that shame experienced by descendants of formerly enslaved people, when they go deeper into their family history, is usually related to what was done to their ancestors rather than what was done by their ancestors. The enslaved people were not the beneficiaries of the institution or the perpetrators of shameful actions.

The source of shame may be that

- A modern-day student might understandably think that no one should have been allowed to beat, rape, humiliate, torture, confine, chain, sell, handle and otherwise dehumanize their people. It was beyond shameful in its day, and its legacies today are shameful and unjust.
- A contemporary researcher might feel that, if an enslaver or an overseer had children with their ancestor, the perpetrator raped and humiliated her. They might fear that others would judge their ancestor.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

- The modern researcher knows their ancestors were treated brutally, ill-fed, sparsely clothed, uneducated, and more. Their family feels shame because of the victimization, humiliation and deprivation inflicted on their ancestors. They may feel that they are shamed in the present by the legacies of the past, that have left too many Black and brown people with less wealth, second-class citizenship, inadequate education and housing, lower-wage employment, and many other deprivations. The shameful situation today for too many Black and brown people may be experienced as a shame inherited from their ancestors.

A cross-examination of the shame experienced by descendants of formerly enslaved people might include learning more from family histories, from community histories, slave narratives and the biographies of enslaved African Americans as well as from books and documentaries made by African American historians. The truth of what the modern-day researcher feels cannot be questioned, but maybe it can be expanded. Maybe the narrative can be extended to include so much more about the ancestors.

- The researcher's African and African American ancestors built the country's agriculture, its commerce and foreign trade, its infrastructure of roads, canals, railways and ports. They built many of its finest and most famous buildings and the central areas of its best-known cities. They invented items used in daily life across the nation. Their work and its products created a booming economy.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

- The ancestors became pre-eminent writers, thinkers, preachers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, political leaders, businesspeople, and much more.
- The ancestors created families and communities, they held cultural and spiritual celebrations, they made art and music, they cooked inventively and worked magic in textiles, they started schools and churches, wherever they were.

If an expanded narrative helps address some of the feelings of shame, Black and brown researchers may be able to add attributes to the family history that had evoked shame, such as

- Ancestors in this family kept their African traditions and passed them along. They kept oral narratives of their family histories and handed them down through the family.
- Ancestors in this family had parents, partners and children, whom they loved, provided for and sheltered as best they could. They had the gift of making new families if they were forced apart.
- Ancestors of this line of people had strength and endurance to do the agricultural and construction tasks forced on them.
- The Ancestors composed and played music, sang and wrote songs, danced for worship. They celebrated life creatively.
- Ancestors in this family had many skills and talents - making furniture, building houses, forging tools, processing raw materials into thread and weaving textiles, sewing homely items and fine clothing and fine linens, cooking daily dishes and creating fine cuisine. And much more.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

- The Ancestors had the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical fortitude to survive. Here I am. They had dreams for their children, dreams for the future. Here we are.

Now may be the time to go on to “Remake. Reshape. Revise.”

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Remake. Reshape. Revise.

Version “A” of “Remake. Reshape. Revise.” (next page) is intended for descendants of formerly enslaved people. Version “B” (later pages) is for descendants of enslavers.

For all family history researchers and students of history, the goal of moving through shame is to diminish its effect and its power to divert energy and attention from other, possibly more productive activities. In that process, we gain new information and new insights that may lead us to remake the way we think about ourselves and our ancestors. We may have material to reshape the histories of our families and our nation. We may find we want to revise the story we tell about ourselves.

For descendants of formerly enslaved people and descendants of enslavers, information has been withheld, lied about, and covered up. At best, the inherited stories are incomplete, and at worst, distorted with lies. What descendants might do to remake and revise those stories differs, so there are two versions of this tool, one for descendants of enslaved Africans and African Americans, and one for descendants of enslavers.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Version “A” – Remake. Reshape. Revise. (Intended for descendants of formerly enslaved people)

As an African American researcher expands their knowledge, learns more about the lives and contributions of their own ancestors and of other formerly enslaved people, their sense of who their people were may fill out, become more rounded, enlarge beyond the truth of brutalization, victimization and dehumanization. They may sense the agency, talent, creativity and strength of the ancestors.

An African American researcher may weave a more complex story of their ancestors, one that includes the resilience, talents, strengths, accomplishments, beauty and grace they possessed in the midst of an externally imposed, oppressive, brutal system over which they had no control.

The summary of one person’s revised narrative might be

“My people were courageous, intelligent, resourceful, and creative people, who exercised their minds, their gifts and talents, and their sense of agency. They built families and communities. They loved and worshipped. They valued home and family. They were all this in spite of the oppression and horror around them. They created full lives for themselves and their children, down to the present day.”

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Version “B” – Cross-Examine the Feeling. This version of “Cross-Examine the Feeling” is intended for descendants of enslavers.

Introduction. Version “B” of “Cross-Examine the Feeling,” for descendants of enslavers, has three parts: Interrogate the history; process how expectations were violated; strengthen boundaries.

Part 1 - Interrogate the history. Examining and cross-examining the history of our enslaver ancestors takes time, often proceeds through layers of information, and requires learning about the context of their lives and actions. One reason for closely examining their history is to make sure we know what happened that we find shameful and abhorrent, and try to make sure that what we have been told or think happened most likely did happen.

For example, the family stories and the first layer of research about one enslaver’s relationship to the enslaved woman whom he exploited sexually stated that although his will emancipated their mixed-race children, it did not give freedom to the enslaved woman. Exploiting her from beyond the grave, his descendants said!

Further research into the context of enslavement in Virginia in the 1830’s clarified the consequences of emancipation for the enslaved woman. Because she was not bound to a free person as an apprentice, like her children were, she would have had to leave the state of Virginia upon probate of the enslaver’s will, and would have been separated from the sons who were caring for her. Instead, she was informally emancipated by the enslaver’s son-in-law, and enabled to stay with her sons. When her sons completed their apprenticeship, they were emancipated and had mastered the trades necessary to support the family.

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Part 2 - Process how expectations were violated. We are ashamed when values and norms are profoundly violated, and the violation leaves us feeling that we are bad and unworthy of respect and belonging to our family or community. Cross-examining the feeling includes clarifying what norms and expectations were violated and who has the responsibility for the violation and the shame.

- **Impact in the present of shameful actions in the past.** If your research findings about your ancestors are made known, what are you afraid will be the impact on you or your family?
 - Are you afraid that the shame of actions committed by someone in the past will be attributed to their descendants, including yourself?
 - Has that happened to you or in your family in the past? Are “the sins of the fathers visited upon the children”?
- **Reality checking.** If you have no experience of being shamed for ancestors’ behavior but you are afraid that might happen, ask yourself now how likely is it that people in the present will see you or your immediate family as shameful for an ancestor’s past actions?
 - If you think it’s highly likely, what makes you think so?
 - If you think it’s not very likely, is your feeling of shame realistic? Could it be modified or released?

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- **Shame as a cover up?** Shame is a form of “acting in” on oneself rather than “acting out” toward others. Is it possible that feeling shame about your ancestors’ behavior in the past feels safer than feeling anger, “acting out”? Or easier to live with than the enormous grief that might come up?

Part 3 – Strengthen Boundaries

- Feeling ashamed of what an ancestor did can happen to individuals or entire families when they feel very closely identified with their ancestor. In those cases, it looks as if what happened in the family was that family members believed they inherited a special status because of their ancestor’s reputation, achievements, standing in history, wealth and power. Their image of who they are became at least partially merged with who their ancestor was.
If there has been a merging of identities and it turns out that the ancestor behaved shamefully, descendants may believe they have inherited the shame. Such a legacy can feel unbearable.
For example, if the ancestor beat the small enslaved boys who worked on a production line, or if he denied them food until they met their daily quota, descendants may fear that other people will see them as abusive.
- Releasing ourselves from shame related to our ancestors’ actions includes ensuring we have strong, clear identity boundaries and clearly understand that we are separate from them. Questions to ask ourselves at this point follow.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Part 3 – Strengthen Boundaries

- How closely do you and/or others in your family feel identified with your ancestors? How strongly is your sense of yourselves today tied to your sense of who they were in the past?
- If it became public knowledge that your ancestors committed shameful atrocities in the past, how would the shame of what they did affect you and your family today? Would you or do you feel ashamed of who you are in relation to your family history?
- Put family history aside and look at yourself on your own. Who are you, what are your strengths of character, values, relationship, commitments, standing, reputation and achievements? Appreciate yourself for yourself. (Repeat as needed.)
- Affirm to yourself that you are a separate person from any of your ancestors. You did not do what they did. You have no responsibility for what they did. You do have responsibility for addressing the legacy of harms – Take a look at the tool “Remake. Reshape. Revise.”

You are your own self, brave enough to research and uncover the truths of horrific past actions, strong enough to stand on your own, wise enough to tell a new, more complex story about yourself and your family, and bold enough to tell the story to the world.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

Version “B” – Remake. Reshape. Revise. (Intended for descendants of enslavers)

Version “B” of “Remake. Reshape. Revise.” is intended for descendants of enslavers. Version “A” (preceding pages) is for descendants of formerly enslaved people.

Cross-examining feelings of shame, where they come from, and how they may have been linked to our self-image, puts us in the position to construct a different story for ourselves, a new, unashamed but more complicated identity.

❖ **Our identity.** We declare we are our own selves; we are not our ancestors. What they did in the past does not determine who we are now. They did commit shameful acts or were complicit with them, but they are not us. The shameful things they did do not make us shameful. If you need a reminder of this facet of your independent identity, say these points to yourself.

- I did not commit the atrocities my ancestors committed; I was not complicit with them. I am a separate person from them.
- I cannot change the past. I am not responsible for what they did in the past.
- I AM responsible for repairing harms done in the past, for creating a more just and equitable country in the present.

Tools for Moving Through Shame

- ❖ **Our Story.** Create a more complicated, inter-woven story about our ancestors. Include their gifts and the fine side of their characters
 - Include points such as boldness, talent, strength, courage, accomplishments, contributions to their communities, their places of worship, to government, to culture and the arts, their beauty and grace. And much more.
 - Combine the best of who they were with the harmful aspects: who they were, what they did, what they colluded in, how they thought, and how they benefited
 - They participated in social and economic systems that created benefits for themselves and their families, i.e., status, power and wealth while brutalizing, dehumanizing and victimizing people whose liberty they stole.
 - They compartmentalized or denied their compassionate feelings and moral values.
 - They showed dangerous defects of vision, insight, character and morals, such as uncontrolled ambition, greed, extravagance, laziness, entitlement, ignorance, and more.

One version of the revised narrative of an enslaver's history might be summarized this way: "My people were ambitious, intelligent, educated, faithful people who raised families and contributed to their homes, places of worship, and communities in many ways while enslaving others for their own gain, grievously harming the people they enslaved, and finding ways to turn a blind eye to what they were doing and how their deeds conflicted with other values and beliefs they professed. My people were complex, with great talents and much to offer along with enormous flaws and failings."

Tools for Moving Through Shame

❖ **Action.** The processing of shame and revising our sense of identity to separate ourselves from shame in the past needs to lead us to some kind of action. As stated earlier, descendants of enslavers are not responsible for slavery, brutality, oppression and dehumanization in the past.

But descendants of enslavers **are** responsible for addressing the legacies of slavery left by their ancestors. They are responsible for helping to heal the harms from the social, political and economic systems that benefited their ancestors in the past and whose benefits continue to accrue to them today.

Descendants of enslavers can step fully into the [CTTT Approach](#) to take action, “actively seeking to dismantle systems of racial inequality, injustice, and oppression; to work for the transformation of our nation.”

As stated earlier, the options for action are many, from writing, teaching and speaking to service, social justice work, and political engagement. Descendants of enslavers can engage through civic organizations, faith communities, national or local advocacy groups, and historic and cultural organizations.

Be empowered by the more truthful, more complete, more complex narratives of your history and our history.

Reminders for Self-Care Through Anger & Shame

Working with shame and anger can have an impact on your thoughts and feelings when you take a pause from the work.

- You may feel shame, embarrassment or anger. Name those feelings. Work with them. Don't let them deter you.
- Skepticism, disbelief may come up. Healthy questioning is useful. Work with your questions, aware of everyone's tendency toward self-protection from painful, difficult insights and the work of investigating them.
- Keep an open mind, open heart for yourself, for anyone else moving through anger and shame.
- Be kind, take care of yourself, show self-compassion in all the ways that hearten you.
- Practice one of the new tools to move through any difficult feelings.
- Reach out if needed, get support.

Resources for Moving Through Anger & Shame

Anger:

- *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* (Thich Nhat Hanh)
- *The Gift of Anger: and other lessons from My Grandfather Mahatma Gandhi* (Arum Gandhi)
- *The Gift of Anger* (Marcia Cannon)

Shame:

- *The Gifts of Imperfection & I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)* (Brene Brown)
- *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience* (Burke & Brown)

The Journey

- *Inheriting the Trade* (Tom DeWolf)
- *Gather at the Table* (Morgan and DeWolf)
- *The Hairstons* (Henry Wiencek)

Miscellaneous:

- *Bodyfulness: somatic practices for presence, empowerment & waking up in this life* (Caldwell)
- Updated White Supremacy Culture - It's Still Here
<http://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>

Trauma:

- *The Body Keeps the Score* (van der Kolk) - also good intro to ACE Scores for those unfamiliar
- *Trauma and Recovery* (Judith Herman)
- *Waking the Tiger; & In an Unspoken Voice* (Peter Levine)
- *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation & Disease* (Scaer)
- *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds* (Hubl & Avritt)
- *What to know if you've experienced trauma (and especially if you haven't)*
USA TODAY: <https://apple.news/ApkI7E8SdSrmUczO8R-Y5PQ>
- *My Grandmother's Hands* (Resmaa Menakem)

Perpetrator Trauma, Moral Injury & Cultural Addiction to Violence:

- *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma & the Undoing of Character* (Jonathan Shay)
- *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (Chris Hedges)