

# **A form of abuse, a social death penalty: The practice of shunning and its consequences**

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Humans are most commonly considered to be social beings by nature. This makes an individual's social life critical in their mental well-being. In fact, an individual's survival depends on having strong long-lasting relationships, based on mutual trust. Taking into account the importance of our social life, it would be obvious to state that when this is taken away, it can have harmful effects on an individuals' mental wellbeing.

This need is often used by communities, their leaders to be more specific, to ensure that everyone is obeying the same collective views. Failure to do so is often punished, by the person being banished from the community. This phenomenon is often referred to as shunning or ostracism. Essentially shunning is a form of social shame and humiliation.

More specifically, shunning or ostracising is a form of abuse. It is discrimination and silent bullying. Unfortunately, often people who have been shunned also face other forms of abuse, ranging from death threats and physical assaults to murder.

In everyday language we use shunning and ostracism as being synonymous. However, shunning is a form of ostracism. Ostracism comes from the Greek word '*ostrakismos*' and this was a technique that was used under the ancient Athenians where citizens who posed a threat to the state were banished from Athens for 10 years.

Human history is rich in examples of ostracism being used within communities and institutions to enforce conformity, punishment or control, or all the above, in order to ensure their identity as a collective group. This means that there is no room for individual thinking or beliefs that go against the collective beliefs or rules.

The phenomenon of shunning and ostracising has often been linked to cults. It is a tactic that is used as a form of punishment for those who are perceived to have transgressed, questioned any of the community's beliefs or who do not share the same collectively held beliefs.

Shunning is often implemented by community leaders. They encourage families to also shun their family members, including their children. Failure to do so implies a loss of honour within the community and families who refuse are likely to be banished as a whole because they have lost their honour within the community and the community as a whole feel that they had been dishonoured.

Shunning or ostracism is not limited to cults and is often used in communities where there is a high prevalence of "honour" based violence. This practice is encouraged and continues to be implemented by those who hold some form of authority in the community.

For example, in a recent documentary by Deeyah Khan — 'Islam's Non Believers' — Omer El-Hamdoon makes the statement that the Muslim community is only based on the religion and one must expect to be shunned. Yet there was a denial of this being a form of discrimination. His statement reinforces the 'us versus them' mentality and most importantly in that process it promotes

and normalises shunning to the audience. This is a common example of how community leaders encourage and normalise shunning to its members.

*[Video not reproduced here.]*

It is well-documented in research from social psychology that people obey orders that are given from someone in authority. If those in authority are encouraging shunning, people will obey this, regardless of the psychological distress and the damage that it may have on the family.

Adding to this, shunning is a powerful tool for social influence, so leaders use it to ensure that people will obey them, in order to maintain their membership within the community. Let's not forget, humans are social beings and the prospect of facing social humiliation, shame and rejection are not a prospect that we aim for — in fact, we would do anything to avoid it.

The psychological consequences of being shunned can best be explained as a social death penalty. The immediate effects are isolation from family and the community. There is an attempt to make sense of why this is happening to them. How could the family have rejected them? The person then starts to attack their sense of self, which is also why shunning is often perceived as the death of personhood. This leads to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideations and self-harming behaviours.

Also, researchers in psychology have observed a high prevalence of PTSD amongst people who have been shunned. To get a more clear idea of the pain that shunning can cause, researchers have observed that even being a bystander to shunning can have dire psychological consequences. The psychological consequences of being shunned are long. Although, externally there may not be any wounds, internally the wounds are deep and long-lasting.

Working therapeutically with people who have been shunned is very challenging. All of the negative beliefs that they hold about themselves are often, in the eyes of the victim, reinforced by the act of being shunned. Also, individuals who have been shunned live with psychological agony, often for the rest of their life. In the long term, shunning becomes a long-term psychological torture.

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**P.S.**

• SEDAA. 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016:

<http://www.sedaa.org/2016/11/the-practice-of-shunning-and-its-consequences/>

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