

[The Maori Experience](#)

by [Kiri.Dell](#) July 17, 2016 8:12 am

Kiri Dell from Ngati Porou, Te Whanau a Apanui. I am many things. Mother Aunty Poet Entrepreneur etc

The Great Māori Shame Legacy



As Māori, we don't deal well with shame or whakamā.

Yet, our people are riddled with it. Whakamā impacts our social, spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing. It sits at the birthing place for our addictions, obesity, violence, aggression, depression and therefore I would call it the

number one killer in Māori society.

Let me say that again, the number one killer of Māori people. So why are we not looking at it?

Whakamā is often transmitted intergenerationally, and can stem from past trauma, which is why Māori carry so much whakamā. The attempted cultural genocide at the hands of colonization, sought to rid us of our inner being and our identity. They then tried to replace our core strength by teaching us that Māori people inherently have an inner defect and to fix it, is to learn the white way. Colonization has done a wonderful job at making us feel ugly about ourselves.

Whakamā doesn't have an exact equivalent in Western words, but is referred to as shame, feeling inadequate or with self-doubt. Whakamā

“...REPRESENTS THE FEELING STATE IN A PERSON WHEN HE OR SHE HAS FELT DISHONOURED IN THE EYES OF OTHERS”

or is

“...THE SENSE OF FEELING ‘INFERIOR, INADEQUATE, DIFFIDENT AND WITH SELF-DOUBT”

Whakamā is a very uncomfortable feeling. People develop quite unconscious behaviors around whakamā, and they seek to hide perceived ugly or defective parts of themselves. Whakamā feels like a weakening of the self, so a quite natural reaction, when we feel weakened is to protect ourselves and distance our self from the feeling, especially when it is extreme trauma. Distancing comes in many forms, but addictions and aggression are common actions. Distancing are survival strategies we teach ourselves to cope with the

awfulness of that moment. So, when I see some of our people struggling, I think to myself 'that's a survivor'.

While, some of the extreme manifestations of whakamā can be violence, addiction or aggression, even very seemingly normal behavior can be hiding whakamā, such as obsessive career progression or even fanatical parenting. The focus often is on not how you are, but how you look.

Shame loves to live in secrecy and doesn't like to be seen, it finds ways to hide itself. The less you talk about it, the more you have it. Whakamā is the fear of disconnection, from someone or people you care about, so essentially whakamā is a connective disorder. It inhibits people from meaningful connections and living a full and purposeful life. Connection is the antidote to whakamā.

The good news for us is that tikanga Māori is loaded with 'connection' and 'belonging' processes. But the bad news for us, is that because of our connectedness, we also have group whakamā. Whole entire groups, such as a hapu, whanaua or iwi, can be whakamā. We tend to feel it more for each other, because we see ourselves as being connected to each other. That is a whole different level of a shame experience compared with, say for example Pakeha.

So why are we not looking at whakamā? Most people think that whakamā and its bad behaviours belongs to addicts and losers. But there is a lack of awareness in the general population around whakamā and its debilitating effects, whilst you might be living a good life, you might not be living your fullest life, so I challenge you, as a start to look at the 'ugly' parts of yourself. As the number one killer of Māori, we should be uncovering and getting at 'whakamā'. Or perhaps we are still just too ashamed to see it.

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