

BOOK EXCERPT

# Embracing Shame

How to Stop  
Resisting Shame  
& Turn It into a  
Powerful Ally

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## INTRODUCTION

We wrote this book to bring awareness to something that far too often stays hidden. If you judge yourself harshly; if you've ever frozen up or felt suddenly embarrassed, anxious, or confused without understanding why; if you work hard to do everything right so no one will suspect there's something's wrong with you; or if something from your past often troubles you and sneaks into your thoughts when it's not wanted, this book is for you. Like countless others, you may be affected by one of the most powerful, painful, and invisible emotions: shame. And if you're ready to free yourself from the debilitating beliefs and habits that shame can cause, we invite you to join us on this healing journey.

We're a husband-and-wife team who founded the Center for Healing Shame. We've taught our Healing Shame workshops to thousands of therapists, clinicians, teachers, coaches, nurses, and helping professionals worldwide for almost two decades. We are proud to call these helping professionals our students. Along the way, we've fostered a network of Healing Shame professionals dedicated to helping people internationally. We're on a mission to educate as many people as possible on how to heal shame.

Most people feel they never received proper operating directions for their life. In this book, you'll learn some of those missing instructions, and you'll learn to not judge yourself—whether stepping on the scale, putting on a swimsuit, working on that writing project, or even making love. You'll learn to not criticize yourself for reading one book instead

## INTRODUCTION

of two, for saying the wrong thing to your kids, or for messing up an assignment at work. You'll experience more balance and have an inner support coach available at all times. You'll learn to integrate all the pieces of yourself to become more authentic and express what you're feeling. You'll learn more ways to replenish yourself, remain grounded, and move forward in life in the way you truly want.

A major part of being human involves being a social creature who needs others. We need others to understand us, and it can feel debilitating when they don't. As a result, we might ruminate afterward, asking ourselves, *What's wrong with me?* or *Was that my fault?* hundreds of times. Far too often, when we share those doubts with others—for example, a close friend or therapist—they encourage us to move on and stop worrying, but then we receive their “helpful” dismissal as more shaming, which only adds to our pain and confusion.

This book is the result of our work with ourselves and with our students and clients. Throughout it, we'll be sharing lots of personal stories, both our own and those of our students, who are all helping professionals, and our clients. All of the stories are true and told with permission. Some are composites, and some details have been changed to assure privacy. In our workshops and private sessions, we try to create a counter-shaming environment—that is, one in which we help lessen the shame people bring in with them—and we hope you experience the same counter-shaming support as you read this book.

Shame is an important and difficult emotion that's far too commonly dismissed and misunderstood. Shame does not simply have to be tolerated. We don't have to remain afraid or ashamed of our shame. Rather than push shame away, strange as this may sound, we encourage our clients and students to embrace it—to acknowledge it, to explore it, and to learn the lessons it is trying to teach. Once we embrace shame, it loses much of its power over us.

There is an old adage that says, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” This refers to the idea that we want to know what our enemies are up to so we can be prepared and suffer as little harm as possible. Shame,

in its full power, may be an enemy. But shame, when it is understood and softened, can become a friend.

We believe there is an evolutionary purpose to shame, that all societies can benefit from a healthy relationship to shame, and that, if we embrace shame, it can be transformed from a horrifying inner demon to a powerful ally. We believe—as radical as this may sound—that shame can be transformed from toxic and destructive to useful and healthy.

Shame is a difficult and loaded topic, which is why most people avoid talking or thinking about it. As you read this book, we urge you to be gentle with yourself. Go through this material in whatever way feels right to you. You can start at the beginning or go directly to the chapters that pique your interest. You can stop and take a break at any time. We urge you to try some of the practices—they'll offer a more visceral experience that will help all the information this book contains sink in deeper. Above all, be kind to yourself. Make sure you breathe as you read. Put your hand on your heart and remember that you are good enough. If something in the content triggers you, take a break and return to the material whenever it feels right for you.

While this book is written for everyone, much of it can be extremely useful for helping professionals. Most people have trouble coping with shame, and most professionals have trouble helping clients when they are in shame. Additionally, when clients experience shame and react to it, helping professionals will often have their own shame triggered. For that reason, this book contains many tools you can use personally—not only to help you understand and heal your own shame, but also to demystify and heal shame in people you are working with.



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## Shame—The Magic Emotion

*Shame is a complex and typically hidden emotion. We all experience it. But oftentimes we're not aware of the secret ways it operates.*

—John Amodeo

We want to invite you to welcome all of your emotions as you begin this book. Dealing with shame can be a bumpy ride. Shame can arise at any time, often when you least expect it. As you read, you might experience uncomfortable feelings and realizations, or you might find yourself remembering times in your life that were upsetting and scary. Shame can be a scary and difficult emotion because we are socialized to fear it and therefore avoid it. It takes courage and curiosity to face shame and work with it, but the rewards of doing so can be tremendous.

There's a quality of magic in how powerful and mysterious shame is. We also call shame *the magic emotion* because Sheila was a magician (still is in her own way), and magicians work with misdirection—they distract your attention so you won't see them move the card from their sleeve to their hand or take the coin from behind their back to your ear. All the while, you're convinced you know what's going on.

Shame distracts you by making everything confusing and blurry. Shame focuses you on yourself; it's an incredibly self-conscious emotion. You start focusing more on yourself and less on the people and events around you, getting lost in internal conversations about what's wrong with you, just like a magician's sleight of hand. That's how you lose touch with present reality.

Because shame is so subtle and so powerful, we approach it gently, step-by-step. Shame is a lot like nitroglycerin—a little bit goes a long way. If you don't treat it with respect and care, you might wind up with an explosion. But nitroglycerin in the proper dose can be beneficial—to relax blood vessels and help the heart function properly, for example. That's how shame functions too. Used in the right way, shame is valuable medicine.

## WHAT IS SHAME?

Shame is the opposite of life force, the opposite of what moves us forward, the opposite of what gives us energy and vitality. Shame keeps us stuck; it freezes us. One definition of shame we like to use is this: *shame is both a primary emotion and a state of freeze*. By *primary emotion*, we mean that shame seems to be experienced by people all over the world. Although some animals appear to feel shame, only in humans does shame express itself with exceptional power. By *state of freeze*, we're referring to the unique way that shame disrupts our ability to think clearly. Our attention turns inward, and we become so absorbed in criticizing ourselves that we lose contact with the world.

Brené Brown offers a three-part definition of shame: “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”<sup>1</sup> Brown's definition describes, first, the physical component of shame—how excruciatingly painful it can be; second, the mental component—the belief that there is something wrong with us; third, we come to believe that, because of our perceived flaws, we are undeserving of love and belonging.

Gershen Kaufman defines “shame as the breaking of the interpersonal bridge.”<sup>2</sup> We humans feel safe when we're connected to others. Consciously



and unconsciously, we're always on the lookout for connection, and we react strongly when we perceive even the smallest break in attachment, whether between romantic partners, children and their parents or guardians, or friends. The more important the relationship is to us, the greater our emotional wounding when there's a break in attunement. Sometimes what damages the interpersonal bridge might seem minor; it could be as simple as someone looking at their cellphone while you're talking with them. You might try to reason your way out of feeling hurt, but there's something about their behavior that triggers your childhood experience of being ignored and abandoned.

In our work, we often talk about the *90/10 Split*. As a rule, when something relatively small kicks off a powerful shame reaction, 90 percent of that is due to past experiences; only 10 percent is coming from the trigger itself. That's not always the case, of course, but it's almost always true that strong shame experiences have to do with things we had to live through as children.

No matter what causes a rift in the interpersonal bridge, it's crucial to restore the connection. If that doesn't occur, we can be left with toxic shame. The basic formula that applies here is the three Rs: *Relationship, Rupture, Repair*. If there's a rupture and it can be repaired by somebody apologizing or promising to behave differently next time—or there is a compassionate clarifying of what happened—then the shame is minimized and, in fact, can result in what we call *healthy shame*.

Hopefully, these three definitions give you a good sense of how pervasive and important shame is. We believe they also point the way to how we can heal and transform shame. If we view shame as the breaking of the interpersonal bridge, the path to healing begins with rebuilding connection.

Shame happens in the body as well as the mind.

## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF SHAME

Shame happens in the body as well as the mind. Shame affects the way we stand, move, breathe, and feel. Our nervous system reads and reacts to a perceived threat, which readies our body to react. The most extreme threat for us humans is exile from our community or family, which often gets triggered when we sense disapproval or humiliation or have the experience of being dismissed or ignored.

When we feel shame, our body starts to contract. Our chest collapses and our head comes forward and lowers so that we are looking down toward our feet rather than out at the world. When the chest collapses like this, it becomes difficult to breathe.

An *action tendency* is a behavior or reaction linked to a particular emotion. The action tendency of shame is to hide, disappear, or freeze in place. Shame makes us feel small, so we shrink physically and mentally. Without being able to breathe fully, our focus narrows. Sometimes it can even be hard to speak or think. Shame severs our access to language and higher-level cognition.

## THE SHAME-PRIDE CONTINUUM

The opposite of shame is pride. Healthy pride is a positive regard for yourself even when you acknowledge limitations and fallibilities. Healthy pride doesn't mean that you think you're better than others; it's the result of accomplishing meaningful goals that have required effort on a foundation of simple positive regard.

On one end of the shame-pride continuum is pride in the self at its best—pride for worthy accomplishments, for example. On the other side of this continuum is the self at its worst—all the stuff we don't want anybody to know or see. At any moment, we're balancing how we show up with ourselves with how we show up with other people, and all of us are performing this balancing act on a regular basis.

It's important to be able to connect with a sense of accomplishment, a sense of achievement. Some people find it hard to contact that experience, but most of us have something in our lives that we're proud of—our

children, for example, or maybe somebody we've helped along the way. Most of us also have people in our lives who've helped or inspired us in some way, and it can also ease our feelings of shame to bring them to mind. Our nervous system can start to feel safe again, and the state of freeze we experience in relation to shame can relax.

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**PRACTICE**

Try to remember something you're proud of. Something you did or said that felt really good. It could be something recent or something that happened a long time ago. Take a deep breath, recall the experience as clearly as you can, and see if you're able to connect with that sense of pride.

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**PENDULATING, RESOURCING, AND COUNTER-SHAMING**

We want to introduce three concepts to help you stay grounded and present as we go deeper into the material in this book. The first is *pendulating*. Just like the pendulum of a clock, our nervous system never stays put—it moves from one side of the spectrum to the other, calm one minute and excited the next. We can feel quite upset about something and then we cheer up and then eventually we feel gloomy again and so on. It's what our minds naturally do. But shame stops pendulation. When you're frozen in shame—focused on how bad you are and everything that's wrong with you—that's where you'll tend to stay.

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**PRACTICE**

As you read this book, you may notice shame coming up. That's a natural response. As you read on, we encourage you to feel how

much is okay for your nervous system at any given time. If it stops feeling okay, pendulate to thinking about (or doing) something that feels nurturing for you: if it's available to you, get up and move around, look at a favorite picture or painting, talk to a friend, or pet your dog or cat. By taking a break, you can pendulate away from being absorbed in shame and then pendulate back to experiencing it when you feel more ready.

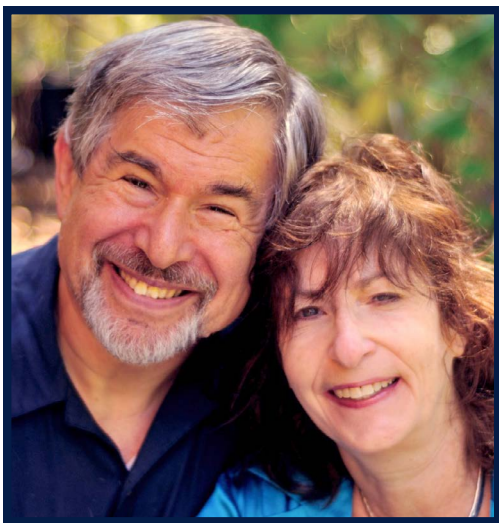
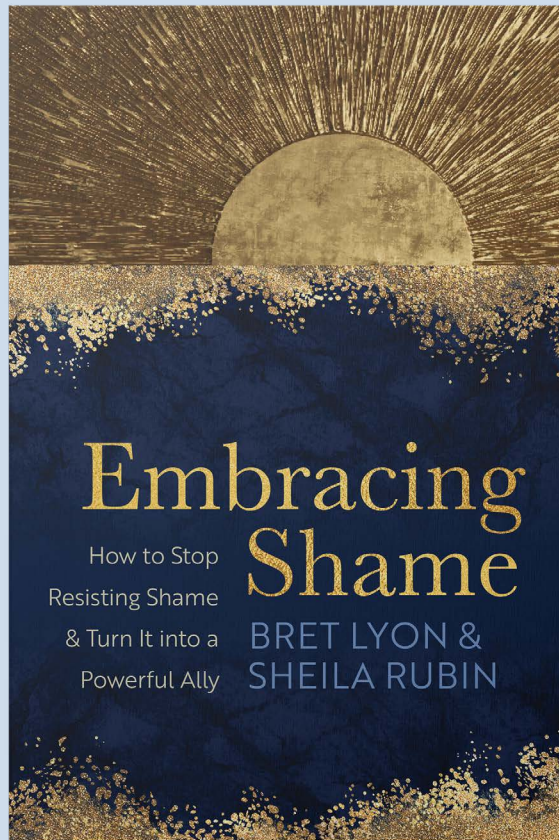


The second concept is *resourcing*. Shame is an under-resourced state that affects the nervous system. When we're in shame, we're basically frozen. It's a protective response in which the amygdala takes over and we lose access to higher-level thinking. You've probably noticed this phenomenon before when arguing with someone who was really activated or when you were the person in the argument who was agitated or triggered.

When we're in shame, we forget we have resources: all the things we do that bring calm and a feeling of competence that tell our nervous system it can relax again. It's crucial that we find and remember resources when working with shame to not get lost in it and cause yet more shame in the process. Resources can be internal or external. Breathing, sensing our feet on the ground, and feeling the energy of our body can be internal resources. External resources include supportive friends, people or pets who've loved us in the past, positive characters in literature or movies, and soothing places we've been to that made us happy or where we felt at peace. Getting in touch with our resources sends signals to the brain and heart that we're safe, and this counters our stress reactions to shame. Our body's state of arousal is quieted, which allows our more evolved systems (rational thought, language, and the ability to see the bigger picture) to come back online.

*Counter-shaming*, the third concept, is more specific to the content of the shame itself. It involves examining the bigger picture and all the details that get lost in the shame freeze, as well as actively countering harmful messages with self-talk.

1. Brené Brown, "Shame vs. Guilt," January 15, 2013, [brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/](http://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/).
2. Gershen Kaufman, "The Meaning of Shame: Toward a Self-Affirming Identity," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 21, no. 6 (1974): 568-574.



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