



# Embracing Shame

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

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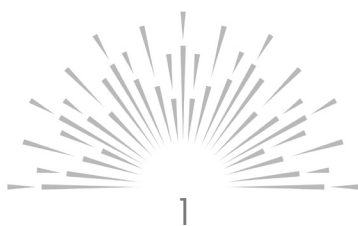


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## Shame—The Magic Emotion

*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.

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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.

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## PRACTICE

While reading this book, if something triggers a shame reaction and your inner critic starts telling you how deficient you are, be on the lookout for *always* and *never* statements. For example, if you hear your inner voice say something like, *You never do it right!* try out a counter-shaming statement such as, *Actually, I got it right yesterday when I . . .* You can counter, *You always do that stupid thing they're talking about in this book,* with something like, *Well, maybe I do sometimes, but I often realize it and then change my behavior.* While the inner critic tends to speak in generalities, you can get specific and counter that voice with a more compassionate and realistic look at the situation.

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## THE PURPOSE OF SHAME

Every emotion we experience has developed and been refined over thousands (and likely millions) of years of evolution. In proper balance, any emotion is useful. The problem arises when one becomes too powerful and disturbs the balance: we end up with too much of one emotion and not enough of another. Shame is often referred to as the *master emotion* because it modulates and interferes with other emotions so that we don't take action.

Our survival as a species relates to the fact that we are the most social of all animals. Humans have the longest childhood, and we're the most dependent on our parents and society to survive and thrive. As children, we are unlikely to make it without caretakers and a system of support around us. Even as adults, we still need connection with others, not only for happiness, but for our long-term survival. All of this to say that shame is a social emotion.

Shame is designed to help us navigate society's rules and customs so we have a better chance of survival. In this way, shame is meant to

keep us out of trouble with others, and few of us would be comfortable in a shameless society, where everybody did whatever they wished with no regard for the feelings and needs of others. A little bit of shame then keeps us in line. Shame reminds us where the boundaries are.

Unfortunately, society's rules aren't always logical, known, compassionate, or understood. Additionally, shame thrives on difference. We're all unique in our own way, but if our differences aren't resolved in a healthy way with others, societal shaming occurs as a result.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHAME AND GUILT

People often ask us about the distinction between shame and guilt. For us, the two are quite different. Guilt is localized—it refers to feeling bad about something you did. Shame, on the other hand, is global—you're convinced that you are bad, defective, and unworthy of love and belonging. Guilt is more cognitive; shame is felt in the body.

Guilt involves agency, as in *I did something wrong that needs to be fixed*. Shame feels powerless. For many, shame feels like a cloak or an ooze that's put on them, or an unfixable hole or wound deep inside. Developmentally, guilt comes later than shame because guilt involves a developed sense of right and wrong. Shame is a primary emotion with us from birth; guilt is secondary.

Western society has shame about shame—feeling shame and talking about it are often viewed as shameful. In part, this book is about countering that view. By understanding the purpose of shame, as well as how it works and affects us, we can begin to look at it with curiosity and learn to appreciate the information it can provide us.

Guilt, on the other hand, is a socially acceptable emotion. People are often proud of their guilt; it's evidence that they're good and moral. Perhaps because of this, many people use the word *guilt* when they really mean *shame*. They may be saying, "I did something wrong, and I feel guilty," when what they really mean (and what they feel inside) is "I did something wrong. That shows that I'm bad, flawed, defective, and unworthy."

*Sheila's Childhood Shyness*

In high school, I felt so shy and embarrassed that I was often scared of talking to other kids. Even so, when I saw a sign for a workshop to learn how to become a peer counselor, I felt the call. Although my shyness was profoundly painful back then, the part of me that wanted to help others was there too. I imagined how to talk to someone who came for counseling. I could imagine the scenes and my ability to help them. In reality, I couldn't do the partner practices in the training workshop because I was afraid of all the eye contact and felt embarrassed doing the revealing exercises. But later on in life, those scenes I'd imagined in which I was helpful to others guided me to become a therapist. 🌅

**RESPONDING TO SHAME**

Although we teach about shame all the time, we still have trouble dealing with it at times. You probably do too. Most people try to stay as far away as possible from noticing and exploring shame, but establishing a healthy relationship with shame requires us to approach and understand it.

There are two major ways that people respond to too much shame. First, people can get lost in it. They know they have shame because it's overwhelming and it makes their life hard, but they don't know what to do about it. Second are the people who don't even know they have shame. They might act in ways that are peculiar or in ways they may not understand (and certainly in ways people around them don't understand) because they're reacting against their shame or denying it. They're not in touch with the shame that underlies so much of their behavior.

Because everybody experiences shame in some measure, we want to give you a roadmap to help you navigate shame in a way that gives you a sense of being okay with it. We want to help you be able to look right at the shame and deal with it so shame will just be part of your life and not something that completely blocks or freezes you—not something that you feel compelled to avoid. This is a difficult task because shame

is like the many-headed Hydra of Greek mythology. Dealing with all of those heads is a challenging but doable task.

## SHAME SIGNALS AND SHAME SPIRALS

Let's take a look at some of the ways shame manifests and the signals that indicate when shame is present. This can give you a new understanding of what happens to you and to the people around you when shame comes into the picture.

When we feel shame, we don't feel like relating. We either pull in to protect ourselves or push others away. Shame is at the root of the inner critic and perfectionism, and it binds with other emotions, like anger and fear, so it is often hard to detect. Unhealed shame may be a major contributor to depression, eating disorders, addictions, domestic violence, bullying, narcissism, and other dynamics that can get in the way of healthy relationships with ourselves and others. Understanding shame indicators will shed light on some of the blind spots of your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

### *A Student Describes Shame*

For me, it's a deep sense of not being worthy associated with my muscles tensing and a loss of awareness about my body. It's difficult to stay focused and keep my attention on the group. My heart races, my breathing quickens when it's my turn to speak, it's hard to remember what I wanted to say, and it's difficult to think critically and with much depth. I carry the legacy of shame for my family—from my mother to my grandmother and on up the line. I desperately needed love, attunement, curiosity, and warmth. I was like a spore that had decided it needed to go into survival mode until there were more viable conditions. I just needed a little warmth and tender care to be able to flourish and believe that I was worth making better decisions for myself. 🌅

Some people experience shame instantly. They start to hear what sounds like their own voice putting themselves down. Other people