

THE SHAME FACTOR

Heal Your Deepest Fears
and Set Yourself Free

STEPHAN B. POULTER, PH.D.

 **Prometheus Books**

59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228

FOREWORD

by Dr. William Carter Felts

Self-image is more important than any other factor in determining direction, success, and overall happiness in life. This “ground zero” influences all of our choices, perspectives, and perceptions.

In his seventh book, renowned psychologist Dr. Stephan Poulter explores the profound emotional experience of shame. No emotion in a man or woman’s life is more confusing, debilitating, and damaging than shame.

What is shame? Its insidious nature is complicated and difficult to explain. You can live with all of the symptoms of this debilitating emotional condition and never want or be able to identify the origin. In *The Shame Factor*, Dr. Poulter exposes the secret and nonfunctional nature of this psychological malaise.

He carefully dissects the root cause of shame, how it originates, and the many ways in which it can manifest and severely damage our lives. Understanding the origin and nature of shame is the first step in bringing awareness and healing to this misunderstood emotion.

Beyond simply defining shame, Dr. Poulter provides a road map to healing using insights, techniques, and exercises that have proven successful in many years of clinical practice. Self-acceptance and a person’s identity can be negatively impacted by the unseen role and harmful nature of shame.

In broader terms, the understanding and clarity Dr. Poulter provides can apply to “imposter syndrome,” fear of rejection, and all kinds of insecurity and self-doubt. He shows the emotional and psy-

chological connection between shame and the negative self-image responsible for the majority of our suffering.

When trying to develop clarity about our “deep inner self,” I find it immensely helpful to expand the definition to include living a shame-free life. The day-to-day integration of psychology and the emotional insight given in this book can aid us in our understanding of self.

Dr. Poulter is unique in his credentials and perspective because of his additional training in theology and law enforcement. His inclusive and comfortable presentation style resembles a personal meeting with him. Without being overly academic or philosophical, he speaks to you in a manner that is practical, safe, and full of hope. I’m looking forward to the powerful transformation this book will have in your life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my family, who are powerful loving souls: Miriam, Madison Wendy, Jonathan Brett, Matthew, and Julia.

Additionally, I want to thank and extend my hands to those who have helped me discover, heal, and live a shame-free life. Many of you have no idea of the positive impact and lasting impression you made in my life. Special thanks to my editor, Steven L. Mitchell; Brad Jenkins; Christopher Casey; Erik Odom; Carter Felphs; Barry Weichman; Jim Myerson; Evan C; Dave D; Paramahansa Yogananda; Jay Grossman; Sean Novak; Jack Levy; my late parents, Peter and Charlotte Poulter; Debbie Davis; Peter Chang; the late Grace Chang; and to all my clients over the years. Additionally, the following were instrumental in helping form me and this book within me: Paraiso Way neighborhood, Valley View, Dan Curtis, Coach Goorjian, Coach Goffredo, Paul Roberts, La Crescenta, COTW Church, CVHS, USC, GPD, Dr. Winston Gooden, Barbara Zax, Lunada Bay Little League Baseball, 11980, and the shame-factor process.

THE PREFACE OF SHAME: ON A PERSONAL LEVEL

It always seems impossible until it is done.

—attributed to Nelson Mandela

My journey with shame started early on. I had many personal challenges. I had a speech problem, a terrible time with learning how to read, and I wore glasses when it was a stigma to have four eyes. When I was around six or seven years old, I knew something didn't feel right inside of me. I knew it wasn't mental illness because I saw plenty of that in my family and relatives. This feeling of terror and despair in my stomach was an all-too-common experience. What was it? I couldn't describe it; I could only feel it.

My reading problem became a source of personal contention with my parents. I was always in the lowest reading group during elementary school. This feeling of inadequacy was my closest and best friend. I just couldn't mentally put things together, and I struggled with reading out loud in class. I tried so hard, but my mind just didn't process it. I got Ds for reading all through elementary school, which was catastrophic for me and impacted how I felt I was viewed by my parents. I am not saying that a lot of other things weren't happening at home, but poor reading grades were the bane of my young life. Finally, in the sixth grade, my teacher had me read to her privately. I got my first A in reading. I literally, for the first time, felt I was the luckiest kid in the world as I mastered how to read. Unfortunately, the damage was done. The self-loathing of feeling stupid, defective,

and odd was already set in cement. I tried to hide my emotional malaise, but it was never far away.

Growing up in the 1970s and early 1980s, no one talked about anything below the surface of life. There was an emotional gag order on expressing anything negative or remotely emotional insightful. I had figurative gray duct tape around my heart and soul. This continued through childhood and into early adulthood. It wasn't until my second major romantic breakup that I realized I had to do something. My heart felt like it was hemorrhaging emotional pain, and I chronically felt I was "defective" and "not good enough." When I would mention my emotional malaise to my closet buddies, they would look at me oddly, like my beagle does when I refuse to give her my dinner. I clearly had a problem that no one else felt or that they just didn't talk about. This realization post-college was even more upsetting. On paper my life looked fine; I just didn't feel fine.

It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I finally sought out a therapist. I had to do something because the future didn't look or feel very promising. I didn't tell anyone that I was going to get professional help because none of my friends or family had ever done that before.

Putting words to this "dis-ease" and emotional malaise seemed impossible. I didn't feel depressed, and not particularly anxious, but I just felt seriously defective. On our first visit, I said to my therapist, "I feel really messed up on the inside. What is it? Because I feel terrible and empty inside?"

My mild-mannered psychologist looked at me and said, "Stephan, you are struggling with shame!" Finally, my emotional terrorist was named and exposed. The relief I began to feel over the following months was tremendous.

Shame was now formally named. The state of not knowing what was wrong with me had been torture in itself. Not allowing shame to control my life has been a bumpy dirt road of a healing process ever since.

This book, *The Shame Factor*, is an in-depth exploration into the insidious unrecognized role shame plays in people's lives. Smart,

loving men and women tell me all the time that they don't have any shame. The denial, avoidance, and emotional amnesia of trauma is the perfect setting for shame's growth and control in our lives. In this book, we will discuss childhood, family history, emotional expression, addiction, self-loathing, body image issues, career, money, love, sex, relationships, people pleasing, self-doubt, food concerns, embarrassment, imposter syndrome, and all the other factors of shame.

Shame is a very tricky psychological phenomenon, but we will look at it systematically so you can see how it has affected you and decide how you want to manage it. I know you have the courage to read this book and continue your journey to living a shame-free life. Let's start this process.

There is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly.

—R. Buckminster Fuller,
“Everything I Know,” 1975

SECTION I

WHAT IS SHAME AND
WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.

—Gloria Anzaldúa,
Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 1987

All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.

—Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, 1955

Until you make the unconscious conscious it will direct your life, and you will call it fate.

—attributed to Carl Jung

CHAPTER 1

THE SHAME FACTOR: WHAT IS IT, DOCTOR? EXPOSING THE BIG SECRET

For reasons rooted in the values of contemporary culture, the concept of shame had until recently all but vanished from discussions of emotional disarray. Now it is regarded by many psychologists as the preeminent cause of emotional distress in our time.

—Dr. Robert Karen, “Shame,”
Atlantic Monthly, February 1992

It’s like there is a hunter (shame) over your shoulder, and the hunter is always coming. And they’re going to find out that I am flawed and defective. They’re going to find out that I am not what I look like I am. My secret will be exposed.

—John Bradshaw,
Healing the Shame That Binds You, 1988

No mental health professional, psychologist, healer, or medical practitioner will debate that there are many different psychological and emotional issues, personality disorders, and chronic human conditions in life. None of these disorders have the deceptively negative influence and residual toxic power of shame—none! Shame is one of the most universally traumatic emotional states, fraught with irrational beliefs and paralyzing experiences for people of all ages (after about the age of five) and races, spanning all economic and educa-

tional levels. No one is immune or exempt from shame, one of the most highly underrecognized and terribly misunderstood of all human emotions and states of being. Shame is clearly a taboo topic and is rarely discussed in therapy or outside the therapy office. I have been in practice for a long time (over thirty years) and my clients look at me with an air of suspicion and mistrust when I ask, “Tell me about the role shame plays in your life?” The typical response is, “What shame? I am not guilty of anything, and I don’t have shame.” That response, and the professional silence on the issue, is why shame is the most common emotional or psychological condition to remain untreated, unhealed, and unexposed. My clients are dramatically more comfortable discussing more familiar topics like anxiety or depression, or verbally bashing their ex-husband or wife. Because of shame’s complexity and insidious nature, it is difficult to discuss or describe. I often describe the physical experience of shame as trying to nail sand to the wall and wondering why you can’t get a handle on it.

SHAME IS NOT GUILT

Guilt is directly associated with a wrong action or poor behavior that violates one’s moral values. Shame is a much different beast. Before we define the inner workings of shame, let’s first describe in detail the raw, dark experience of it. Both writers quoted at the beginning of the chapter are identifying the social, personal, and psychological gravity of shame in its role of creating irrational personal beliefs that separate us from the people we love—and ultimately from ourselves.

Working Definition of Shame

For our discussion purposes, I am defining shame as the following:

a primary emotional wound, not a secondary belief, based on a particular action; a paralyzing emotional, mental, psychological state of mind that distorts a person’s view of themselves in their world and with others,

preventing them from developing a loving sense of self and impairing the individual from developing trusting, secure, safe relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding; a chronic fear state of being discovered as a phony, a fraud, and an imposter.

The person is emotionally incapable of feeling like a valuable and productive adult, has an underdeveloped inner sense of self, and lacks personal self-acceptance. This is further characterized by a negative inner self-portrait and an unclear perspective of relationships with self and others.

This definition is not out of a book or from a particular theory but from thousands of clients and friends (me included) who have struggled with this distorted, ugly, and blinding emotional state. The far-reaching influence of being ashamed isn't limited to any particular situation in a person's life. It is pervasive. Like physical cancer, it becomes the driving force in all of your decisions: romantic, financial, sexual, health, career, parenting, etc. There is no area of functioning, feeling, and living that isn't colored or touched by this silent shadow. Shame in psychological theory is frequently referred to as a person's "shadow" side, part of the unwanted and disowned aspects of their personality.¹ Clearly, if you feel ashamed, you don't want to expose or explore these aspects of your behavior or emotions. Concealing these feelings and beliefs from everyone can begin as early as age five. This concealment process is called the false, or public self versus the real, wounded self.² Throughout this book we will explore how to reconcile the false self with the true inner self. Exposure and emotional rewiring (section III) is the pathway to your transformation and inner healing. If left untreated, shame has the potential to completely and thoroughly take control of any man or woman's life (a prime example is the fact that virtually all addictive behaviors are shame-based).³

Real Life Victims of Shame

My client Dave, age fifty-three, is a very successful tract-home developer in the greater Southern California area who struggles with

random emotional paralyzing bouts of shame. Regardless of his career accomplishments, Dave feels inadequate and inferior and is often prone to raging verbal outbursts toward his employees, wife, family, and colleagues. Dave has the reputation of having anger management issues. (I personally don't believe that there is such a thing as anger management issues—rather, anger is a symptom of untreated shame, as we will discuss.) He recently lost his emotional composure with a home loan officer and was arrested for making death threats to everyone in the bank. Dave recounts this story, along with many others, saying, “I suddenly feel this surge of embarrassment, my stomach drops, and I feel this hole inside of me open up, and I can't stop the rage from coming out. I know I don't really believe what I am screaming, but it has a life of its own.” Dave explains that his rage outbursts come and go quickly and do a lot of relationship and emotional damage in his life. He feels incredibly mentally defective, emotionally damaged, and beyond help or repair. When we started to discuss the undercurrent of shame in his career, marriage, childhood, health, friendships, and his relationship with his children, Dave began to see the different emotional connections, reaction patterns, self-loathing, and chronic negative self-talk playing out in his life constantly. We will discuss Dave's story, progress, and prognosis further in section II of this book.

My client Emily presents a different storyline, but her core issue is the same as Dave's. Emily is a nineteen-year-old college freshman at a major local university in Los Angeles, who has been secretly cutting her lower stomach and pelvis area with scissors, razor blades, and thumb tacks since she was twelve years old. Whenever Emily becomes upset, ashamed, or embarrassed, or when a friend is mad at her, she impulsively engages in this self-mutilation. Emily came to see me because she is frightened that her self-hatred, perfectionism, and false social image is falling apart. In the past, she has been hospitalized for self-destructive behavior, with little or no behavioral change. During our first therapy session, I asked Emily what she was so ashamed of or was hiding from. She looked out my office window

and said, “I have a lot of secrets and no one will believe me. I hate myself and my life. Yet I don’t want to die. I have good days, then this rage boils up in me and I lose my shit and hurt myself.” Emily paused and listened to the possibility that shame could be an emotional issue she had never considered or understood. She was very interested in the idea that her unresolved, untreated shame was a primary driving emotional force in her life. We will revisit Emily in section II of the book, when we talk about body image and shame.

FIVE EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS OF SHAME

1. Shame Is the “Emotional Cancer” of Your Heart and Soul

The best way I know how to express the power of shame is to liken it to an emotional cancer of the human heart and mind. We all know what a cancer of any type or magnitude can do to the human body by attacking a person’s health and vitality. Shame functions the same way on an emotional and spiritual level. It rebels against the heart and soul of an individual in the same way that a cancerous tumor attacks the person’s body. Rebellion of any sort against your healthy sense of self is never an easy issue to address or to see clearly. Emotional cancer can literally kill you (for example, through a drug overdose) or can sabotage you in its attempt to remain in control. Regardless of its insidious and intrinsic nature, shame is an issue that is treatable, but it must be addressed head on in order to move forward on your life and spiritual path.

The lasting legacy of emotional shame is that you feel you are secretly and privately defective, always hiding that you are not being good enough or that there is something “not enough” about you, which is counterintuitive to your self-acceptance process. The “hunter” in the John Bradshaw quote is your shame, always terrorizing you and threatening to emotionally blackmail you into remaining a victim, captive and psychologically repressed. Shame is an awful taskmaster, driving you into complete despair and hopelessness. This reaction is

in direct opposition to having a fulfilling life journey, which is expansive, loving, caring, forgiving, and compassionate. Two entirely direct paths that have two entirely different outcomes for your life. Shame is incompatible with your divine, intuitive, and loving nature. Many religious scholars refer to shame as our sinful nature, our fallen self, or simply as evil. Clearly, shame isn't our highest self or pure nature; it's the ego's control at its worst.

2. The “Big Secret” of Shame

One of the salient features of being a victim of shame is that it leaves its victim feeling flawed, unlovable, and/or disposable or replaceable. The core belief that you are of no value to the world and the loved ones in your life impairs and sabotages any significant personal development. Another way to put this is that you have a chronic, deep-seated fear that your coworkers, romantic partner, children, neighbors, and clients will discover that you are a fraud. The nagging voice in your head keeps telling you that “You really aren't any good. You are incompetent and incapable of doing or being whom and what you pretend to be. Eventually, everyone will find out about your terrible secret.” This isn't an occasional emotional state, but rather the inner emotional geography of your fragmented sense of self and stalled self-acceptance process. The feelings of shame are chronic, but their emotional intensity can vary from low to extreme.

3. Shame Is an Inside Job, Not Something Outside of You

Shame isn't alleviated by selfless actions or loving gestures. Shame doesn't decrease with any type of outward behaviors, wealth, education, love, sex, or relationships. Shame is immune to all outward treatment or healing actions directed at it via drugs or any other mind-numbing behaviors (i.e., alcoholism, gambling, sex, or any addictive behavior). Addictive behaviors can momentarily silence your inner shame critic, but never for very long or without leading to

more self-loathing later. Shame can only be addressed, treated, and removed from your life with an inward approach that involves self-acceptance, self-love, and your newly acquired emotional awareness.

4. Chronic Fear of Not Feeling “Good Enough”

Shame chronically slices away at a person’s sense of self-acceptance, preventing them from developing any degree of personal autonomy or sense of competence. It also prevents a person from properly developing inner confidence and the belief that their true self is lovable, acceptable, or good enough. How could anyone ever trust or believe in what you have to say or do when you are harboring the big unspoken secret that says you’re a fraud (imposter syndrome)? I can’t begin to describe how many of my clients over the years identify these exact feelings and yet still argue that it’s their personality that is the problem, and it is their plight in life to feel deficient and like a “phony.” Many of the shame-driven people that I work with are some of the greatest individuals I have ever encountered. Unfortunately, they are addicted to their shame belief system like a dog is attached to a bone (my beagle and a bone—inseparable). They don’t let go of the addiction until the emotional trauma caused by the shame cycle blows up their life. The huge explosion usually occurs in their relationships, finances, career, or health, and can be brought about through the death of a loved one or a family crisis (see section II). It is only at a point of complete despair that a personal awakening begins to become possible, as the person becomes aware of the truly deceptive power of shame. Only then will he consider the possibility of healing and resolving these powerful life-long self-defeating emotions, beliefs, and actions.

5. Shame’s Emotional Super Glue: Addiction Mixed with Shame

It’s my professional and personal experience that the issues surrounding shame are the least understood, least diagnosed, and least

discussed emotional concepts in all the various types of psychological therapy modalities, including twelve-step recovery programs and peer counseling. The powerful emotional combination of addiction and shame is a force within a person's life that has to be reconciled; otherwise, the prognosis for healing is bleak. For instance, it is much easier to discuss depressive bipolar issues than the intangible power of self-loathing, self-hatred, and addictive behaviors—which are all motivated by shame. Psychologically speaking, shame is a deep-seated belief and feeling that is part and parcel of all maladaptive, self-defeating, and self-destructive behaviors. Shame isn't an action-related feeling or event but rather an *ongoing emotional malaise* that rears its ugly head at certain times in a person's life. It is a paralyzing feeling and a negative thought process that has no regard for a person's education, intelligence, wealth, or professional position. Shame knows no boundaries or limits in our lives.

As painful as shame is, it does seem to be the guardian of the many secret, unexplored aspects of our being. Repressed shame must be experienced if we are to . . . come to terms with the good, the bad and the unique of what we are.

—Dr. Robert Karen, “Shame,”
Atlantic Monthly, February 1992

SHAME FACTOR: THE CLASSIC SYMPTOMS

The following shame severity scale contains some of the more common characteristics of shame-based behaviors and feelings that you might experience. Take an honest look at how you feel about yourself, your relationships, your romances, your sexual intimacy, authority figures, and your ongoing self-doubts, which are all influenced or fueled by shame-based emotional malaise. Understanding the silent ways shame lives and operates in your daily life is critical to exposing it, healing it, and permanently removing it from your life and spiritual path.

Nothing about you or your life circumstances is unacceptable, unlovable, or worthless. Nothing! Do not lose that perspective. Shame is a learned behavior that can be changed and healed.

Exposure Is Really Good

The first step on your recovery journey is to honestly examine your shame-based feelings, actions, and personality patterns up close *and* from a distance. It's important to mention at this juncture in our discussion that most people are involved with some form of personal growth or self-improvement, such as psychotherapy, mind and body healing, or support groups. No one is perfect, and personal growth is the process of healing and of reclaiming the underdeveloped parts of your personality. Developing personal awareness is the deliberate act of accepting your shame and making a commitment to healing it. If someone isn't inclined or interested in personal growth, then they are either living shame-free or they are avoiding their painful traumatic past.

You can think about shame as being experienced on a scale from zero to ten. A zero would mean living shame-free, and a ten would mean being fully consumed and controlled by self-destructive behaviors. Your experience of shame is personal, and it is something only you can diagnosis and treat. Below, we will discuss the shame scale and the wide range of the experiences of shame. Our life journey consists of learning, expanding our self-awareness, and transforming. Shame is a psychological and emotional malaise that can be left unnoticed and untreated for many years. Most people have some type of personal challenge, an area that needs improvement, and if shame is a factor, it will impair any positive personal change.

Unfortunately, most people stop at the critical point of confronting their "shameful" beliefs on their road to positive self-awareness. Don't stop, no matter how awful you feel or how scared you are. I assure you that this confrontation is well worth all the effort. The paralyzing fear of revealing your hidden secrets and toxic feelings is absolutely necessary to get past your current shame state.

It's a paradox because the very thing you desire is within you. Your uncomfortable feelings about yourself are the roadblocks to your immediate fulfillment and purpose. Acknowledging your shame and its incredible hold on you is a major transformational phase in your life. Staring your shame in the face with the limitless power of self-love and acceptance is applying the sun to morning fog. All your shame-based personal beliefs evaporate and disappear from your consciousness and daily life. Be brave and be honest with yourself. You can and will survive your shame exposure process. You don't want any more days living as an emotional prisoner to your shame.

Your Shame Scale and Shame Checklist: What's My Shame Status?

Remember, you aren't a monster. Shame is only a shadow in your closet of secrets. Turn the light on and look within your closet of old issues, addictions, and secrets. Everyone has a closet that needs to be cleaned out and restocked with new items. Before you move on to the shame checklist, think about rating your feelings of shame from zero (healed, shame-free) to ten (completely controlled by shame). The following scale will help you focus on where your normal shame level is, and how extreme it can become when triggered by certain events, feelings, or actions. All experiences of shame—whether on a daily, weekly, monthly, or random basis—are generally triggered by a distorted personality belief system concerning feelings, actions, or relationships (family, social, love, and sexual).

Your Shame Scale

0. Not your emotional issue.
1. You understand the concept but don't feel shame.
2. You occasionally feel shame about certain issues, but the feelings quickly dissipate.

3. You notice that certain events or experiences trigger a wave of shame, but those feelings don't last.
4. Sometimes you are scared to reveal the truth about yourself or a personal feeling.
5. You experience bouts of shame-based reactions and embarrassment. You feel enraged and like a fraud at work or with friends, and you are fearful of being exposed.
6. You have many days or moments when you feel exposed, enraged, and emotionally panicked about being discovered as a fraud or reprimanded for something.
7. It is difficult not to immediately escalate when you are being accused or questioned about a problem. You feel exposed and fearful. You react with intense anger; calming down after being triggered is very difficult.
8. You are told by people that you have an anger management problem. You engage in physical and heated verbal altercations as a means to protect your inner feelings. You are aggressive toward others when feeling shamed.
9. Your relationships are influenced and shaped by your powerful negative feelings, beliefs, and self-defeating shame-driven actions. Your life is controlled by your shame reactions. You struggle with addiction and thoughts of death or suicide. You cannot tolerate any conflict without extreme inappropriate reactions.
10. Your life is consumed with shame-based addictions and behaviors. You are incapable of functioning at your potential. You consider death as an escape plan or murder as an option. You are a danger to yourself and others, and you are resistant to seeking any type of assistance. These extreme reactions may be a result of severe drug abuse. Professional mental or medical help is necessary.

Your Own Shame Triggers.

The above shame scale is a barometer for your range and cycles of feeling shame as it flows through your heart, soul, body, and mind. This self-reflective, personal inventory of shame is critical to explore and consider as you answer the following questions. The statements below are examples of how you might react, what triggers your shame, and how you feel about yourself. The shame scale illustrates how far you allow your shame at times to control your relationships—including your relationship with yourself and with your close family and friends. It is important to restate that any degree of shame can be healed within you. Nothing is ever beyond your innate ability for change and healing within your heart and soul. Nothing! Changing your belief system surrounding your shame begins to allow you to experience peace of mind. Your personal emotional transformation is the way out of the shame-cycle maze. In section III we will explore some direct ways of removing your shame reactions, beliefs, and unresolved rage. Now consider the following traits, behaviors, beliefs, and triggers concerning how your personal version of shame operates in your day-to-day life.

What Are Your Shame Beliefs, Feelings, and Actions?

- You have an irrational fear of being exposed as a fraud/phony (imposter syndrome) in your career, job, and/or role as a manager.
- You cannot allow anyone to be too emotionally close for fear they might see your awful secrets and constant failings (your true “bad” self).
- You constantly worry what other people think or know about you and you believe that their opinion can’t be positive.
- You experience terrifying emotions about being embarrassed.
- You privately believe that you are an “angry” man/woman.
- When you experience intense feelings of rage or anger, afterward you experience intense feelings of regret and shame.

- Your emotional cycle of shame and regret is nonstop.
- You feel that there is a secret inside of you that can't ever come out or be seen by anyone you know or love.
- You tend to do things that are self-defeating.
- Sometimes you purposefully try to physically hurt yourself.
- You are privately convinced that people think you are a bad and worthless individual and a fraud or a phony.
- You blame yourself for anything that happens negatively in your life (because you deserve it).
- You have an explosive temper and/or anger management and self-acceptance issues.
- You have a history of physical violence and/or domestic violence.
- You become emotionally overwhelmed and feel “crazy” when you express any of your anger, frustration, or aggression.
- You experience emotional blackouts with no clear memory of what you said or did (not drug or alcohol related) when you become emotionally defensive or angry.
- Your feelings of anger or rage scare you so much that you will do anything to suppress them; this causes you to feel depressed and hopeless.
- You have strong shameful feelings about sex, your sexual orientation, and/or your sexuality.
- You have feelings of rage and wanting to physically hurt or punish others when you feel dismissed, discredited, or disrespected.
- You are secretly waiting for bad things to happen to you as punishment from God and/or the universe (because you feel that you deserve them).
- You really don't like yourself and secretly feel like a “loser.”
- You sincerely believe that no one can truly care for you or love you because you're “damaged goods.”
- You fantasize about dying when you experience intense feelings of shame.

- You can't accept compliments but only criticism.
- You feel this awful shame about yourself most of the time to a greater or lesser degree. It is always a part of your life.

What's your shame trigger? Which statement above hits your primary raw nerve and floods you with shame-based feelings? Think about your operating core beliefs that are part of your feelings of shame on a daily basis. Many issues surrounding shame are valuable sources of insight for your healing and resolution. One of the most commonly misunderstood elements of shame, for example, is how it is expressed when an individual is feeling it surge through her mind and heart. The response shame cycle is typically fueled by anger toward people or yourself or by extreme embarrassment. Anger and embarrassment are typical emotions to be triggered by feeling shameful.

These primary emotional responses have layers upon layers of collateral issues, feelings, and reactions attached to them (see section II for further explanations). For instance, no one would argue that a person who is expressing their shame-driven anger with violence or deadly force is in control. The person who cannot constructively express her anger and rage feels embarrassed and humiliated that she reacts the way she does. The problem is compounded emotionally because she tries to suppress this nonproductive automatic behavioral response. The inevitable failed attempt at not feeling mortified cycles into deeper feelings of self-loathing and hatred or, in the worst case, self-destructive actions. The cycle of shame is endless until you finally go beyond its reach. The ending of your shame-controlled life is the focus of the discussion in section III.

THE CYCLE OF SHAME: ANGER, EMBARRASSMENT, AND SELF-LOATHING

The shame scale and shame personal inventory list have these three parts of the shame cycle fueling your reactions, feelings,

and thoughts. Shame is the gasoline, and your triggers ignite the internal fire. Your reactions might be immediate, or they might take days or weeks to play out in your particular circumstances. During this repetitive shaming cycle, one of the five common issues (i.e., finances, romance, family, parenting, and health) in a person's life is adversely affected. Given years of experiencing this emotionally crippling cycle of feeling and suppressing shame, an individual ultimately feels emotionally drained and powerless. The low self-esteem energy causes daily life to be extremely painful, disappointing, and filled with chronic feelings of hopelessness. The shame cycle is relentless, and it is the primary cause for developing many serious personal problems, life-threatening challenges, and despair and suicide.

It is important to mention that any degree of shame-based anger is dangerous for both the holder and the people at whom it is directed. Many psychologists call this type of anger narcissistic or infantile anger expression.⁴ Rather than differentiate anger with many different subtypes, I am referring to any type of anger expression that is being generated from a shaming feeling or emotional defense as toxic and deadly for all parties involved.

Shame is usually expressed in one of three classic ways: anger, embarrassment/self-blame, or self-defeating choices. Which one of these three responses is your typical reaction to feelings of shame? We are going to explore all three reactions throughout the book, so you are no longer a prisoner to this damaging emotional cycle. This may seem obvious, but it needs to be said: No amount of personal, professional, social, or romantic shame-induced suffering is ever warranted or needed in your life. Shame tends to be a primary roadblock within a person's mind for moving forward in their life. Shame and personal change, self-acceptance, and inner transformation are incompatible. Shame is the emotional and psychological root cause of any type of self-doubt, self-loathing, anger management issues, and all degrees of self-hatred. It is why addressing these lifelong feelings and reactions is one of the pathways to emotionally freeing and liberating your inner true self.

Shame Cycle #1: No One Is Winning—Anger

If a man loses his temper and “goes off” verbally, he is considered dangerous, violent, or a bad guy. If a woman does the same and engages her shame-driven anger, she is considered a “bitch” or a very mean-spirited person. The truth is that neither individual is mean or inherently dangerous, but rather deeply hurt, misunderstood, and feeling powerless to stop their raw-nerve response to their long-standing wounds. These labels only intensify the anger, embarrassment, and self-loathing that a person feels when his or her shame cycles are triggered and come to the surface in any challenging encounter.

Going beyond your anger issues, emotional fears, and self-doubts are all critical parts to your life and journey. One of the goals for you in this book is this: *You no longer have to be defined by how your emotional needs and wounds control your life.* From this point and time on, you choose to define your adult life without your shame vetoing your choices. One of the challenges to healing your shame is learning to manage your angry impulses and random bouts of rage. Many times, men (in particular) are labeled as rage-a-holics when really it is their unresolved childhood emotional wounds being triggered. The primary root of all types of abuse in a relationship (be it physical, verbal, mental, sexual, or deadly violence) is unresolved shame fueled by years and years of anger. To sincerely address and heal your anger issues, the process must include insight into your neglected and ashamed inner-child. It’s not enough to acknowledge your anger issues—you need to go a step further and pull out the emotional roots by dismantling (meaning to explore how and why you feel shameful) your inner shame cycle.

For instance, I have an example of out of control anger and shame. This last fall, early on a Saturday morning, I was walking with a client to get some coffee. My client is a fourteen-year-old boy, who suffers from being chronically bullied at school. We walked into a local, family coffee shop, and a well-dressed, professional-looking man, approximately fifty years old, was dragging the clerk (male,

slim twenty-year-old college student) across the counter by his shirt. The clerk looked terrified, and everyone in the coffee shop looked stunned. Because I do animal comfort therapy for most of my teenager clients (they love the pooches), I had my two young beagles with me. This was a scary scene in the making. I spontaneously yelled at the male aggressor in a deep authoritative voice, “Hey, let go of the kid. You are scaring him.” Everyone was shocked (myself included), and the man released his two-handed death grip from the clerk’s shirt and walked out of the shop without saying a word. Of course, he was waiting for me outside the coffee shop, where he aggressively approached me and said, in a very hostile and threatening tone, “I am going to f— you up.”

I looked at my young client and told him to keep walking away. The hostile guy got within twenty-feet of us, and my two beagles became enraged and leapt to attack him. I have had both dogs since they were born, and I have never seen either of them react so violently. The guy stopped walking toward us, and screamed, “You f—ing a—hole, you pussy come back here!” My client and I walked back to the office, where he calmly said to me, “You know, Samantha and Stella (the dogs’ names) knew that guy was crazy, and they were protecting us. You could see the craziness in his eyes.”

Anytime an adult “goes off,” that person is immediately flooded with paralyzing shame-based emotions. Insight, understanding, and the ability to connect to emotional reason is lost. The present circumstances of feeling emotionally rejected, misunderstood, powerless, or dismissed are all replays of the past.

The benign circumstances of getting the wrong cup of coffee on a lazy Saturday morning can trigger an overwhelming rage response as the person feels emotionally misunderstood and that he has been treated as someone without value or importance. This might sound overly simple or psychologically elementary, but, unfortunately, the perception of being disregarded or dismissed is a match to a bucket of highly flammable irrational reactions. The man’s unresolved emotional pain is instantly triggered by a seemingly harm-

less event. These volatile reactions can lead, in the worst cases, to physical harm or death. To be perfectly clear, the power of shame is the driving force behind all crimes of passion.⁵ The person who is full of anger turning into resentment doesn't understand that the feelings of being dismissed or disregarded aren't a personality flaw but rather an untreated shame-based emotional wound. The volume and intensity of emotional energy that comes out of the individual who is carrying such a wound is dangerous at best and lethal at worst for him and his world.

Shame Cycle #2: Embarrassment Has No Limits.

After the extreme feelings of anger, rage, and frustration have cooled off, the next piece of the cycle kicks in: paralyzing embarrassment. When the wave of emotional embarrassment is triggered, it is like a hundred-foot wall of water crashing into the victim. The triggers again are generally centered on personal themes of not being good enough, of being a bad person, an awful parent, a horrible partner, and/or a disappointing son or daughter.⁶ This very strong emotional response is an internally driven private experience.

The victim of such shame-driven embarrassment is psychologically vulnerable to any type of circumstances where they feel their world is judging them or discovering their secret. The shaming incident can be triggered by something as simple as looking at a coworker in a sexual way or having angry feelings toward their newborn child. The triggers are highly personal and private. The unconscious or conscious events always reinforce the irrational feelings of being an awful, fraudulent, and phony individual. The victim feels that they are containing, hiding, and concealing a monster within their heart and soul.

This inner monster, or the "hunter" that John Bradshaw referred to at the beginning of the chapter, is always alive and well within you. This dark force, this secret about you, is always on the periphery of your thoughts and feelings. No matter what the personal cost,

these awful embarrassing emotions have to be kept undercover at all times. The long-term damaging effect on your personality, caused by repressing your natural feelings of wanting to be understood, can develop into many different types of mental illness and/or severe personality disorders.

No Lasting Relief

The secondary crisis for the horribly embarrassed man or /woman is they don't know how to relieve themselves of their awful feelings. Any avoidant behavior is acceptable (the endless list ranges from sleeping to drugs, eating, sex, work, etc.), but unfortunately these behaviors are only a quick fix to a long-term problem. The incredible inner emotional pressures of these absolutely intolerable feelings of inadequacy are so painful to experience that they have learned to rid themselves of shaming feelings at any personal expense, starting at a young age, and this can often lead to an addictive or compulsive personality in adulthood. Feeling this paralyzing shaming embarrassment is to be avoided at all costs and becomes the doorway to any type of addictive numbing behaviors. The spectrum of mind-numbing behaviors is as varied as the people experiencing shame. Triggering their sense of inner embarrassment is an experience so painful and crippling that their life is controlled by trying to avoid that feeling.

It is very critical to understand that the cycle of shaming embarrassment is your automatic emotional and psychological response to your preconceived notions of good and bad behaviors. Often your shame-based belief system is irrational but you have left it unquestioned. Your inner belief system is based on a foundation of feeling inadequate—not an accurate base for your future. Shame-based beliefs are the primary cause and theme of many present-day relationship problems (personal, romantic, professional). It's almost impossible to feel good about yourself and have a loving sense of self, when you have an underlying chronic sense of inadequacy. *Experiencing self-acceptance and feeling shameful, inadequate, and awful are like oil*

and water: they don't mix, and they naturally repel each other. One of the most productive ways out of the emotional shame maze is to focus on your inner desires and passions for your life. Beginning to understand and see your cycle of shame allows for new personal self-accepting information to begin to transform, embrace, and heal your wounded and neglected inner self. No amount of knowledge will replace or be a substitute for your ability to feel and experience positive, loving emotions for yourself and others. Experiencing a different response to your relationships is a major step toward removing the roots of your old shaming cycle.

Shame Cycle #3: Self-Loathing Is an Underestimated Force

When the circumstances surrounding a blowup or volatile argument with, for example, an ex-partner have ended, the wave of self-loathing begins. All the shame roadblocks—personal, romantic, and professional—that you might struggle with are related to an underlying belief of self-loathing. *Self-loathing is your shame feelings in action.* It is the active ingredient of shame in your day-to-day life. Your self-acceptance process has been aborted, undeveloped, and stalled. Various degrees and feelings of shame are played out in many painful life detours, poor choices, and regret (self-loathing). Developing any degree of self-acceptance in your life will immediately benefit you by exposing this insidious cycle. Slowing down your shame cycle can and will reduce at least 80 percent of your self-loathing choices.

Self-loathing, low self-esteem, self-hatred, and self-destruction all come from the same well of the shame-driven personality. The emotional poison in your well is your shame, not you. Your personal well of goodness, empathy, passion, and compassion might feel contaminated by your current choices and circumstances, but it isn't. One of the biggest surprises in life is that all our happiness, acceptance, love, and purpose are still within our inner self. Any action, feeling, or belief that comes from a sense of disliking, hating, or punishing yourself, regardless of its significance, is a classic symptom of your

shame. The range of punitive behaviors is endless, and they are all directly connected to your shame-driven belief system. Yes, it's all related.

STOPPING AND EXPOSING YOUR SHAME CYCLE

Letting Go of Your “Bad” Self

If your well of shame is full to the brim with sensitive self-accusations, distorted personal information, recriminations, and distorted beliefs, then the well needs to be drained, emptied out, and refilled with your own positive self-accepting feelings. Any degree of self-rejection is a ball and chain holding you back. Emotionally, your bad-self speaking, denying, or dismissing that ball and chain of shame that you carry around every day is a difficult pattern to acknowledge. Shame over time becomes a very ingrained belief, emotion, and state of mind. The saddest and most extreme expression of self-loathing is self-destruction resulting in suicide. Suicide is an extreme reaction to rejecting one's life. Suicidal thoughts, feelings, and wishes all come from the untreated reservoir of your shame. The cure for your insidious bad feelings about yourself is correlated to the degree that you allow your self-acceptance process to take place. What is clear is that when you detox your heart, your well of shame, and all of its paralyzing side effects, you can pursue your inner passions and dreams with courage and confidence.

Emotional Sobriety Exposes Shame

Developing a loving and nonreactive inner-self is the ultimate antidote and cure for healing a shame-based personality. When you consider a new positive approach to your life and develop a loving sense of self, you slow the shame cycle down considerably, if not completely. This is emotional sobriety. In section III we will discuss at

great length how to implement all of your new life-purpose skills, tools, dreams, and desires for your journey forward. It is important to clearly define what exactly emotional sobriety is and how it is a cornerstone to your healing life journey.

Emotional sobriety is the ability to respond, ponder, and consider the multiple issues when you're confronted with an emotionally charged situation, relationship, or crisis. Sobriety is allowing for new insights, new information, and a new perspective to influence and guide your relationships, emotional connections, decisions, responses, and self-perception. It's the absence of familiar automatic emotional defensive reactions, yelling, and abusive behavior. It's the absence of needing to conceal or hide your true feelings and thoughts in any situation.

Your evolving emotional clarity and self-acceptance allows you to better understand what you genuinely think and feel about all the things in your life. You will start responding to your inner feelings without the hunter or monster of shame lingering around your heart and soul. Instead, you will begin to experience an emotionally balanced, nonreactive, non-approval-seeking, fearless, and empowered point of view about old issues and old challenges. You will view life events with a fresh perspective and with new insights. The need for validation, acceptance, and approval from others will no longer be important factors or unspoken forces in your emotional and life decisions. You will find yourself feeling good about yourself regardless of the circumstances.

Keeping Your Emotional Clarity via Personal Boundaries

When someone triggers one of your shame issues—such as trying to make you responsible for their feelings—rather than automatically starting the painful, crippling shame cycle, you will pause and consider that maybe there are other options in your particular situation or circumstances. The ability to pause and breathe allows for new information to filter into your emotions and feelings. New behav-

iors and positive responses are evidence of living shame-free. When people are drunk or under the influence of a mind-altering drug, they aren't remotely capable of responding to any situation with 100 percent physical or mental capacity. That simply isn't a possible option when you're psychologically numb or checked-out. The analogy holds true for your emotions, feelings, and psychological capacity: you can't respond or clearly understand any of your life challenges with a foggy personal shaming perspective.

Your emotional clarity is directly correlated and connected to your emotional and mental ability to not react to things that trigger your shaming cycle. We are going to go into great detail throughout this book about how to unplug from these old patterns. The higher your degree of emotional and psychological clarity, the clearer your life and responses to your shaming triggers will be. The "hotter" your feelings of shame, the less clarity and inner peace and perspective you will have in your life.

Emotional sobriety allows you to consider other points of view and new possibilities that you had never imagined and that had never even been part of your previous worldview. You develop the capacity to see, through your awakening self-realization, that part of your life that is going in the right direction regardless of the emotional or physical pain and crisis surrounding you. When you are confronted with your old triggers, you no longer find yourself automatically anxious and reacting with the old shame-cycle symptoms, the powerful debilitating beliefs, feelings, and thoughts you previously experienced. You have a sense of comfort in your own emotional and psychological skin.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The right way to wholeness is made up, unfortunately, of fateful detours and wrong turnings.

—C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1944

Having depression and anxiety is like being scared and tired at the same time.

It's the fear of failure yet having no urge to be productive.

It's wanting friends but hating socializing.

It's wanting to be alone but not wanting to be lonely.

It's caring about everything and nothing at the same time.

Having depression and anxiety is feeling everything at once and then being completely paralyzed and numb.

—Justin Kruger, Project Helping, 2018

The two quotes above underline the life journey that you are currently embarking on and that you will move forward along as you grow in your self-discovery and increase your emotional shame-free life. You are making your way and trying to avoid as many detours as possible. Shame is one of the toughest roadblocks to remove and one of the strongest depressed elements on your journey. Success seems impossible only because of how distorted your thinking gets from the constant recycling of shame throughout your daily life. Increased emotional sobriety and clear emotional boundaries allow you to begin feeling and experiencing your relationships without the rapid undercurrent of shame, anxiety, and psychological terror. The black inner cloud of impending doom that lingers in your heart and soul will begin to dissipate. Healing your heart, soul, and mind is a lifelong task, but it is worth every ounce of effort to reduce or eliminate the symptoms and beliefs of shame.

Think about how shame did or does play a role in creating emotional pain, psychological and physical suffering, and panic in your life? How do your feelings of shame about your life choices, big or small, influence and shape your decisions and experiences? Regardless of your answers, nothing is beyond change or impossible to heal. As your shameful feelings decrease, you will open a new chapter in your life, form deeper relationships, and develop more and more loving self-acceptance.

Life is the most difficult exam. Many people fail because they try to copy others, not realizing that everyone has a different question to answer and different projects to complete.

—Anonymous

Finally, this quote reinforces the fact that all of us have many personal lessons to learn on the path of discovery. Developing your own life purpose and passion will always have challenges and tests, not to mention a steep learning curve. Removing the emotional roadblock of shame allows your inward education to continue and evolve. The road-trip experience through your valley of shame is all part and parcel of connecting with all the different parts of your life. Your self-healing and acceptance process is a lifelong project aimed at healing your inner self. Nothing is ever lost and everything can become learning material for the bigger plan in your life. Your shame experiences can't compare to someone else's because their "life exam" is entirely different than yours. Your only concern is to focus on your inner nature and what you need to heal in your relationships. The next chapter is going to explore your early formative years with new insights and perspective.