

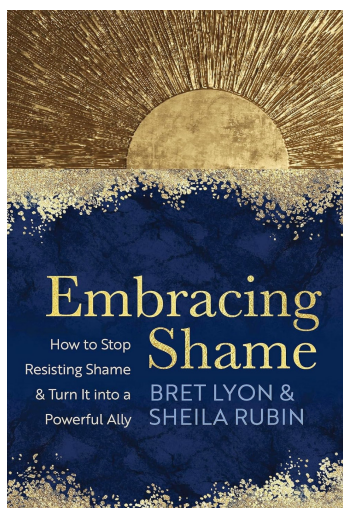
## BOOK REVIEW

# Embracing Shame

*How to Stop Resisting Shame & Turn It Into a Powerful Ally*

by Bret Lyon & Sheila Rubin

Beverley De Witt-Moylan



**S**hame is a word that on its own evokes somatic reactions such as changes in breath and heart rate, uncomfortable sensations in the viscera, tightening in the throat, impulses to shift or avert the gaze, and postural freeze. Ranging from barely perceptible to notable, and even disturbing in the bodymind, our reflexive shame responses can cause us to “shrink physically and mentally” (Lyon & Rubin, 2023, p. 8).

Babette Rothschild acknowledges that shame is “... a terrible emotion, because it is so awful to feel,” but “... like every other affect has a survival value” (Rothschild, 2000, p. 63).

As a social emotion, shame’s constructive function helps shield a group from adverse outcomes from an individual member’s potential antisocial behavior. Evolving from a time when being cut off from one’s tribe meant certain death, shame strengthened the social order in support of group survival by carrying the existential threat of exile for indefensible transgressions.

A potent tool of control in childrearing and education, the predictable freeze state resulting from chronic shaming becomes entwined with trauma in developmental dynamics of the past that can hold us prisoner there, and prevent us from fully experiencing or expressing competency as adults in the present.

“Shame is not just a feeling; it’s a major factor in determining who we are.” (Lyon & Rubin, 2023, p. 192)

Though shame and trauma seem inextricably linked as freeze states, in trauma the threat is to survival. Shame’s inherent threat is to connection. As a result, shame does not relax its relentless hold on the bodymind through the same somatic techniques that effectively discharge trauma’s survival energies and lead to healing.

Enter Bret Lyon and Sheila Rubin. With techniques refined through decades of research, training, exploration, and experience, their approach reflects the belief that “[t]he most intense moment of the trauma experience is actually a moment of shame” (Lyon & Rubin, 2023, p. 30). They describe shame as an “embodied cognition,” pointing out that shame has a strong cognitive component – a thought that says, “There is something wrong with me. I am flawed.”

Having originally gathered their life’s work into their 2021 Sounds True audiobook, *Healing Shame*, they now offer *Embracing Shame*, a handbook brilliant in its simplicity and accessibility, available in print with an audio option. The concepts they have researched, tested, expanded upon, and taught, along with their self-directed exercises, are a resource for both professionals and laypeople.

Bret and Sheila’s decades of investigation and practice substantiate what they have taken to heart, that “acceptance and contact appear to be keys in relieving shame ... it does seem to dissipate under very special circumstances – the nonjudgmental, accepting contact of another human being” (Rothschild, 2000, p. 62).

With the warmth and positive regard that infuse their classes, Bret and Sheila have achieved a masterful collaboration in *Embracing Shame*, as together they become the voice of the “Kind Inner Coach” at the heart of their method, delivering the poignantly transformative message “You are not alone” (Lyon & Rubin, 2023, p. 150).

Their work clarifies the concepts of *healthy shame* vs. *toxic shame*, reinforcing the core belief that shame has intrinsic social value for survival of the species, while acknowledging the message carried by corrosive shame: “There’s something wrong with me.” Shame can adversely affect every aspect of a person’s life until addressed with compassion, kindness, and humor, “gently, gently,” in Sheila’s signature phrase.

Bret and Sheila’s complementary personal styles and approaches blend seamlessly in an accessible handbook for transforming an inescapably universal human condition. Through gentle guidance and practical exercises, they provide what we did not receive as children: the operating instructions to understand and manage the gift of shame, which helps ensure our survival as a social species.

Their insightful candor smoothly steers the reader through a range of topics, from basic definitions of shame to the science of Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011) and beyond, all of them relatable and relevant.

Moshe Feldenkrais, father of the *Awareness Through Movement*<sup>®</sup> somatic method, whose work influenced Bret and Sheila, was fond of saying, “You can’t do what you want until you know what you are doing.” Toxic shame operates in the shadows and often below our awareness, controlling our interactions, inhibiting our relationships, and thwarting our potential.

The authors offer a clear-eyed assessment of the real-world damage to our relationships when we fail to recognize the subversive role toxic shame plays in the development of our coping strategies. They show how toxic shame wears down our connection to our community, how it distorts our concept of our inherent goodness, and how it corrupts our sense of worthiness, thus unravelling the social fabric that defines our humanity.

In contrast, they have consolidated their decades of research, experience, and teaching into a message of optimism and hope. Awareness of toxic shame's influence on our lives gives us the choice to transform it. To paraphrase Moshe Feldenkrais, when we know what we're doing, we can do what we want. Transformation is possible. *Healthy shame* exists as the achievable antidote to *toxic shame*. *Embracing Shame* shows us how.

Along with student or client cases to illustrate concepts, Bret and Sheila share their own stories of shame, and struggle to underscore their core teaching that transforming shame is a worthy, lifelong practice. If generosity is the highest form of courage, they offer their own vulnerability throughout the book as enlightening, teachable moments.

*Embracing Shame* is a wise and kind guide, an indispensable resource to help us heal the wounds of our past, transform shame, and alter the trajectory of our lives for good. It is a truly life-changing book.



**Beverley De Witt-Moylan**, M.Ed., SEP, Tibetan Cranial Practitioner, Kinēsa Practitioner, Center For Healing Shame Student, is retired from 38 years in education, including 29 years as a Special Educator. She has been in private practice as a Healing Facilitator since 2007. Having discovered

Bret and Sheila through a USABP presentation several years ago, she became inspired by their work, their gentle teaching, and the warm, accepting humanity that infuses their approach to working with shame.

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## REFERENCES

**Porges, S. (2011).** *The pocket guide to the Polyvagal Theory*. W. W. Norton.

**Rothschild, B. (2000).** *The body remembers*. W. W. Norton.