

INTRODUCTION

“Shame on you!”

“It’s a crying shame!”

“You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“That puts me to shame!”

OUCH!

You probably picked up this book because shame hurts. It may play an outsized role in your life, or maybe it’s holding you back just enough to get your attention. Want to know how shame works and what you can do about it? Perhaps you’re intrigued about shame because it’s taboo. Do you know someone who seems to be swimming in shame? No matter what your entry point to this book may be, rest assured that you’re not alone.

Shame has been part of the human experience since the dawn of humankind. The Adam and Eve story is about shame. Nonetheless, most of us try to avoid it at any cost. Sometimes even *thinking* about shame makes us feel ashamed. It takes special courage to turn *toward* shame and see what’s there. It’s even harder to be *kind* to ourselves when we feel shame. Seeing and responding compassionately to shame is self-compassion. It’s a tall order, but that’s what this book is all about. Fortunately, you have what it takes. By starting to read this book, you’ve already taken the first step to loosen the grip of shame with self-compassion.

Shame is the most difficult human emotion. It feels really bad. Shame is that sinking feeling that makes us want to slide into the earth and disappear. Shame can cause panic and make the mind go blank, as it did when I suffered from public speaking anxiety. If the mind manages to stay online during a moment of shame, you probably don't want to hear what it's saying—"You're such an idiot! Who do you think you are?!" Shame can also make us feel nauseous, go numb, tremble, blush, or cry. It can make us fly into rage for no apparent reason. How do *you* feel in a moment of shame? Probably not so good.

Shame is mostly hidden. It's a minor miracle when we can say, "Ah, I'm feeling shame!" *while* we're feeling shame. Part of the problem is that shame blends with other emotions. For example, do you know someone who seems to be angry all the time? If so, you might wonder, "*Why* is this person so darn angry?" Look for shame. Chances are this person's inner dialogue is far worse than the words coming out of their mouth. Similarly, if you're caught in anxiety, grief, or disgust that never seems to quit, there might be a vein of shame running through it. I struggled with public speaking anxiety for two decades until I realized shame was the problem, not anxiety. When we're able to see shame mixed up with other emotions, a whole pile of difficult feelings becomes more workable.

Another tricky aspect of shame is that it wipes out the "observer"—there's no one home to work with shame. When we feel shame, our instinct is to go small, go silent, or go away. If we can't escape physically, we try to disappear mentally. We tend to space out when we feel shame, and when it's severe, we may even dissociate. Sometimes we abandon ourselves by bingeing on television or numbing ourselves with alcohol. Or we may blame *others* for how we feel—passing the hot potato of shame. Although these mostly unconscious efforts may alleviate shame in the short run, they tend to cause new problems that make us feel even more ashamed.

Shame blindness extends to how we treat ourselves. Think of the last time you set the alarm and woke up an hour later. What did you say to yourself? Probably something like "Gosh, I'm so *lazy*!" Or maybe you forgot your sister's birthday and thought, "What kind of sister

does *that*?” Perhaps you’re considering taking up a new sport and the words run through your mind: “Don’t do that—you’ll look *ridiculous*!” Shame is a self-attack, and when we say these things to ourselves, we’re shaming ourselves. Sadly, most of us do this when just about anything goes wrong in our lives, and we’re the last to know it.

Even if shame doesn’t feel like an issue in your life, it probably is. Shame is a universal emotion, and turning a blind eye to shame keeps us from living fully. Shame is the inner voice, sometimes faint, sometimes loud, that says: “You can’t do that. You don’t deserve that. How dare you?” There might be no voice at all, just a sense of “not-okay-ness” or “not-really-there-ness.” With shame invisibly pulling us back, how can we expect to seize opportunities that come our way or stand up for ourselves when we need to? It just doesn’t seem to matter—we don’t seem to matter. Over time shame can wear us down, leading to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and a host of other ills.

The good news is that shame is not the problem—*avoidance* of shame is the problem. Shame is an emotion like any other. It comes and goes. What makes shame stick around are our conscious and unconscious efforts *not* to feel shame and *not* to be kind to ourselves in the midst of shame. There’s a saying, “What we resist persists.” If we bury our heads in the sand when we feel shame or go to war with shame, shame will never let us go. On the other hand, “What you can feel you can heal.” When we have the emotional capacity to turn toward shame with curiosity and tolerate it, and even *learn* from it, shame will let us go. Emotions are messengers that have information we need to hear. When we receive the message, the messenger is ready to leave. Self-compassion is a powerful resource that allows us to *be* with shame and with *ourselves* in a moment of shame, and transform it for the better.

The power of shame is mostly an illusion—smoke and mirrors. It’s like in the *Wizard of Oz* when the little dog Toto pulled back the curtain on the Wizard. Rather than finding a terrifying figure, Dorothy and her friends found an old man manipulating levers to appear all powerful. Self-compassion pulls back the curtain and allows us to see through the illusion of shame. There’s a line attributed to Marie

Curie, the Polish-French scientist who discovered radiation: “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.”

What does shame look like through the eyes of self-compassion? First of all, we see that shame is an innocent emotion. By *innocent* I don’t mean without causing harm. Shame can, after all, be terribly destructive to ourselves and others. What makes shame innocent is the *motivation* behind it, namely the wish to be loved. As human beings, we all wish to be considered favorably in the minds of others. When we think we’re unacceptable or unlovable in some way, shame arises. However, when we connect with the innocent wish behind shame, shame starts to lose its grip and we can respond with self-compassion.

Through the eyes of compassion, we also see that shame is *not our fault*. None of us were born feeling ashamed of ourselves. We were all born with the capacity for shame, but the shame that we carry around with us like heavy luggage has been learned from our interactions with others. It started outside ourselves in subtle or not-so-subtle messages that we received in childhood and from our culture. Over time we internalized those messages. It’s true that sometimes we feel shame because of something we did, but the gnawing shame that never seems to go away is mostly a product of how we’ve been treated by others. Therefore, it’s not our fault. No one had a choice about the family, body, culture, or time that we were born into. To paraphrase the eminent psychologist Paul Gilbert, shame is not your fault, but it *is* your responsibility. Since the impact of shame can be so harmful, we should do something about it if we can.

Fortunately, we *can* do something about shame—we can practice self-compassion. If nothing else, self-compassion is an antidote to shame. Scientists only recently learned about self-compassion. Before 2003, when researcher Kristin Neff defined self-compassion, there were no studies at all on the subject. In Neff’s model, self-compassion consists of three components: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. Interestingly, the opposites of these components are rumination, isolation, and self-criticism—all core

aspects of shame. Although Neff is a developmental psychologist and didn't know about the science of shame at the time she defined self-compassion, her definition is exactly the opposite of shame. Since then, research has demonstrated over and over that as self-compassion increases, shame decreases. Scientific studies on self-compassion for shame are scattered throughout the following chapters, primarily to inspire confidence to try the practices that follow.

This book contains the key concepts and practices of the 8-week Self-Compassion for Shame (SC-Shame) course that was originally designed for graduates of the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program. The material in this book has been tailored for the general public. Like the course, the chapters in this book are carefully scaffolded to build on one another. You can skip around the chapters if you like, but please familiarize yourself with the basics of self-compassion before attempting more challenging topics like self-forgiveness or body shame, which are tackled later on. If this is your very first exposure to self-compassion, it might be helpful to first read *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* or take a workshop on self-compassion (see Resources).

There are exercises in each chapter that are designed to take what you read off the page and into your life:



You'll find 13 **Reflections** that give you a chance to think more personally about the concepts you read.



There are also eight **Try This** exercises that deepen your understanding, usually with instructions to touch shame and discover what happens when you evoke self-compassion. Try This exercises are one-off learning experiences.



Last but not least, you'll find 16 **Practices** that you're encouraged to apply more often in daily life, not just while reading, that help you build self-compassion into a healthy, new habit.

You can also find guided recordings of these Practices online (see the end of the Contents for information).

This book was written with the intention to provide tools to all readers, no matter how shame arises in their lives, along with vignettes covering a spectrum of expressions of shame. Admittedly, the examples cluster toward the middle of the spectrum because an attempt was made neither to sugarcoat shame nor to scare some readers with descriptions of severe trauma and shame. I hope you'll be able to relate to the vignettes provided in this book and adapt the tools to your own life even if the examples given don't entirely match your own experience.

To reinforce your learning, it would help to keep a Practice Record as you make your way through the book. There's a Latin saying, *verba volant, scripta manent*, which translates as "spoken words fly away, written words remain." If you keep a written journal, either in book form or as a digital file, you'll be able to build on your own experience chapter by chapter. At the end of this book, you'll get a chance to reflect on everything you learned.

Self-compassion for shame is a profound journey, probably deeper than you imagine, so please go slowly and treat yourself as you would a good friend as you go along. Give yourself permission to lean in, lean back, or let go whenever you wish. Remember: You're your own best teacher. At the end of the day, self-compassion is a journey home to yourself, just as you are, right here and right now, so you can afford to take your time.

Shall we begin?