

# Shame

## Understanding, Releasing, and Creating Safe Spaces for Learning

Shame is often described as the painful emotion arising from a belief that one is flawed, unworthy, or unacceptable. Unlike guilt, which relates to actions (“I did something wrong”), shame attaches to identity (“I *am* wrong”). **It is intensely physical**; felt as heaviness in the chest, averted eyes, a flush of heat, or the urge to shrink and disappear. Left unacknowledged, shame can silently shape behaviour, block learning, and limit human potential.

Shame is closely linked with trauma. When someone experiences rejection, criticism, or violation, the body can store these experiences as tension, constriction, or collapse. Over time, this becomes a pattern of self-protection. **Practices like stretching, breathwork, and yoga are powerful tools for releasing stored trauma.** Deep, rhythmic breathing nourishes the nervous system, while mindful movement opens pathways for emotions to move through rather than become trapped. In this way, embodied practices remind us that healing is not only a mental process it is entrenched in the body.

**For educators, understanding shame is essential.** A classroom or learning space must be more than a place for information; it should be a safe environment where children feel accepted as they are. When teachers use shame through public correction, comparison, or harsh judgment, children may retreat, disconnect, or project their own pain onto others. By contrast, **when educators model compassion, validate effort, and allow mistakes to be stepping stones, learners build resilience and trust. Education becomes less about control and more about drawing out innate capacities.**

Shame also carries cultural dimensions. In some societies, shame is used as a communal tool to maintain harmony and ensure individuals follow collective norms. In others, shame is internalized through ideals of perfectionism and individual achievement. Across cultures, however, its impact can be both protective and destructive guiding people to act with integrity while also silencing voices and diminishing self-worth. Recognizing these cultural layers allows educators, parents, and communities to respond with sensitivity rather than judgment.

Because shame is so physical, it helps to work with the body directly. A simple reflective practice can support learners and educators alike: pause and notice where shame lives in the body; name it gently as *shame* rather than as part of identity; breathe deeply to soften the tension; stretch and expand the body as if to reclaim space; and finish with a compassionate affirmation such as “*I am learning. I am enough.*” Such moments of awareness can interrupt cycles of contraction and invite healing.

Ultimately, shame is a universal experience, but it need not define us. Through awareness, embodied healing practices, and environments free of imposed judgment, we can transform

shame from a silent prison into a teacher, one that reminds us of our shared humanity and our capacity to create safe, supportive spaces where every learner can thrive.

This week's '[All Learning Reimagined](http://www.alllearningreimagined.com/)' podcast has guest Carolyn Cowan who is an embodied psychotherapist, author of *Shame: The Path Out of Hell*, and Kundalini Global yoga teacher & teacher trainer. For over 30 years she has worked with trauma, where shame underlies how the mind, behaviour, and self-regulation are shaped.  
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