

# Ep #287: Shame, the Nervous System, and Emotional Outsourcing: Exploring the Interconnections



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine expert, and life coach Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome, my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. This week, I want to talk about a thing that most of us don't like to really look at, and that's shame. Shame operates like a subterranean force, unseen, unnamed, not discussed, and oh so potent, shaping the landscape of our emotional lives and how we interact with the world and all of those people in it.

For many, shame is the hidden driver behind our emotional outsourcing, our codependent, perfectionist and people-pleasing habits, where selfworth is outsourced to external validation and internal validation becomes dependent on others' approval and acceptance. Understanding how shame roots itself in this pattern we live in is super important if we are to shake free of it and step into community-focused, liberatory interdependence.

So my loves, let's define terms. Shame is a complex and multifaceted experience that can manifest in both subtle and overt ways, often affecting us on a deeply somatic or felt body-based level. It's not just feeling bad about something we've done, that's guilt, which can be useful. Shame is a pervasive sense of being fundamentally flawed.

This distinction is crucial. While guilt might say, "I did something bad," shame whispers, "I am bad." This whisper is deafening, shaping our sense of self and our interactions with the world.

Shame is wildly complex, and of course I'm not going to touch on every single aspect of it in just one show, because it touches on so many parts of our psychology and biology, so this will be an ongoing theme that we touch base on here on *Feminist Wellness*.

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I don't think of shame so much as an emotion, but more as a tool that helps us to stay out of the profound pain that comes with not being attuned to in childhood. Which is existentially petrifying to mammals, especially young or small ones who cannot meet their own needs, can't regulate their own emotions or nervous systems, and thus must rely or depend on others.

And when those caregivers, the folks charged with taking care of us, protecting us, defending us, nurturing us, aren't ready, willing, or able to show up for us, don't have the skills or the capacity to do so, are not really inclined to accept and love us for who we are as our most authentic selves, who teach us either directly or indirectly that we need to be different than who we are in order to be okay or to be loved...

When they aren't able to care for us the way we want and need, are emotionally bankrupt or immature, it's an exploding Death Star level of freak-out anxiety for a kiddo to experience that. Because, really pretty smart logic goes, "Who in the FAF is going to save us from the charging bull and the things that go bump in the night?"

And the upsetting answer is no one. That's terrifying, horrifying, rageinducing, for darn good reason, namely survival. But the thing is that those feelings, all that rage, all that terror, that is way too big for a small human to hold. And so we shove those emotions, those feelings down, down, down, so we can simply move forward in life.

The place we stash all that intense emotion is in shame, the magic emotional hidey-hole for way too big feelings, that also serves to disconnect us from self. When we have come to believe that our self is no good, our self is bad, our self is shameful, we disconnect from that very bad thing and try to be something that is lovable, that is acceptable, that will garner us the kind of protection and safety and care we need as children.

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Heavy, right? Somatically, shame often presents itself as this heavy, sinking feeling in the body, a knot in the stomach or throat, constriction in the chest, heat or flushing, muscles, particularly the neck and shoulders, tense and rigid like a boxer ready for the next blow.

My clients often talk about, and I've experienced this, this visceral urge to shrink away when shame strikes, to avoid eye contact, to hide at the back of the proverbial cave. Psychologically, shame can lead to a pervasive sense of inadequacy and self-criticism, aka you being wicked meany-pants to your perfect self because you were taught that yourself is not a good thing.

And so, of course, you then have a heightened sense of vigilance or worry that others will throw you right back into that pit of despair known as the “shame spiral”.

So, of course, you steer clear of situations where you might be judged or criticized. Of course, you don't put yourself out there. Of course, you don't raise your hand. Of course, you go out of your way to gain approval and avoid disapproval, aka people-pleasing. Of course, you strive for flawlessness as a shield against potential shame, aka perfectionism.

And when it still feels scary to be out there, we hide our authentic true selves away, retreat from social interactions, and isolate to avoid the risk of exposure. Which all just makes a mammal feel even more broken, effed up, and shameful.

Shame runs so darn deep because chronic shame can become our identity. A deep-seated belief that we are fundamentally, inherently, and para siempre, forever-sies flawed and unworthy.

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This root core, deep, deep identity influences every aspect of our lives, embedding itself in our self-concept and driving codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing behaviors.

When shame becomes who we are, it colors our perceptions, our decisions, our interactions, making it challenging to break free from its grip because it's everywhere. Shame often takes root early in life, during our formative years, when our sense of self is still tender, plastic, unformed.

We don't have a solid story that says, "This is who I am." This story, that who we are is shameful, can be the result of explicit messages from caregivers, peers, cultural messages that equate worthiness with certain behaviors or achievements.

For example, a kiddo who's constantly criticized for their mistakes or shortcomings, or a child whose parent constantly needs to feel right by showing them they're wrong, may internalize the belief that they are actually inherently flawed or messed up. Which makes a lot of sense; like how water is wet. If you're told there's something wrong with you, you're going to believe there's something wrong with you.

These early experiences forge neural pathways that associate self-worth with external validation. Societal norms and values often set the bar for worthiness, success, and acceptability, which can leave a lot of us feeling shame just for existing; that our bodies, our skin, our love, it's all shameful, on and on.

White settler colonialism says that anyone outside of the rigid confines of whiteness is effed up in innumerable ways. Capitalism emphasizes productivity and achievement in inhumane ways and can make folks feel inadequate if they don't meet those standards or don't want to work themselves to the bone.

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Patriarchal structures impose restrictive roles and expectations, especially on human socialized as women. Though I hear myself say that, but actually, the patriarchy sucks for men and the patriarchy sucks for everyone, and can lead to all of us feeling shame and inadequate when we aren't fulfilling these roles perfectly.

Yes, we can learn to be ashamed at home. Yes, the environment in our homes can lead us to feel shame. And always remember, our homes are part and parcel of larger social constructs that tell us who and how it's okay to be and not to be. Which can lead us to carry shame for being our perfect selves if the “systems that be” don't approve of us.

And because all of this is so deep within us, of course, my nerds, the nervous system plays a pivotal role in how we experience and respond to shame. So when shame triggers the sympathetic nervous system, our fight-or-flight system, our body prepares for action by making the heart go lub-dub-lub-dub ever faster by focusing your brain on the source of the threat, real or perceived, and flooding your bloodstream with your body's favorite snickety snack, glucose, to provide quick energy.

Because remember, you're going to need to punch a lion in the nose or book it out of there. When there is actually something to run from, the aforementioned lion, you use up all of those resources, and things normalize within the body once you're to safety.

Remember that the problem with not actual-in-this-moment threats, like chronic shame... because you're not literally in danger, it just feels like garbage... is that all of that escape energy that your body revved up stays in your body with no way to discharge it. So that's both hella bad for your body. Medically speaking, it feels like crapola.

It also leaves us in chronic anxiety, which can fuel us to then feel shame about feeling shame. And then we feel more shame. Wild, right, how that

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anxiety shame spiral spins around itself? And when our sympathetic nervous system fight or flight gets activated, we are going to either fight, which can sound like aggression.

Somebody says some comment and we feel this profound need to defend ourselves, “You don't know me. That's not what I said.” Attack, right? Or we flight, we go into withdrawal, “No, that's cool, man. No, no, I don't have an opinion. No, no, no, no, no, no. I've only been working here 12 years. I don't know anything. It's fine. Don't worry about it. It's cool, cool, cool. Me? No, no, no. I don't know anything.” Right?

In both reactions, we aren't standing in our presence. We aren't in our choicefulness. We aren't in our agency. We are not in our power. And our self-identity gets completely lost to that fight-or-flight shame reaction, either aggressing outward or sort of withdrawing and escaping. They're both reactions that most of us then later shame ourselves for having.

I hear this in coaching all the time, “Why couldn't I just stand up for myself? I can't believe I was such a jerk.” Either direction, the shame begets more shame begets more shame. When fight or flight doesn't work, when shame is pervasive, persistent, intense, overwhelming, the dorsal vagal system can get activated, which can trigger a state of immobilization or collapse.

That's like being fully immobilized or collapsed. That's like 10 out of 10. Most of us only go to a couple... two, three, four, right? Where we feel numb, disconnected, or not “freeze” in the nervous system language, frozen, but like, “Oh my God, I have 1,000% experienced this.” Where it's like I feel nothing at all but also the whole world is on my shoulders crushing me. And I have no thoughts except like... That's it. I'm kind of just blank.

Physiologically, your body wants to conserve energy, so it slows down the physiologic processes in your body, digestion, thyroid... No big deal, right?

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Thinking and all of that can be fatiguing. It can reinforce a sense of helplessness. It can worsen IBS and can make us feel shame about that shame reaction. Oh, it's so many layers.

Meanwhile, shame triggers a rainbow cascade of neurobiological responses that affect both brain and body. When activated by shame, the amygdala and the limbic system signals danger, initiating the stress response. Shame can impair the prefrontal cortex, the executive function part of the brain. It can impact its ability to regulate emotions and respond rationally.

And the insula, which is involved in interoceptive awareness, or the perception of internal bodily states, which helps process visceral sensations associated with shame can contribute to the feeling of being physically impacted by the emotion. Like we were just talking about, your heart racing or feeling like you're completely checked out or your digestion going wonky.

My nerds, I share all of this because while it's not at all that you're broken or effed up if you're feeling shame. Shame runs deep, deep, deep and impacts the whole of us in profound ways. And I share that not to depress you or to make you feel stuck. It's to give you an invitation towards extra compassion for yourself and how you react to life when you are neck deep in shame.

Because the thing with shame, especially when you're living in emotional outsourcing, is that it is the soup we are swimming in. And we don't even realize it's shame guiding our thoughts, feelings, actions, and creating the results in our lives. So it behoves us to pause, to slow it all down, and to develop an awareness of its physical and psychological signs.

This involves tuning in to notice any areas of tension, discomfort, or other sensations that might indicate the presence of shame, sort of in a small



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amount, like a little whisper of shame, so you can notice what that feels like before it goes into like this full-blown shame spiral.

While recognizing that shame can lead us into emotional outsourcing, it's also important to recognize the way that emotional outsourcing can be a coping mechanism for the excruciating pain of shame, which is a tool for not feeling excruciating emotions. By seeking validation from others, we attempt to soothe our inner turmoil and gain a sense of worthiness that we don't remember how to find within ourselves.

This external validation becomes this super lovely, beautiful, important, and temporarily helpful salve on a majorly deep ouchy, offering real but fleeting relief from the relentless internal narrative of unworthiness. But like any little band-aid, it doesn't last long; four hand washes, max.

And we get into this cycle of dependency on others for a hit of self-worth supportive salve for that gaping wound within. Same with perfectionism and people-pleasing, which are also attempts to protect our tender ravioli hearts from the sting of shame.

Perfect people are untouchable and worthy, while those that keep literally everyone, literally always delighted with them, literally always, will never be disapproved of. And thus, so goes the internal narrative. Achieving peak perfectionism and people-pleasing means there's no way anyone else will confirm our worst fear.

Which, of course, is that we're fundamentally flawed and thus we can avoid all shame. Yeah, right. If only that worked though, right? If only we could perfect and people-please our way out of ever feeling bad about ourselves. I know we've all tried it.

And I think what's obvious here is that these factors create a truly vicious cycle. The more we rely on external validation, the less we develop our

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own internal sense of worth and our own identity beyond the shame identity. Which reinforces the belief that we are not enough and that we are inherently shameful.

This dependency on others perpetuates a cycle of shame as any criticism or perceived failure is internalized as evidence of our inherent unworthiness. The cycle is in fact self-reinforcing, making it increasingly difficult to break free and cultivate an authentic sense of self-worth and a self-identity all our own.

My angels, this is a lot. Looking at shame, the root causes, the ways it plays out, it's a lot to hold. I'm going to pause here for today. I'm going to let this marinate. Let it soak in. Start to see what you can see of this in yourself.

Where did you learn shame? How does shame show up for you? How is shame fueling your emotional outsourcing? And how is your emotional outsourcing fueling shame? We do not do this work to make ourselves feel worse. There's no judging, no criticizing, no blaming and shaming of self in this work.

It's really just about getting to know ourselves and understanding our emotional landscapes better, the identity story in which there's something about us to be ashamed of. Once we can understand that better, and have more of a connection with what the "what" is within us, we can then come in to apply some remedies.

Next week, we'll be talking about those remedies and I'll be sharing my protocol, GRACE. I know, you like that foreshadowing there? I'll be sharing my protocol with you, which is the process that I use to help myself and my clients to really look that shame right in the snout and start to create a new way of living that's more supportive of your beautiful, perfect self and an identity not rooted in shame.

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Thank you for listening, my loves. If you are enjoying the show, I would be so grateful if you head on over to Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your shows, and leave a 5-star rating and review.

When you do, take a little screenshot and email that screenshot to [Podcast@victorialbina.com](mailto:Podcast@victorialbina.com). I am running a little giveaway all month. It's my birthday month. Yes, I'm a Leo. Yes, I'm bragging.

If you read and review the show, it helps raise it up in the ranks, which means it appears more in the algorithm, which means that this free resource, which I pour so much time and energy and money and effort into, will get into more ears. And that's all I want. I want more people to hear it so it can help them, because I have been so privileged to have so much education and so many resources. And I truly just want to be of service through this show.

So send that screenshot to [Podcast@victorialbina.com](mailto:Podcast@victorialbina.com) and my team will send you a treat. It is a sleep meditation; relax, rest, sleep meditation; that you cannot get unless you are in my programs. So go and get it. If you've done a review in the past, I'm pretty sure you can do another one, or you can help someone you love do one and then you can get the meditations.

But I digress, my loves. Thank you for listening. Thank you for helping the show and for helping your beautiful, perfect self. Let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty, and I'll talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means, and why it matters for your life, head on over to [VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar](http://VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar) for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.