

# LOVE ON FIRE

Practicing Embodied Intimacy After Sexual Trauma



LEAH RS BRAUN



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Practicing Embodied Intimacy  
After Sexual Trauma

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All names of abusers have been changed — not to protect them, but to protect me from possible libel.

All names of 12-step sponsors have been changed, as anonymity is one of the cornerstones of all 12-step groups.

All other names have been changed to minimize the collateral impact on those persons directly involved in my story, except where express permission was given to use real names.

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

## The Feels: Shame

Oh, shame, you cruel teacher. Shame is the thing that separates us the most from ourselves — shame disowns us from our own humanity. Post-trauma shame for me showed up in the following ways:

- Verbally bashing myself for almost 3 years during my morning commute to work about all the ways I should have stopped my abuse while it was happening, and how stupid I was for letting it go on so long, and how I would die if anyone ever found out the details of what happened — what I allowed.
- Feeling my face get hot and my stomach start to churn every time I remembered being involved with a man who had been a sexual partner to my mother.
- Feeling like I wanted to disappear when the guys from church who were helping me move out of my house uncovered a porn stash under the bed.

- Feeling so helpless and so “less than” and like I had this big moral void because I could not stop looking for emotional and physical affair partners during my first marriage.
- Feeling unworthy of being a parent while engaged in a double life that included visits to swinger clubs with my trauma-bonded boyfriend at the time. Getting physically sick with chronic pain, unhealthy weight loss, and sleep-defying anxiety from said double-life. Feeling ashamed to tell the truth about this part of myself to close friends, and to let them help me get out.

It is hard for me to talk about shame without describing the sensations and sadness and defeat associated with this complicated emotion. Shame is abstract. Shame is visceral. Shame is familiar. Shame is persistent and makes us sick all over. And, with time, intention, and good help, shame can be countered and overcome.

In my effort to understand not only my own shame but shame in general, I have come to love the work of accomplished Clinical Social Worker (PhD), Author, and Speaker, Brené Brown. She speaks of this core human emotion in ways anyone can understand and to which all of us can relate. I’ve listed one of her books and the links to her TED talks in the resource section of this book, and I will summarize what I’ve learned from her here about shame.

Brené outlines, in her book, *Daring Greatly*, the “Shame 1-2-3’s”. Here is an excerpt. Then all of you should go out and get her book.

1. We all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience. The only people who don’t experience shame lack the capacity for empathy and human connection. Here’s your choice: Fess up to experiencing shame or admit that you’re a sociopath.

2. We're all afraid to talk about shame
3. The less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.

Dr. Brown further explains that “Shame is the fear of disconnection ... of being unworthy of connection, unloveable, and that I don't belong. *Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.*”

So, that last one, especially. I spent the better part of 20 years hiding what happened to me as a child and teenager because I feared if people knew the scope of my abuse, they would blame and judge *me* for causing or allowing it to happen. I would be unlovable, cut off from my friendships and loved ones and disallowed any sense of belonging.

We all just want to fit in. To be *normal*, whatever our unique perception of that word may be. Admitting you are a sexual trauma survivor can make that hard to do, even though sexual trauma is in fact, a sad *norm* in our rape culture today.

Here is a recent example of how sexual shame, especially, is hard to talk about. When I began this book, I sent out a question on my Facebook page, asking for comments or private messages from my followers detailing how body shame or sexual shame showed up in their lives.

I received five responses. Three of the people who messaged wrote that they would address the body shame question because it was easier. These three women didn't detail their sexual shame issues, even though they acknowledged they had them. And two of the five had eating disorders that were a direct result of their sexual shame. Any kind of addictive/disordered behavior is also a strong source of shame

as well, so when sexual shame causes more shame-inducing behavior the shame blanket just becomes heavier and more suffocating.

Four of the five people who responded to my query did eventually get around to bravely sharing about their sexual shame, in great detail. One person said she felt helped by the act of writing it down, which I took to be a small triumph over a big beast.

Let me go back to Brené Brown and *Daring Greatly* for a few nuggets of hope in countering and healing shame so we can find sexuality that feels whole, complete, sovereign, and free. Two things that Brené mentions in the shame combat training arsenal are:

## 1. “Reaching out”

I take this to mean owning and sharing your sexual trauma story with people who have earned the right and the trust to hear it. This does not mean jumping on social media and shouting to the world your darkest sexual story without filter. That type of behavior is typically sensational, does not really accomplish real healing, and is often accompanied with yucky consequences, both internally and externally. This also does not mean shut up about your trauma — far from it. And, by all means, *report any violation you experience to the authorities who can help hold the abuser accountable*. Tell who you need to tell to begin feeling safe.

This step means do your healing work with people you trust before you shout it from the rooftops. (Or write a book or two, for that matter.) The most compelling memories about trauma experiences are the ones where the author has done enough work to present her experience as a gift to her audience, rather than a cry for more help.

## 2. “Speaking Shame”

This one to me means speaking openly about what happens in your body and mind when you feel shame — calling yourself out on those behaviors and sensations and maybe asking for accountability or even just a listening ear from others you trust for extra visibility.

For example, my shame has voices that I have always called gremlins. My shame gremlins tell me I am a fraud, not good enough to think big, not good enough to be successful. For many years those same shame gremlins kept me seeking out partners who would only value me if I was being sexual or morphing my sexuality to fit their needs, all the time. My own sexuality was not worthy of care or attention or attraction from another person or myself, so said my gremlin voice.

Today, I have a group of women. There are just four of us. On purpose. I don't think there is much we don't know about each other, and we are all really good at allowing, allowing, *allowing* all the human-ness that we have.

If I had to put words to our core value as a group, I might say something like “Everything about each of us that IS, is GOOD.” All of it, the profane and the profound, the messy and the meticulous, the joy and the pain. We just get it. When my gremlins speak up, I tell these four women immediately. They can respond in depth or not at all.

My purpose is not to get strokes from them, but to use the container to hold myself accountable and to take a look at what is going on in my head. They may provide me some perspective as they allow me to work out my own shit. There is no fixing — only acknowledgment and encouragement, and bringing stuff out into the light for evaluation. I might die if I didn't have something like this. I worked really hard to get to a place where I could invite this kind of squad into my life. They are soul sisters in every way.

We don't need a group like this always, but we do need a place where we can speak our shame. When we name it, shame loses power almost immediately. Even if you only say it to yourself. The words "I am ashamed" or "I feel shame" may seem like admitting defeat. To the contrary, these are the words that shame hates to hear. Shame hates to be called out — it would much prefer to remain a slippery ghost in the dark.

If we admit, even to ourselves, the presence and feeling of shame, then we can begin to climb out of the pit of the shadows. It is a risk to be sure — a vulnerability challenge. Some people may judge us or discredit us or shake their heads and say "I told you so." If this happens when you name your shame, it is simply a cue that you have to keep looking for the people who do not judge and who do not blame. It is a cue that the person you told is still mired in their own shame and so cannot yet walk with you on your healing path — they are not ready. YOU are, though. And that is good.

A great place to reach out and name and speak shame is in the Twelve-Step recovery community. (Remember the Motherfucking Support?) Twelve-Step groups are quite awesome in their acceptance of you in your shame-feeling moments, because guess what? The people in those groups are all like you. They have experienced all the same feels if not exactly the same circumstances. Sharing the truth of your shame in a healthy Twelve-Step group (within the parameters of the meeting structure, of course) can be like walking underneath a clear and sparkling waterfall. The water might be a little shocking to the system at first, but the clean and refreshing sensations of the water washing over you are wakeful and energizing and powerfully motivating.

Remember, shame does not like to hang around in that kind of environment — it prefers solitude and the sticky tar of self-loathing

and destructive behavior. Shame can shrink considerably after just one meeting, just one admission that you feel it, just one touch of empathy from someone who gets it.

You have to ask for that acceptance. So go do it. Take a risk. And, if you don't find the acceptance in the first place you seek, keep asking for it until you do — if you can't find the acceptance outside yourself at first, I promise, there is a place out there in your community where it exists. Keep looking until you find it, or until you can give it to yourself.



## About the author

As a sexual trauma survivor, Leah RS Braun is committed to helping others discover that recovery and joy and a fulfilling intimate life are fully possible when we ask for help, do the work, and practice new thoughts and behaviors.

A life-long guide at heart, Leah spent the first half of her career as a wellness professional, personal trainer, and yoga studio owner. She now coaches private clients and groups to find and do the work they love as #thework4joycoach.

Leah lives in Minnesota with her family. She is available for speaking engagements, professional coaching, copy writing, and other collaborative projects. You can find her at [vla50.org](http://vla50.org).

## You might also want to explore

### SEX ON FIRE

*Finding Embodied Intimacy After Trauma*

by Leah RS Braun

*How one woman overcomes her traumatic past to become a strong leader, a good parent, a healthy relationship partner, and an empowered woman, sexually and everywhere else.*



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