

*How We Can Reject  
Self-Blame  
Culture and Reclaim  
Our Power*

# **UNLEARNING**

# **SHAME**

**READING GROUP GUIDE**



# A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of this book, and for showing an interest in dissolving the barriers that keep so many of us feeling isolated, afraid of other people's judgments, and dread-filled about the future of our world.

Systemic Shame is a negative cultural force that teaches us to understand every world problem only in terms of our own individual effort and moral responsibility, ignoring that massive forces like capitalism, white supremacy, and imperialism actually create our shared misery and deny us our means of escaping it.

We all experience Systemic Shame about one issue or another—blaming ourselves for our own failure to overcome the prejudices we face, beating ourselves up for not being the perfect activist on all issues, stressing out over our recycling while super-polluting companies fill the atmosphere with carbon dioxide, and feeling completely powerless all the while. Now more than ever, human beings are showing the psychological consequences of only seeing themselves as individuals in a world that demands collective solutions.

I wrote this book because I believe we are all deeply suffering from Systemic Shame, and that we are reaching an important crisis point at which many of us are making important decisions to reconnect with one another meaningfully and unlearn the negative, self-blaming patterns that have long kept us apart. Simply by taking an interest in the work this book explores, you are taking an important step to give voice to your own dissatisfaction and to reach out beyond yourself, and that really matters. I hope that the exercises and research I have presented in this book will be helpful to you.

By sharing your reflections and reactions to this book with other people in a book club, you are also taking an important step to think more communally and less individualistically, and to erode your shame by finding shared pains that can serve as a bridge between us and other people. There is a rich, storied history to the shame each of us carries—it is an ancestral, familial, and global wound, and by learning more about the many aspects of life that it touches, we can better understand it and separate it from ourselves, so it does not rule our lives.

In this book club kit, you will find reflection questions that expand upon the exercises and concepts already present in the book, to help begin a conversation with other readers and to get you thinking more about how Systemic Shame has shaped your world, and what a world less ruled by shame might look like. I recommend pondering these questions slowly and without urgency, in an open discussion format that allows multiple people to share any thoughts and reactions that come to mind. The more we develop trust in others and practice sharing vulnerable, authentic responses as they begin to form, the more we can begin to expand our sense of self beyond our own individual bodies and the privacy of what's in our minds, recognizing that we are an indelible part of a richly interconnected, supportive social world.

I cannot thank you enough for reading, and for taking whatever meaning from the book that you do. Writing books like this one helps me to feel less powerless and afraid in a world beset with challenges, and hearing from readers like you allows me to truly be a part of something larger than my own small efforts.

**Devon Price**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## SYSTEMIC SHAME

The powerful self-loathing belief that says I am to blame for the circumstances I'm living in, and that the only way my problems can be overcome is through individual goodness and grit.

1. What was your initial reaction to reading Dr. Devon Price's definition of Systemic Shame?
2. Why is American culture in particular an especially fertile breeding ground for Systemic Shame?
3. When you reviewed the signs that you might be suffering from Systemic Shame, which stood out to you? What surprised you?
4. What did you learn about the psychological effects of Systemic Shame? What did you learn about its tangible and physical effects?
5. Discuss how Systemic Shame both overwhelms and robs us of empowerment—while simultaneously telling us we're only in this position because we haven't tried hard enough or made the right choices.
6. In what ways do you experience Personal Shame? Interpersonal Shame? Global Shame? Which of these categories do you feel you struggle with the most?
7. What marginalized groups are you a part of? When you considered the internalized shame you may have felt, what stood out most?
8. Which approach-based emotions do you feel often? Which avoidance-based emotions do you feel often?
9. Think about a time when you felt profoundly ashamed, or a factor in your life that you feel shame about. How does this shame manifest in your body?
10. Dr. Price includes a list of the healthy emotional alternatives to Systemic Shame, including joy, radical self-acceptance, pride, vulnerability, shared mourning, shared celebration, and even neutrality. Which of these resonated most strongly with you? Why?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## EXPANSIVE RECOGNITION

An awareness and acceptance of one's position in the larger social world.

1. Describe a time you've experienced expansive recognition—or the sensation of being witnessed and fully understood when you least expected it. How did it feel? How did your body react?
2. To “fully recognize someone’s situation is to believe the barriers and limitations they are facing are legitimate, and to trust them as the expert on their own life.” What did you think when you read this passage? Have you ever struggled to trust someone as the expert on their own life? Has this happened to you? Discuss.
3. Consider the three levels of Expansive Recognition: Radical Self-Acceptance, Vulnerable Connection, and Hope for Humanity. Which of these do you think will come easiest for you? Where will you struggle? What will your first step toward Expansive Recognition look like?
4. When you read Dr. Price’s assertion that “Radical acceptance involves fully listening to our bodies and minds, and cultivating slower, more gentle habits that are guided by what really matters to us . . . as well as by our genuine limits,” what came up for you? Where can you make your habits gentler?
5. What really lights you up with passion? What gives you the most pleasure?
6. Dr. Price lists eight Radical Self-Acceptance affirmations. If you were to write one of your own, what would it say?
7. “The impact of others is everywhere. We can’t run away from their gifts. And why would we want to?” Think about the people—seen and unseen—who have impacted your day today. Name them and why you are grateful for them.
8. Read and respond to the questions in Dr. Price’s adaptation of the Duke Social Support Index. Which relationships stood out to you as positive, supportive, and affirming? What role do you see yourself having in your family or friend group? What surprised you about this exercise?
9. What is your attachment style? How can you work to practice secure attachment?
10. Reflect on who makes up your potential community using the questions Dr. Price poses: “Who else suffers from similar injustices as I do? What other groups might understand a bit of how I feel? Who in my community can I extend generosity to, with no strings attached? Which other struggles, historical or in the present, resemble my own? What can I learn from other marginalized or vulnerable groups?” Where are you seeing common threads? How will you seek out your communities?