



Conscious Life presents  
**HEALING TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**

## Healing Toxic Shame

**Guest: Dr Peter Levine**

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### **[00:00:10] Alex Howard**

Welcome everyone to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Peter Levine.

We're going to be talking about healing toxic shame. Shame happens within us, it also happens in the dynamics of our relationships. We'll talk about this from the perspective of trauma, but also, how do we heal the shame that so often can be the barriers to connection and intimacy. Both in intimate relationship, but also in friendships, family, and other relationships as well.

To give you a little bit of Peter's background, Peter Levine, PhD is the developer of Somatic Experiencing, a naturalistic and neurobiological approach to healing trauma. He holds doctorates in both biophysics and psychology. He's the founder and president of the Ergos Institute for Somatic Education, and the founder and advisor for Somatic Experiencing International.

Dr Levine is the author of several best-selling books on trauma, including *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, published in over 29 languages. He has received lifetime achievement awards from Psychotherapy Networker and from the USA Association for Body Psychotherapy. He continues to teach trauma healing workshops internationally.

Peter, welcome back. I really appreciate you making the time for this conversation. You were just saying to me, just before we started recording and I interrupted you, because I thought it was the perfect place for us to start in the interview. You were saying that not all relationships that become toxic start that way.

### **Dr Peter Levine**

Yeah.

### **Alex Howard**

Say more about that.

### **Dr Peter Levine**

There are a number of things. We all come into relationships with all kinds of expectations, and with all kinds of histories, and those histories can rear their ugly head. But what's even more

fundamental is that most of us really haven't had the gift of being well regulated as infants, and babies, and children. And without that things can go from bad to worse.

**[00:02:44]**

If couples can learn how to, each individual, how to regulate themselves to some degree, and also to co-regulate each other. Then it's surprising, it doesn't, I'm not saying that makes a perfect relationship, but it really gets the relationship on a good even keel. So that's one of the things that... I don't see private clients anymore, but I think that's one of the things that really gives us a good footing in a relationship, and increases our level of care with each other, because we do fill each other's needs for regulation.

And in a way if you think about it, it's a beautiful thing when they get upset and instead of attacking each other, can say something, "I'm really upset right now. Here's what's going on in my body. I would really appreciate it if you could just be here with me, while I move through this, and see what's going on." To me it is a mature relationship.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's of course not what often happens though, right?

**Dr Peter Levine**

No.

**Alex Howard**

Going back to what you were saying around the ideal, is a relationship, is one of the places that provides that regulation for us. That when we come into relationship, part of what can be happening is we don't have that regulation inside of us. We're looking to that person to provide it. And then when that's not happening, there's a sort of escalation of pushing and pulling. And so maybe you can speak a little bit to how that can be problematic, but also how we can move away from that.

**Dr Peter Levine**

What happens, like you say, is, or you hint, is that we go into blame and shame, "it's your fault". And the other partner says, "no, it's your fault". And we feel shamed, and we shame each other. That doesn't help, that doesn't enrich a relationship. Shame is a very tricky emotion, chronic shame at least.

There's shame that's really necessary, it's part of the social glue, and it's part of the glue of couples, to be able to say, "I realized that I was wrong when I said this about you last week and I apologize. I really apologize." And something like that can really wipe the slate clean. So that's healthy shame.

But shame and blame is another kind of shame, and that is a toxic shame. And that does then lead to toxic relationships. Relationships that may not have started as being toxic, but then soon become toxic and bite on its own tail.

**[00:06:13] Alex Howard**

Well, part of the challenge is that typically when we come into new relationship, we are presenting, the neat and tidier aspects of ourselves. So that early foundation often is, maybe we are quite skillful at least on the surface, of responding in a helpful way, and being patient, and being tolerant. And then what often happens over time, because we feel safe in the relationship, as we start to relax, some of the other elements then start to come in.

**Dr Peter Levine**

I hadn't really thought about it that way, but I like some of your phrases here, like neat and tidy. We start a relationship, we have all of our hopes, we have our projections. We have the search for the magical other. And then we find out that this is not the magical other, it's another person with their own flaws, their own challenges. And then we have to really adjust to that reality, that the other person is a real person. And what I mean by a real person is that they have their own real issues. And if we can learn to respect those differences, and help regulate each other, then we have the opportunity to have a beautiful, enduring, healthy relationship.

**Alex Howard**

What helps us make that transition? So there's the recognition that we're in blame and shame. We're looking for the other person to meet our needs, but we're not willing to meet their needs. That there's not a reciprocity that's happening there. If we find ourselves in that place, what helps us start to move from there?

**Dr Peter Levine**

How do we move from reciprocity and to reciprocity? I think the first thing is much easier said than done, we recognize that something's happened and we're feeling stuck. And I think if we can start from that platform, "sweetheart, I'm really feeling stuck here. I wonder how you're doing". And so that opens to connection. "Yeah, I'm feeling stuck", which is meaning, "I could use some help from you, and how can I be there for you?" So to be able to hold those together, I think those are co-factors that play into lasting relationships.

**Alex Howard**

It strikes me, Peter, that really critical in what you're saying here is, there's the recognition that in those moments of tension, or activation that's happening, that actually to really address any issues that are going on, we first have to be in a place of regulation or co-regulation together. Often we try to fix the problem from a place that we're not going to be able to really fix the problem.

**Dr Peter Levine**

The other thing is, we also bring into the relationship our long history of trauma, abuse, neglect, and how that plays itself out. I was just thinking about a couple that I saw, must have been 40 plus years ago. A colleague of mine who's a marriage family therapist, she asked me to see this couple to see what I could do, because she was just unable to work with them, and she was just really frustrated.

**[00:10:20]**

So they came into my office and I had the obligatory couch, and they both sat down on the couch, completely on the opposite side, as far away as possible. I'm sure a marriage therapist will recognize this. And so I'm thinking, "okay, so where do I go from here?" And I noticed something interesting. They both had a scar across their throat, and I thought, that's interesting, maybe they've had thyroid problems and had thyroid surgery together. And when I brought the topic up, they froze. And so then I realized, okay, we have trauma coming up here.

We need to find out what that trauma is. Well, what I uncovered with them is that they were driving their VW bus, and somebody was hitchhiking on the road. They picked up the person and he was in the back, and then, this is bizarre, but it is what happened, so prepare yourself for it. The man had an enormous knife, and he slit both of their throats. Miraculously, they were right outside of a hospital emergency room, so they were able to save their lives.

I said, "look, I need to work with you one at a time. So the one that I'm not working with, just stay here, and just see if you can be aware of what happens to you when you're seeing your mate work with me." So I've worked with both of them around that horrific trauma. It was wonderful, as they resolved the trauma, as they worked through the trauma, starting from the opposite sides of the couch, so they come closer and closer, and then holding hands.

I gave them some tools for helping to regulate, because when you have a trauma like this, it's not like it completely goes away completely. In times of stress, in times of activation, it may come up again. So to be aware of that, and aware of what they can do, so they're not helplessly floundering with the trauma. I didn't say anything to my colleague, and I got a call a couple of days later and she said, "Peter, I don't know what you did, but I don't have any more work to do."

### **Alex Howard**

It's so interesting, isn't it? Because in a way you're describing the freeze had become a wall between them, it caused a disconnect. It strikes me that sometimes just the journey of doing inner work together also becomes a connecting thing.

### **Dr Peter Levine**

Absolutely. To me that's when the relationship becomes a growth relationship, when you're working together, working with each other, supporting each other. And the more we can learn to do that, the less that we're swept off our feet when these difficult emotions and sensations become activated. I don't know if I'm being repetitive here, but I think it bears repetition because it's so important in relationships, and such a great opportunity. If you think a relationship is going to solve all your problems, well, good luck. But at the same time, it can be a step in healing some of our deep wounds, and learning to be fully connected.

### **Alex Howard**

One of the frustrations that people can have, is that they're in a relationship with someone, a bit like the couple you described that are on the couch, which have got that proverbial wall between them. One part is willing and keen to do the work, and another is... Not necessarily that they're not

ultimately willing, but there's a lot of defensive structure that's in the way. That can be difficult, because there's potential, but there's not that reciprocity in that work.

**[00:15:26] Dr Peter Levine**

It's interesting, sometimes couples come together, and one couple is very much therapeutically minded, but the other isn't, and often those relationships will fall apart because of that. But if you recognize that as a request from the one person to the other to be able to say, "I really feel that for us to continue and to grow together, I would hope that you would start to do some therapeutic work yourself. And I know, I can't push you to do it, that's your choice. But if you could do that, it would make a big difference for me." And again, you put it as an appreciation, rather than "you should do this," that you don't have enough therapy, and I'm the only one who has therapy. I think you know what I mean.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, it's funny. Meagan, who's my co-host in these conferences, and I have got this joke, we realize that we've both put ourselves in this category, that pretty much everyone that's gone to couples work, has gone to couples work so the therapist can tell their other half why they need to change. Very few people go to couples work, because they want to do the work.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Yeah, well, seen that one, done that one.

**Alex Howard**

I want to come back to this topic of shame, because it feels to me that it's multi-layered. There's the blaming and shaming of other people, but also as we get closer to our own work, and we get close, particularly to our own stored trauma, there's often also a layer of shame that's in there as well. That can be one of the barriers in relationship to going to these vulnerable places. Not just the externalized shame, but also the internal.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Yeah, absolutely. Shame is probably the most difficult of all emotions to work with, more difficult than fear or even rage, because it just sucks our energy out of us. It's something that really needs to be worked with therapeutically. I'm not saying it's impossible, but I rarely see couples able to work through their shared shame issues without some outside help. That's another important thing about couples work, is to know when individual work isn't absolutely necessary to continue on.

**Alex Howard**

What do you see as the relationship between shame and defensiveness? I'm going to put it in a personal way, if my wife was here now and you were to say to her, "what's the thing that Alex most needs to work on in relationship?" I can guess she'd probably say, "being defensive". So it's like, get called out on something, first response is to defend. In a way the layer above that is often this shame layer. And I'm curious as to your thoughts on that.

**[00:19:01] Dr Peter Levine**

I think we're defensive as a way of trying to protect ourselves from not feeling the shame. I think that's important to realize what we're defending against, and in this case it's shame, and in very many cases it's also shame.

**Alex Howard**

As I'm reflecting personally, it's often a projected shame, I can recognize my wife might say something, which is a relatively reasonable comment, but I'm projecting shame onto it. So what I'm hearing is different from what's being said. It's like our inner shame we then see in the world around us.

**Dr Peter Levine**

We see through those glasses, shame everything. Shame, it's the ugliest of all the emotions, chronic shame. We will do almost anything to avoid it, and also to then avoid contact with our partner because being with them is evoking the shame. The first thing that couples need to learn to do is to identify, each one to identify, when they're in shame. And then to make note of that and take it into the therapist. As I say, I think a lot of work people can do with each other in couples, but shame is really not one of them. And really needs some guidance. It doesn't mean you have to take years and years of therapy, but to find somebody that you can work with, this particular issue and then bring it back into the relationship.

**Alex Howard**

And what would be some of the pieces that would be helpful in that shame work? So if someone's working with what might help move through that?

**Dr Peter Levine**

First of all, identifying it. I found in working with shame, before I even knew it was shame, like for the past half-century, is that there's a specific bodily posture of shame. And that's what keeps the shame circulating. It keeps circulating the content. What really is the anchor of that, is the bodily posture.

For example, if you think about that, when we're feeling shame, what people will do, not only people, but for example dogs and other mammals probably, is we turn away from the person, and look down to break the contact, and then we collapse forward like this. And that takes the energy out of us, because it's the collapse, it's the hypoarousal state.

So when I'm able to help people notice the posture, and instead of going into the posture like this, to just touch into the posture, that's the smallest amount. Like this titration and then slowly coming back up. And usually what happens is when they come up, they start feeling a lengthening in their spine, and the beginning of pride and dignity. So to go from shame, to pride, to dignity is the way out of shame.

Having the person notice, averting the gaze, looking down slowly, slowly coming forward, just the smallest amount, it feels horrible. But then coming back out, coming back out, feeling the spine lengthening, feeling the chest opening, and feeling return to pride and dignity. And that's much

better to lead a relationship when you're experiencing pride and dignity, and respect the other person's pride and dignity. That's one of the hints in working with shame and shame trauma, is to learn how to work with the posture, because that's what keeps recirculating the whole shame complex.

### **[00:23:26]**

One of the challenges can be that we get so normalized to going to these places that we often may not recognize we're doing it. That's one of the real gifts, going back to what you were saying a little bit earlier about how loving relationship can be a support. Because if the other person can help recognize that there's been that collapse and turning away that's happened, you actually name it.

Then to be able to say something like "oh dear, oh sweetheart. It seems like what I did was activating some shame, and I apologize for that, and is there any way I can be here for you?" Think about that. What a difference that would make instead of shaming the shame.

### **Alex Howard**

What strikes me as being particularly powerful about that, is that in the place of shame, often in a way we're rejecting others before they reject us, because there's this sense of not being lovable. So actually being met in that place, like being met with kindness and softness, even in that place feels a powerful thing.

### **Dr Peter Levine**

It really is, and it's really about vulnerability on both people's part. The person who's experiencing the shame of being vulnerable enough to identify it, and the other couple who was able to say, to not be defensive, and to say, "oh sweetheart again I'm sorry if what I said made you feel shame."

I have a sneeze, I came back with a cold yesterday.

That's to me what a healthy relationship is, and you could say a toxic relationship is the opposite of that, is when this doesn't happen.

### **Alex Howard**

That's what is in my mind, because I think it's really helpful to paint the picture of what's possible. There's the reality of where people can find themselves. And then there's how, and I really like that practical suggestion around using posture, around that place, just titrating their edge and then finding the way back from it.

I'm wondering what else when we're in those shame dynamic... Because the other thing that, going back to what we said earlier about the shame and blame game, it also goes back and forth, there's an escalating that happens. What can help, and not just in intimate relationship here, but also wider family relationships, particularly parent, child, sibling. When we're in those places of shame is going back and forth, and maybe particularly when we haven't got the loving container of intimate relationship, it's a bit less well held. What can help us move with that in a different way?

**[00:26:45] Dr Peter Levine**

The first thing is to recognize it, and usually we don't know what it is but we just feel all of a sudden we feel yuck, technical term, and again if we can be vulnerable around that in ourselves and say, "I don't know what just happened. It's like I just shut down and I went away from you. I'd like to see if we can find a way back into connection", because that's what people are seeking. Two things: connection and safety. Safety and connection.

**Alex Howard**

The more that we find ourselves in that shame dynamic, it feels like, I'm thinking out loud, it's almost impossible to be in safe connection when there's shame in the middle of that.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Absolutely. But at least if you recognize it, then you know what the next steps might be. For sure just recognizing it isn't going to make it disappear, but it can give you a little bit of a ground to stand on.

**Alex Howard**

What might be the next step? Let's take a working example that we've got, let's say a situation with a sibling, or mom and dad where it's not a super close relationship, but it's a relationship that still matters, and we want to stay in relationship with that person. It's not so bad that the actual resolution is to separate. We recognize that's happening. Part of it is also trying to use tools, we may have to settle a bit more on ourselves, not get pulled into the activation. What else can we do?

**Dr Peter Levine**

It very often does occur in friendships. One of the places, I don't think I'm going to answer your question quite yet, but it particularly is true of adolescence. Particularly the shaming that young women do to each other. It's this thing, like, you're best friends with somebody, best friends and you text each other 100 times a day and blah, blah, blah, blah. And then one day you go to school and the person doesn't have anything to do with you, won't have anything to do with you. They say, "this is my new best friend."

This, Peter, is my twelve year old daughter's life right now.

Well, let me know what you find out that helps.

**Alex Howard**

Bless you. I was hoping you might have the answer.

**Dr Peter Levine**

I have some hints I can give. It feels like death. Why is it so powerful, shame, death? That's just way out of proportion. But if you think about this, and this is true of primate groupings. If one of the members is ostracized because they're doing some behavior that's not acceptable. In other



words, they're being shamed, and they're thrown out from the tribe. If they don't, and they often are unable to find another group to connect with, they will die.

**[00:30:35]**

My background is in studying ethology, animal behavior, and so forth, but I really think that that's a relationship that actually goes on, and that's why it feels so absolutely horrible. Feels like I will not survive it, that I'll die. And you think about that, when your daughters come home and they just be wrecked with grief. What can we do as parents again? I'm waiting for you, but...

**Alex Howard**

Please don't, please keep talking.

**Dr Peter Levine**

One of the things is saying, "sweetheart, I know this feels really horrible, and you know what probably next week you're going to be her best friend again. Or you're going to find another best friend. I know it feels so horrible, but believe me, it will pass, this too shall pass." Hearing that from a parent, especially from a father, I think really makes a big difference, and gives the daughter some hope, that this is not the end of the world.

**Alex Howard**

What's also really important in what you're saying, is what you just described to me was a beautiful example of holding someone where they are, giving them hope for the future, but not shaming them in their experience.

**Dr Peter Levine**

That's right.

**Alex Howard**

That you can hold someone, offer hope, but not from a place of shame.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Obviously, the one thing you don't want to do with your daughter is say, "look, you'll get over it."

**Alex Howard**

Exactly. Doesn't work. I've tried it.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Then you're in shame.

**Alex Howard**

Exactly.

**[00:32:24] Dr Peter Levine**

Then you have to say, "God, I can't believe I just said that."

**Alex Howard**

Exactly.

**Dr Peter Levine**

That must be my own stuff. But yeah, these things change, and they feel like the air has gone out of you.

**Alex Howard**

Also one of the things that I think is often tricky for people when they do their inner work, and start to have new perspectives, new understandings, start to put some boundaries in place, things start to progress and move forwards. Some of those relationships which are really precious and important, inevitably the dynamic starts to change, because we're starting to put certain things maybe we tolerated in the past, we're now saying, "please don't talk to me that way, actually, that really isn't okay for me". Or we're recognizing that perhaps with our parents, that there are dynamics in there which are the source of some of the suffering we're trying to work on, and we don't want to shame them. But we also need to reestablish.

**Dr Peter Levine**

No, good point. That's also about boundaries. I'm not saying it's going to be easy to do, but if your daughter is able to say, "okay, look, that's your thing." And boundaries in general, one of the important antidotes of not being shamed is being able to set boundaries.

How do you set boundaries? Well, in working with people for a good while, often therapists refer clients that have issues around boundaries. They role play, they psychodrama, they coach the client to keep the boundary with their spouse, or the tradesperson who's coming in, the plumber who's coming in, or something like that. But then they think, "okay, that's good, they're going to be fine". But then something happens and the whole thing collapses. I can just think of so many examples of that.

From where I stand, come from as a body therapist, it is about, until you get boundaries felt in the body, you're not really able to set them and maintain them. For example, when I do an exercise with the vu and the jaw, and also with my hand and arms going like...

So you feel the power, and you feel how your body naturally wants to make a boundary, form a boundary. And once you practiced it physically, physiologically and physically, it then becomes so much easier to actually do it when it comes up in your life.

Boundaries are absolutely essential in relationships, because if you're unable to set boundaries, and that doesn't mean you walk all over the other person, but they're going to wind up walking over you, or you're going to experience them as walking over you. So working with both, I've done

that with couples, have them both feel the boundaries, and then face each other and then do the boundary exercise with each other. Typically they'll just start laughing.

**[00:36:12] Alex Howard**

Yeah, I can imagine that. When what we're longing for and yearning for is co-regulation, let's say we're in regulation with someone, but the dynamic is toxic. So to find the place of balance, we're going to have to push that person, we're going to have to break the regulation to reset the boundary. In the short term we're losing the connection. It's a tricky one, isn't it?

**Dr Peter Levine**

It sure is. You definitely got me thinking on this one. When each person, each individual in the relationship is able to say, "I need to pull back. Let's maybe just come together in an hour or so, or tomorrow, you know, let's both feel what's going on in ourselves, see how we've contributed, and what we might do to help change it".

Don't try to do it when everybody is in the activated state. That's a very difficult one, especially where one, or both, people have abandonment fear. Because if we say "well, let's come back tomorrow", it's like there may never be a tomorrow, it feels like that, obviously it's not like that. And each time you do that, the relationship actually feels more and more secure. So you can trust that if one or both of us needs some of our own space right now, it's okay to take it, and the relationship will survive it, and very often survive and thrive.

**Alex Howard**

It's an interesting thing, isn't it? Because it's that balance in relationship of, let's say, we're in relationship with someone that we know they have anxious attachment style, for example. And so they need that sort of constant reassurance and so on. But actually in a way we're in danger of enabling that issue. And so there's a place of holding that person, but also not trapping that person in that place. I think that's also a tricky edge to find.

**Dr Peter Levine**

Yeah. You're answering these dandy questions. I think in some ways attachment has become the end all for relationship problems. And obviously attachment issues play out in relationships. But I think if we're just looking at that, we may be missing some of the other things that are going on in the relationships. Such as learning how, when, and how to co-regulate each other. Because in a way, until we can be co-regulated and regulate ourselves, we keep falling into these attachment black holes.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's a good word for it. It's like, what you're saying is rather than over-focusing on the fact that someone's anxious, or avoidant, whatever, to focus on how do we cultivate a secure attachment, and if we can.

**[00:39:47] Dr Peter Levine**

Exactly. If a couple is committed to doing that, and to being there for each other when they do that, that couple, as I said, will thrive. And their relationship will be very... A lot of times problems which people have thought was from some other source in relationships, really, once you're able to capture the regulation piece, a lot of these other issues can fall into place.

**Alex Howard**

What you're saying is, we can constantly focus on trying to fix the problem, or we can put our energy towards what we actually want to build together.

**Dr Peter Levine**

That's right. To look not just to the past, but to look to the present.

To look to the future from the present.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. We're pretty much out of time, but that sounds like a really nice place.

**Alex Howard**

Do you want to say a few words about the programs? I know that there's a substantive body of work between your books and online courses, but do you want to just speak a little bit?

**Dr Peter Levine**

Thank you. Some time ago, about a year or so ago, one of my really dear friends said... Well, what I was noticing is I was really revisiting and sorting through the index cards of my life. It was a very deep excavation for me. And one of my friends said, "you really should write this as a book". And I said, "no way." As it turns out, I did write it as a book, and it is called *An Autobiography of Trauma: A Healing Journey*. You can get it now on Amazon, it's now available to pre-order on Amazon.

The first time when I thought about writing it as a book, I froze, to talk about freezing. And fortunately a friend was there with me and she just said, "that's okay, let's just settle with that". But then I had the following dream, I had in my hands a whole ream of pages, in each hand, and I was facing into an open meadow, and obviously I didn't know what to do. And then all of a sudden, this wind came from behind me, and took all the pages and just threw them out into the wind land where they may.

And that's when I decided that I would put this down as a book, as an autobiography, with the hope and I think there's some indication that it does help with this, is to help people with their own healing, and to tell my story. Much of these are things people have never known about me.

If you go to Amazon and order it, that will actually help, it connects to other things, something like that. So that's the new thing with me. Also, in March we're having a retreat in Costa Rica. We do this once or twice a year, and it's with a small number of people. We just did one at Broughton Hall, and that one was profoundly transformative, I think for all the people that were in it. And I do that

with a group of my SE teachers and assistants. And it's a whole progression of things. This one had to do more with developmental trauma, and with ancestors, connection with our ancestors.

So Costa Rica will be coming up next, go to [somaticexperiencing.com](https://somaticexperiencing.com) you can find out about that.

**[00:44:29] Alex Howard**

I also see there's a conference coming up with Bessel and Gabor, and some other speakers early next year as well. I think people will find everything in time at your website.

**Dr Peter Levine**

That's right.

**Alex Howard**

Wonderful. Peter, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. I really enjoyed that.