



## EPISODE #23

# Three Steps for Better Shame Resilience with Alex Theobold

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[Breaking the Silence Podcast by Reach 10](#) with hosts Creed Orme and Crishelle Simons

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*Everyone can relate to that terrible feeling of wanting to shut down, disengage from people, and avoid situations because we messed up. Creed and Crishelle talk with Alex Theobold, a young therapist and PhD student at Texas Tech about being more resilient when we feel shame. He encourages us to be aware of when we feel shame. What are you learning about yourself? His top 3 steps to get past shame are to learn how to accept that you are experiencing shame. Then learn how to communicate that safely to someone you trust. Finally, take action towards living consistent with your values. Alex shares some of his own experiences with shame and encourages us to turn those really human and imperfect moments into something that can be productive.*

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Creed:

Welcome back listeners to Breaking the Silence. We are so glad to have you and we're really excited to have Alex Theobold with us today. Today we are talking about building shame resilience and Alex has some awesome tips and thoughts regarding building shame resilience. He has been actually working with—he's worked with Reach 10 a little bit over

the years. He helped get it started, brainstorming ideas for it. So all of us know him quite a bit. So we're excited to have him back and to hear from him. Thanks for being here Alex.

Alex:

Oh, I'm so happy to be here. Thank you Creed.

Creed:

So to get started, could you let us know a little bit about yourself?

Alex:

Yeah, sure. Yeah. So I am currently a doctoral student at Texas Tech and I received a master's student in marriage and family therapy. That's the same degree as my doctoral degree and I'm anticipated to graduate with a PhD in 2022. If all things go well, I put a question mark at the end of that 'cause sometimes dissertations take longer than expected, but if everything goes according to plan: 2022. I'm currently married Ashley and I married in may of 2017 and we are expecting our first child coming in June. I'm 30 years old. I feel like a dating show a little bit, right? 30 years old likes walks on the beach. I'm more of a mountain guy actually. So if we're going to go on a walk I like riding bikes or going on hikes with Ashley. We both really enjoy a lot of music and I think maybe our top fandom interest is Lord of the Rings. So we both deeply love Lord of the Rings.

Crishelle:

Love that. And it's so good to see you and talk with you again, Alex. It feels like yesterday and yet 20 years ago that we were sitting in Vauna's living room talking about Reach 10 for the first time and it wasn't even named, Reach 10 at the time. We didn't even have a name. It was just ideas. And it's so amazing to see how far we've come and individually as well as an organization.

Alex:

Truly. It is kind of a remarkable thing. I would not have guessed that I would be doing a podcast for this organization. Back on that couch. If you would have asked me back then like where do you think this is going to go? I always had, you know, hopes and I always believed that this organization would be really successful in helping people develop

healthier lives. I just had no idea the scope or breadth that it would reach. So it's exciting to be here.

Crishelle:

It definitely is. And it's so amazing how much reach that we are having. In fact, today I received a text message from a friend that I hadn't talked to in probably five years and she just reached out to me and was like, "Crishelle, I'm so grateful for your podcast—" and it's not just my podcast but you know, it's just what she was saying. "But I'm so grateful for this podcast because even though I don't have a relationship with like a super close relationship with a recovering addict, all of the principles that you guys talk about are helping me in my relationships and they're helping me in my marriage and I'm so grateful for them." And I was like, yes, I want everyone to hear this and we are reaching people. So it's so great.

Alex:

Yeah. That's awesome to hear. I'm glad that you're getting a lot of positive feedback too. Yeah.

Crishelle:

Yep. But I'm so excited to talk about shame resilience with you. I think this is such an important topic and again, an important topic in recovery, but also an important topic if you have a pulse and you breathe and you're human. So this is so, so good. And so can you talk to us a little bit about what shame is?

Alex:

Yeah. So let's start like before we had to, you know, start becoming resilient to it. Let's talk about what it is and why we want to develop with some resilience. There are lots of thoughts in terms of how to define shame or how to measure it, how to look at it. One of the ways, one of the definitions that I like is that it is an emotional experience or emotion based on a judgment of your whole person, of who you are entirely. A mirroring emotion might be guilt, which is an emotional experience based on a judgment of an action or behavior. And what we noticed with shame, at least in the language of shame, it's a lot of, "I am . . ." like I am a bad person. And that's one of the archetypal shame statements, whereas a guilt statement might sound like I've done a bad thing. And the reason why we want to

become a little more shame resilient, right, is that belief that I am a bad person. It has really negative effects on an emotional level and a physical, biological level. It also has been shown to show significant distress within relationships. And so shame can become a really problematic emotional experience if, we don't build some resilience to it. But hopefully through our conversation today, you can kind of identify that toxic shame, the, I would say, the more destructive emotion and experience around shame and maybe target that in terms of what we're becoming resilient to.

Creed:

So when you talk about the shame, what does that look like? Like what and why is that kind of shame, destructive or harmful as opposed to healthful.

Alex:

Yeah. So let's pull from some of the libraries of Alex, right? So I'll go back to some times where I felt some major shame. And when I was a kid, I approached one of my friend's parents. Now the friend, this friend's parents, they were particularly kind and loving to me and we had a very good relationship. And he was a joker. This, his father was kind of a tease and he would kind of participate in some behaviors that would, you know encourage risk taking or you know, like jumping off—he would always encourage us boys to go kind of go the extra mile and have a little bit more fun than say a parent that was trying to keep us all indoors. He was very much an adventure dad. So with that context, we showed up at a Christmas party and he had a bald head. Now he actually had a pretty good set of hair before this, but he suddenly had a bald head and I approached him and kind of, you know, nudged his shoulder like, "Hey, like nice haircut. Did you lose a bet?" Or I kind of joked with him that way and his face kind of grimaced and he said, "actually, Alex, I have cancer." And as a young 13 year old kid learning social cues and being awkward, I just immediately shut down. Like I felt like the worst person in that moment, you know, here I was just trying to make light of a haircut. And that's something that would have totally happened to this friend of mine is that, you know, he could have made a bet to shave off his head with his sons or something that's like totally within the realm of something they would have done in their family. But I immediately felt like this horrible person, like I was ya know. So just, I was bad and I remember feeling shut down for the rest of the evening. I wasn't engaging with my friends. I wasn't, it was really hard for me to look at him in the eye and like I felt

uncomfortable around him over our next few meetings. And so I look at that experience and had I been a little more shame resilient, it might've looked like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. That was really insensitive of me to say. I want you to know I'm here, you know. I believe in you and I'm confident you can get through this and I just want you to know, I'm sorry for saying that. It's sensitive thing." So does that kind of paint a picture as to what shame might do and why it might be destructive in a, I guess in a relational emotional standpoint versus maybe what someone with a little more shame resilience might sound like or act like?

Creed:

Right. So if you had perhaps been more shame resilient in that experience, do you think you maybe would have been able to, "darn it, that was an uncomfortable situation and I truly am sorry about it" and kind of kind of maybe leaving it more behind you as opposed to letting it, I guess control your relationship with that man can from that point. Right?

Alex:

Absolutely. Yeah. I think about my disengagement that evening and I wasn't even like we were supposed to be, it was a Christmas party. Right? And so we were playing games and opening presents and I just like, none of it was enjoyable. Like I wasn't able to move on emotionally from that exchange for the rest of the evening. I was still locked in shame and really shut down. And in terms of, if you think about it in a couple of contexts, right? When you're in an intimate relationship, if one partner does something to really provoke shame, right? Or if they do something they're not proud of, you know, that creates a whole bunch of different types of conflicts, you know, you might shut down, you might disengage. Shame can also show up like, my example is a little bit more like a shutdown, like hideaway isolate. But some shame can look like anger blaming you know, you can gaslight somebody. So there's different ways that shame can manifest itself. And we can get more into that too if you want. But I don't know if that totally answered your question, Creed.

Creed:

Totally. Thank you. Yeah, I think we can totally relate to that feeling of wanting to shut down, disengage from people, relationships, situations because we messed up, we did something wrong. And instead of, you know, using it as a way to improve or to learn or make things better, which guilt can help us do shame. I believe often, and this is something

I learned in my recent class, I study about shame and guilt is that it causes us to hide, it causes us to not really improve, but just disengage and disconnect. So shame doesn't seem like a great thing to live your life.

Alex:

No, it's—Oh, go ahead Crishelle Sorry.

Crishelle:

Yeah, I think something that you brought up too is that it can also manifest itself in different ways is important too, because I can definitely relate to times in my life where I experienced what you talked about, where I just like went inward and literally could not get out of, "Oh my gosh, I just did that. Like what was I thinking? And I do not deserve to live." But also I think that there's been times in my life where it's shown up as I'm like, well, I messed up, so whatever. And I then numb all of my feelings and I'm just like, who cares? And I think that's really interesting that it can show up both ways. More than just both ways. I think there's more than just two ways, right?

Alex:

Yeah, absolutely. And so I think maybe an invitation to all of us as we're trying to build our shame resilience is to start observing those moments where you might experience shame and you have some of these thoughts like, wow, I should just disappear right now. Or Oh my gosh, I can't believe I said that or did that. And to be able to learn how to identify what your next reaction is so we might experience shame. And then notice: is my anger spiking? Is my shyness spiking? Am I becoming, I would say, more critical or accusing like, do I become snarky? It'll become aloof or ambivalent, kind of like your second example, right? Like I don't care, whatever. Like I just, I'm going to, you know— pay attention to what those second reactions are. What that does is it enables us to start tracking the shame. Sometimes we don't notice the shame first. We notice the anger and sometimes if we're experiencing anger, it's easier to notice. I'm angry for whatever reason, we're more accustomed to talking about that. And if you were to say, man, I'm angry. Just pose the question. I wonder if I'm also experiencing any shame right now? And if so, what about? Right? If you're starting to feel like isolating or you feel like pulling out of a situation, be curious, open up that question of like, man, what else is going on for me right now? I wonder if there's some

shame involved and that can start to kind of help us become more mindful about our experiences with shame.

Crishelle:

I really love this and I think this is a such a good coping skill, this idea of like observing and like asking questions about your experience from a place of non-judgment. And I think that's really key, especially in the definition you gave us about shame is that it comes from a judgment about something that we did or who we are. And so if we can observe from a place of non-judgment or a place of love and just notice things, I think how I think of it in my life is I like to look up. If I was looking at my life from a balcony, what would I see?

Alex:

Yeah.

Crishelle:

What are all the different things going on? What's the context? What's the emotional context? What did I eat for lunch? Did I eat? Yeah, that's an important factor. And just noticing that helps me come from more of a place of non-judgment and observing rather than like staying trapped in the shame cycle and the gunk.

Alex:

Yeah. I really like this analogy too Crishelle. And I think it's, we can play with it a little bit to talk about how to build resilience. So building resilience is learning how to get to your balcony when you're not there. Cool. Right? So sometimes when we're locked in shame or a heightened emotional experience, it's hard for us to regulate those emotions, especially the more intense they become. So learning how to get to your balcony and get that space of non-judgment or get to that space of non-judgment as you know, as effectively and maybe even as quickly as possible can be helpful. I say quickly, a little bit cautiously because I do think it's important for us to not avoid the emotion. So when working with shame resilience, I like the word resilience because it's not avoidance. So we don't want to avoid shame or we don't want to deny shame or try to live a life of being shame-free. Like there's some ideologies out there and I have some concerns about that because shame is a natural phenomenon and I think a healthy approach to shame is to accept that we're going to

experience it maybe even on a daily basis and then know what we're going to do with that emotion.

Crishelle:

Amen. I just wanna I just want to amen all that because that is so beautiful. I feel like that's something that I've really struggled with in, I'm going to call it the Brene Brown movement. I love her, but I feel like she triggered this like desire in a lot of people to get rid of shame in their lives. And I've just known a lot of people that I love dearly that are like, how dare you, you said something that was shaming to him and I was like, okay, well I was being a human being and I said something and if they felt shame, that's interesting. Right? And so I think that what you're saying is so accurate cause getting rid of shame or getting rid of anger or getting rid of darkness or getting rid of fill in the blank, I don't think that's the solution. And I don't want to take that too extreme, but I think the solution is to be like, okay, I'm observing this or this is happening in my life. Why or what is it about this that I'm learning about myself?

Alex:

Yeah. Well said. I want to just go back to something that you mentioned in that experience where maybe someone said, how could you say that? That was very shaming to them. I think one thing to be very careful about is that our shame is typically an internal experience. It's an internal judgment. If, you know, I, I'll share this and this is fresh, so like, I don't know who will read this or listen to this soon, but I just had my annual review for my program, and this is a time for all the faculty to get together and essentially tell you where you need improvement and where you're doing well. Well, they hit on some things that were really hard for me and my annual review and it was very clear to me that they could see through some of my masks or like my barriers and they went right to the core on some things that I really needed to work on. And it was really hard for me to hear that. What I didn't do. But, well I should say this, my first initial experience, my knee jerk reaction was to try and explain it away, right? I tried to intellectualize the problem and that can be a form of avoiding the work of vulnerability and really leaning into some of that discomfort. And I think that desire to step out and explain a way the issue came from a place of shame. Right? And so what I had to do, and it's still a process I'm undergoing right now, I just had a meeting with some faculty members earlier to kind of walk through my plan of action to correct some of these



things that I need to work on. And one of those things is or one of those things that I would recommend all of us do is to lean into the pain and accept that, "Hey, yeah, this is uncomfortable and it's okay that it's uncomfortable." I'm not going to try to avoid the discomfort. I'm going to try to respond effectively to the discomfort, but I'm not going to avoid discomfort. I think that presents its own set of issues and, what I'm not suggesting is go out and shame yourself more. Right? But rather, accept that part of life that is going to be shame as well as guilt, as well as frustration, as well as happiness and peace and joy and be open to the full breadth of emotional experiencing.

Crishelle:

I keep thinking of the scripture in the Book of Mormon that talks about how there's opposition in all things and that if there was no light, there could be no darkness. And if there's no evil, there could be no good and how that is just an integral part of our world. And I think that that's a truth that yes, we find in the Book of Mormon, but we see that everywhere. There's no night without day and vice-a-versa, no cold without warm or hot and vice versa.

Alex:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Creed:

Yeah. Some thoughts on that. I do really believe that all of our emotions have...there's a need behind it. Our bodies are made to tell us what's going on in our lives and every emotion is helpful to signal what's going on for us. This book that I've recently listened to, The Language of Emotions talks about how we don't want to shut off these emotions. I mean any of them because if we numb one emotion, kind of what Brene Brown also talks about is we numb all the other good emotions too. We have to let them flow, learn from them, be mindful of what's happening. I think the key here is not always sitting in shame and just being ashamed. There's some kind of action or process that we can help ourselves to move out of that because we don't want to always stay in shame because as we just talked about, it's not helpful. Right. Pay attention to what that emotion is telling us and act based off of it, which will allow it to flow. Then we can move out of it and then we're in a good spot again. But that is that right?

Alex:

Oh, I mean I agree with you, but I don't have a capital on what's right or wrong in this world. But I would agree with that statement that all emotions play a role. And I think for me as I've learned to be shame, resilience, I become grateful for that response because it helps me connect to what I care about, right? So if we go back to my experience with my friend's dad who was fighting cancer, why was that such a shaming experience to me? And I think back to my 14 year old self and it was probably had something to do with you know, I cared about supporting people in their grief and I did the exact opposite of that. You know, or I cared about being someone who loves people, you know, whatever they're going through. And I wanted to be a support and not a hindrance or not a pain in the neck for these people. And I think that insensitive comment I made, it wasn't sensitive. It was not considering what could be and it didn't fit with the values that I have. And so had I been more shame resilient, that shame trigger or that experience where it provoked that shame in me, I could have turned that into a relationship building opportunity. And so as we develop this skill of shame, resilience, we find ourselves being more and more capable of turning those really human imperfect moments into something that can be rather productive and effective.

Crishelle:

I love that. So what can we do to build more shame resilience?

Alex:

Yeah. this is a great question and probably merits books on books, but for the time we have together a few thoughts. The first thing is to learn how to accept that you are in shame. First acknowledge and accept, "Hey, this is what I'm experiencing." And then the second thing would be learn how to communicate that safely. So I think back to some experiences, right? I think about that friend and had I been able to turn to him and say, man, I feel bad for what I just did. That's acknowledging for, you know, that shame of experiencing it. I feel bad for what I just said. And then, you know, communicate like, I'm sorry, that was insensitive, you know? How can I make it up to you? I want you to know I care about you. Like all those things I could have said to strengthen the relationship beyond that point could have been very, very beneficial. And other contexts maybe where it's a little more private, where your shame is an isolated experience where maybe you know, someone

working through mental health struggles or you know, they have goals for themselves and their profession or their schooling and they're not meeting those goals or they're not acting in a way that's going to help them get there. And sometimes we can get locked into this shame spiral and thinking, I'm just not good enough. I can't do it. I'm a horrible person. One thing that might be helpful there is to again acknowledge that I'm in shame and then reach out to someone who you know is in your corner, someone you know is going to be able to support you and just say the words, I'm in a lot of shame right now. I feel, you know, and then express how you're feeling and ask if you know, if they're open to kind of helping you process through that or work through it. The third thing I would say is after you process or after you communicate it is to act. Take action towards living consistent with your values. So if I were to kind of review those things first, acknowledge or accept that you're in shame. Two, communicate, reach out for support, express the shame in a way that's healthy and safe. And then the third is to take action that's consistent with your values. Be able to move or act in a way that will help correct the course.

Crishelle:

Really, really love this. And for me, one of the bigger ahas of this whole conversation is that when I think of all the times that like really stand out in my head, that where I've felt a lot of shame, it was because I realized that I wasn't acting towards my values in a way that was really painful, sometimes really embarrassing and oftentimes harmful to myself or to someone that I cared about very deeply, right? And so to recognize that we can totally change that. Like, I made a mistake and I can change that. That doesn't incriminate me forever. I hope that's the right word.

Alex:

Well I think that judgments are incriminating for sure. At least definitely judgments. Right?

Crishelle:

Definitely, definitely. And so being able to recognize, I don't have to stay stuck in my own judgment, in my own experience. I can move forward.

Alex:

I will say this, and speaking—So I worked at you know, an organization that worked with couples working through problematic pornography use, affairs, or other problematic sexual experiences or even sexual traumas. And you know, the work I've done there as a therapist, one of the one of the things I've noticed is sometimes that acknowledge, communicate, and act piece doesn't take into consideration another person's experience. So going back to what you just said, let's say we really do hurt somebody's feelings and you work your shame resilience and you communicate, you apologize, and you try to take actions to repair. That doesn't mean that they're going to be in the same space. Right? We also have to give space to those individuals who we've hurt to heal and that might take time. And so for someone who has offended or hurt their spouse and they try to go repair that, I would be, you know, as open to your own improvement in shame resilience as you are open to their space for their improvement, to walk in with some non-judgment for them and to not expect them to be in a perfect spot to come in and you know, welcome you with open arms. Like man, I'm so glad you're practicing shame resilience right now. Like they're in their own space and that needs to be acknowledged and you know, honored as well. So I appreciate you bringing up that point 'cause I think sometimes we forget and working on ourselves that sometimes our behaviors and actions affect other people and we need to be considerate of them.

Creed:

This is so great. I mean I've been taking notes and writing down everything you're saying 'cause I need to remember this. This is so good. And I love how simple it is to remember too. I mean, just based off of what you talked about, the, three A's, I'm already calling them, acknowledge, admit or communicate, and act. Right?

Alex:

Right! Yeah. That's awesome you named it the three A's.

Creed:

In a place of non-judgment towards yourself, towards others. Mindfulness. I just love this. Thank you so much Alex.

Alex:

This is awesome. And I'm happy to help you out, Creed. I'm aware that most of the people listening to this, you know, have some level of shame resilience. So I hope that all of us here can recognize, Hey, I've probably done this right at some point in my life. Are you also maybe recognizing places where you can improve? Like hopefully that's the idea of this podcast, right? Is we're trying to improve our lives and become healthier humans. And I think that that's...So that's awesome that you're taking notes. I just also want to acknowledge you're probably doing better than you think and that's probably true for everybody else.

Crishelle:

I love that. And I just want to echo what you just said because I think sometimes we buy into the lie that I'm not doing good at all when the fact of the matter is, if you are listening, if you are striving, if you're gaining knowledge, if you're seeking goodness in your life, that means that you're doing something right and you've made strides already and I guarantee that there's at least one time in your past that you were able to do it successfully, right? Yeah. Build on that.

Creed:

And we can definitely use the help of others through that process of building shame resilience. Oftentimes it's really helpful to get a therapist to help guide us through if we're feeling immense shame too often, how to guide us through that. But also when we do that act portion to reach out to those we are close to and to help guide us out of it using others as well is helpful.

Alex:

Yeah, I can't say that enough. I think a lot of people try to tackle their mental health problems or their relationship problems or their, you know, financial problems, anything that's very intimate and personal and kind of close to the heart. A lot of people feel this burden to tackle it on their own. And if you're experiencing significant mental health problems or maybe the non-significant. I'm pro therapy for people that are generally healthy but going through a hard time, right? So I would go ahead and just reach out to those professionals or find a support group. Like right now I'll be vulnerable on the air, right? So I have narcolepsy. It's a sleep disorder. And with this whole quarantine Covid-19

thing, my narcolepsy is having a heyday because I'm in the same place. There's no movement. All the typical sunlight I'd get or all the interactions, socially, I would get where I'd get a lot of energy. I'm not getting out as much. And so it's been really hard for me to manage my sleep disorder and I've been reaching out to support groups that are online for people with sleep disorders to kind of understand, man, what's going on with you guys? How are we all working through this? Because admittedly I've experienced a lot of shame around my sleep disorder. You know, I have an expecting wife that's doing housework and I'm taking yet another nap and I just feel like that lazy husband sometimes, but I have to recognize like actually there's more at play here than your character being lazy. Like sure you've been lazy at times in the past, but maybe this isn't one of those times and you need some support. And so, you know, I think again, taking a step back and assessing where am I experiencing pain and struggle? Where can I get that support? Whether it's from a close friend, a professional, if you need some professional help, which I encourage. And then I mean obviously our religious leaders, our communities. There are also great supports there.

Creed:

Awesome. Thank you so much Alex. This is all great.

Alex:

Yeah, thank you. Thank you all.

Crishelle:

Thank you, Alex. We have loved having you come on and share all of your wisdom, especially about shame resilience and even understanding what shame really is. I think it's really helpful to dig in there and to uncover some of those uncomfy feelings and feel them and then move on and no thank you.

Alex:

No, not a problem. I hope that listeners today and all of us participating in podcasts can get something out of this. I know I did. I, it's always good to know that they say that you learn a lot through teaching and I know that as I've had this podcast today, it feels like I've also been able to learn like, "yeah, I need to work on my shame, resilience around narcolepsy." Like that was an insight I had. So I appreciate the opportunity to explore this with you all.

Crishelle:

Definitely. And like Alex talked about earlier, if you had an aha today and you had something that was like, Hmm, it just like sparks something in you, take action! Act on it. It could be one step. It could be two steps. It could be half a step. Just take action.

Creed:

And next time during this week or in the future, when you feel a shame storm coming on your life, remember the three A's, acknowledge, admit, and act and get back to your balcony and know that you're a person of worth. Let's do this together.