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The Velvet Rage: Overcoming The Pain Of Growing Up Gay In A Straight Man's World, Second Edition



Synopsis

Today's gay man enjoys unprecedented, hard-won social acceptance. Despite this victory, however, serious problems still exist. Substance abuse, depression, suicide, and sex addiction among gay men are at an all-time high, causing many to ask, "Are we really better off?" Drawing on contemporary research, psychologist Alan Downs's own struggle with shame and anger, and stories from his patients, *The Velvet Rage* passionately describes the stages of a gay man's journey out of shame and offers practical and inspired strategies to stop the cycle of avoidance and self-defeating behavior. Updated to reflect the effects of the many recent social, cultural, and political changes, *The Velvet Rage* is an empowering book that has already changed the public discourse on gay culture and helped shape the identity of an entire generation of gay men.

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Customer Reviews

With a title that plays on Janet Jackson's epochal 1997 LP *The Velvet Rope*, and its anatomy of unmet desire, therapist Downs's book describes the paradigmatic ways in which early childhood molds the future lives of gay men: scorned on the playground, disrespected by Dad, loved only by Mom until their first sex with men. Through this mechanism of rejection, gay men feel unlovable, correspondingly angry and, he says, driven to heights of creativity and "fabulousness" in addition to shopping addiction and obsessions with fat, muscle and penis size in a bid to distract themselves from their inner shame. For Downs, the only thing that will bring an end to this spiral of torment is, finally, "validation," which produces "authenticity." Downs is an engaging writer,

though prone to repeating the same few points in different words, while his patients, quoted in sidebars, often make witty quips that rival Quentin Crisp for dry, bitter sarcasm. While many gay readers will fail to recognize themselves here, others will find Downs's logic warming and even generous. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Philadelphia Gay News bestseller, 5/11/12; A groundbreaking examination of the psychology of homosexuality, why it leads to shame over one's identity and how to overcome it. This book has remarkable staying power. Artvoice, 11/26/15; The clearest, most succinct delineation of the origins and consequences of internalized homophobia, and how to address them.

This book, particularly the first third (as other reviewers have noted) and the lengthy second edition add-on (Chapter 14) is a good starting point in understanding the origins and life-long impact of gay shame and how to overcome it. The author's three stage model for how gay men experience/deal with shame (overwhelm, compensation, authenticity) is useful and occasionally eye-opening as are his observations of how shame at each stage can be "foreclosed" on (ignored, buried, etc.) or healthfully resolved. The solid practical advice offered in the aforementioned Chapter 14 ("Skills for Living an Authentic Life), while being tailored to the gay male experience, could be of benefit to a much wider audience. The main flaw with "The Velvet Rage" -- and it's a stunner -- is that it focuses almost exclusively on only one type of gay man, i.e. the urban, successful, materialistic, attractive, sexually promiscuous, well-traveled, fabulous "powergay". Life examples from the less-than-fabulous, i.e. rural/suburban gay men, unsuccessful or non-materialistic gay men, poor and middle-class gay men, ordinary-looking gay men, gay homebodies, senior gay men, disabled gay men, gay men of color, and many others are almost nowhere to be found, likely because these people appear largely absent from the author's social and professional circles (which he talks about a great deal, almost to the point of bragging at times). Though surely unintentional, this is a terrible oversight for a book that seeks to provide psychological support to a marginalized minority, and I suspect a fair number of gay men reading this book will feel further alienated in some way as a result. I would still recommend "The Velvet Rage", as it is vitally important for gay men to understand the toxic shame that lies at the core of our personal and collective psychological shadows as well as acquire the psychological tools necessary to make positive changes in our lives. Just don't expect to see your life experiences adequately reflected if you're an average gay Joe.

As self-help books go (and I will admit that I am not a fan of the genre), *The Velvet Rage* is actually quite good. The problematic issue with many self-help books is that the underlying philosophy (or approach, or methodology, or treatment, etc.) is based on the assumption that everyone who reads the book is suffering with or struggling with the same condition (e.g., obesity, addiction, unhealthy relationship). This kind of essentializing or pathologizing of a condition usually results in overly generic (i.e., pretty much useless) strategies for correcting the condition. This book, however, is based on a more solid foundation—the belief that most gay men face similar challenges during the course of their development. These challenges result in deep-seated shame that often precludes any ability to maintain healthy, loving adult relationships with other men. And on this point, Dr. Downs pretty much gets it right. I recognized more of myself than I care to admit in Downs's descriptions of men crippled by a shame that dooms any attempt at a loving relationship with another man. The book is therapeutic and enlightening without being overly patronizing. In other words, Downs explains how and why our contemporary culture (20th century America, to be exact) makes it well-nigh impossible for a gay man to grow up as a healthy, self-actualized person, yet he does not excuse any of us for our failure to overcome these obstacles. He uses clear, frank language and relates anecdotes from his private practice to illustrate the various ways in which gay men sabotage their own relationships. (Unfortunately, Downs's practice seems limited to middle-class or upper middle-class white men, so there is not much diversity within the stories he tells. We do not get, for example, a clear idea of what it might be like to grow up poor and gay or black and gay or Latino and gay or Asian and gay). More importantly, he offers practical, specific advice for overcoming the various stages of shame many of us grew up with. Downs never explicitly draws the comparison, but the shame-redemption process he describes seems to closely parallel the coming out process in general. And for many gay men, coming out is merely the first step on the long road toward mental, emotional health and self-acceptance.

This is the single best analysis of the gay male psyche that I have read. It offers very thoughtful insights into so many aspects of gay men's culture and patterns and phases of behavior, relations, job stresses, family and so on. I would consider it a must-read for gay men trying to understand the good, bad, and ugly of the culture they are inevitably immersed in as they mature through life. Of course, not every scenario applies to every man, but collectively one can learn a great deal from this book. It is also well written and very engaging, even if you are unaccustomed to reading

psychological writing. I would highly recommend this to any gay man, or to other people, friends or family, who want to gain a deeper, clearer understanding of some of the common possibilities for motives, fears, and experiences that drive a lot of gay male behavior.

I think this book would be a good to great eye opener for gay men who are ready to consider its message: shame has insidious effects on what we think of ourselves and how we interact with one another. I think it touches upon many relevant topics, uses stories mostly effectively to illustrate those topics, and has some good, practical ideas (Chp. 14) for "living an authentic life." However, I don't think the book/author can achieve the stated goal of "help[ing] gay men achieve this third stage of authenticity." I think that's a generous promise. The book is a good starting point - identifying the problem and (somewhat) understanding it - but the change component is much more involved than the recipe in Chp. 14. Also, I'm concerned that the book's notes are seriously lacking in studies that support all (and I do mean all) of Alan Downs's claims. Overall, a good book for getting the conversation going, but nothing more than that.

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