



Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless

By Steve Salerno



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Self-help: To millions of Americans it seems like a godsend. To many others it seems like a joke. But as investigative reporter Steve Salerno reveals in this groundbreaking book, it's neither—in fact it's much worse than a joke. Going deep inside the Self-Help and Actualization Movement (fittingly, the words form the acronym SHAM), Salerno offers the first serious exposé of this multibillion-dollar industry and the real damage it is doing—not just to its paying customers, but to all of American society.

Based on the author's extensive reporting—and the inside look at the industry he got while working at a leading “lifestyle” publisher—*SHAM* shows how thinly credentialed “experts” now dispense advice on everything from mental health to relationships to diet to personal finance to business strategy. Americans spend upward of \$8 billion every year on self-help programs and products. And those staggering financial costs are actually the least of our worries.

SHAM demonstrates how the self-help movement's core philosophies have infected virtually every aspect of American life—the home, the workplace, the schools, and more. And Salerno exposes the downside of being uplifted, showing how the “empowering” message that dominates self-help today proves just as damaging as the blame-shifting rhetoric of self-help's “Recovery” movement.

SHAM also reveals:

- How self-help gurus conduct extensive market research to reach the same customers over and over—without ever helping them
- The inside story on the most notorious gurus—from Dr. Phil to Dr. Laura, from Tony Robbins to John Gray
- How your company might be wasting money on motivational speakers, “executive coaches,” and other quick fixes that often hurt quality, productivity, and morale
- How the Recovery movement has eradicated notions of personal responsibility by labeling just about anything—from drug abuse to “sex addiction” to shoplifting—a dysfunction or disease

- How Americans blindly accept that twelve-step programs offer the only hope of treating addiction, when in fact these programs can do more harm than good
- How the self-help movement inspired the disastrous emphasis on self-esteem in our schools
- How self-help rhetoric has pushed people away from proven medical treatments by persuading them that they can cure themselves through sheer application of will

As Salerno shows, to describe self-help as a waste of time and money vastly understates its collateral damage. And with *SHAM*, the self-help industry has finally been called to account for the damage it has done.

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Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless By Steve Salerno Bibliography

- Rank: #1700881 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Crown
- Published on: 2005-06-21
- Released on: 2005-06-21
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.55" h x 1.04" w x 6.20" l, 1.17 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

You! Yes, you! Are you addicted to self-help books? Do you require "empowerment" to reverse your "victimhood"? If so, relax—you're far from alone. The Self-Help and Actualization Movement (the titular SHAM) is, according to Salerno, an \$8-billion-a-year industry that depends on legions of repeat customers. Salerno presents a carefully researched—and devastating—exposé on SHAM's predatory and fraudulent practices and its corrosive effects on society. As former editor of *Men's Health* magazine's books program, Salerno knows the terrain from the inside. With judicious delight, he exposes the grandiloquent bluster and blithe hypocrisy of Dr. Phil (who, psychologists say, shames rather than helps his guests) and Dr. Laura (the preacher of family values who didn't know when her own mother was murdered), among many others. He cites examples of junk science, such as Tony Robbins's talk of "the energy frequency of foods," and charges that untested alternative medicine draws people away from proven medical treatments. In addition to detailing the raw facts, Salerno excels at pinpointing the self-abnegating strategy the self-help industry employs: namely, tearing you down in the name of building you up. And the positivity yields questionable results in any case. The self-help industry should not be dismissed as "silly but benign," says Salerno, and he documents how it has undermined psychology, education and health care in this blistering critique. (*June 28*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

The all-caps title is an acronym that expresses Salerno's assessment of what it signifies, the Self-Help and Actualization Movement, which he subdivides into the camp of victimization and the camp of empowerment, both of which excuse inaction. The movement fosters victimization by telling adherents they can't escape their pasts, and empowerment by exalting attitude (e.g., self-esteem) over achievement. Salerno keeps both camps in mind as he dissects the checkered--especially in terms of qualifications--careers of SHAM stars John Gray, Dr. Laura, Marianne Williamson, Suze Orman, and in their own chapters, Dr. Phil McGraw and Tony Robbins, both creators of lucrative SHAM empires by copycatting lesser entrepreneurs' wares. Salerno asks why, if SHAM programs and treatments supposedly solve their purchasers' problems, SHAM enterprises thrive on repeat customers, and why the proposed next step, should program or treatment fail, is always more of same. In the book's sobering second part, Salerno powerfully argues that SHAM does real harm through its influence on love relationships, schooling, and health care. A wonderfully lucid, angeringly cogent polemic. *Ray Olson*

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Review

"Funny, naughty, and wise, Steve Salerno's *SHAM* is the must-read antidote to Dr. Phil, Tony Robbins, and the whole cracked pot of American pop psychology." —Greg Critser, author of *Fat Land*

"In an age of self-help, why are so many Americans helpless? Why do so many self-help gurus, from Dr. Phil on down, create followers rather than independent souls? Steve Salerno exposes the SHAM with ruthless honesty destined to make more than a few people angry." —Dr. Michael Hurd, author of *Effective Therapy* and *Grow Up America!*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Leonard Parnell:

In this 21st centuries, people become competitive in each way. By being competitive today, people have do something to make these people survives, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice by means of surrounding. One thing that often many people have underestimated that for a while is reading. That's why, by reading a book your ability to survive raise then having chance to endure than other is high. For yourself who want to start reading a new book, we give you this Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless book as starter and daily reading guide. Why, because this book is usually more than just a book.

Adrian Woodson:

The knowledge that you get from Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless could be the more deep you rooting the information that hide into the words the more you get thinking about reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to be aware of but Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless giving you thrill feeling of reading. The article author conveys their point in particular way that can be understood through anyone who read that because the author of this book is well-known enough. That book also makes your own personal vocabulary increase well. It is therefore easy to understand then can go along with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We advise you for having this kind of Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless instantly.

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William Leone:

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