

SHAME AND GUILT

The “dividing line between the concepts of shame, guilt and embarrassment is not fully standardized.” Many people use guilt and shame interchangeably, but from a psychological perspective, they actually refer to different experiences.

Psychoanalyst Helen B. Lewis argued that ‘The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done is the focus.’ Similarly, Fossum and Mason say in their book *Facing Shame* that ‘While guilt is a painful feeling of regret and responsibility for one’s actions, shame is a painful feeling about oneself as a person.’”

The action that inspires guilt usually involves the infliction of pain, either intentionally or unintentionally, upon another person. Guilt depends upon the ability to intuit how someone else might feel and as a result to experience remorse for the pain one has caused.

There’s such a thing as appropriate guilt, just as there is appropriate shame. Being able to tolerate and not be overwhelmed by them is a sign of mental health.

“How can we help combat our guilty feelings, and accept them when they’re important, but let them go more easily when they’re not?”

1. Recognize the kind of guilt you have and its purpose.

Guilt works best to help us grow and mature when our behavior has been offensive or hurtful to others or ourselves. If we feel guilty for saying something offensive to another person, or for focusing on our careers with an 80-hour work-week over our family, that’s a warning sign with a purpose: change your behavior or else lose your friends or family. We can still choose to ignore our guilt then, but then we do so at our own risk. This is known as “healthy” or “appropriate” guilt because it serves a purpose in trying to help redirect our moral or behavioral compass.

The problem arises when our behavior isn’t something that needs reexamining, nor is it something that needs to be changed. For example, a lot of first-time moms feel badly about going back to work part-time, fearful it may cause unknown damage to their child’s normal development. That’s simply not the case in most situations, however, and most children have a normal, healthy development even when both parents work. There’s nothing to feel guilty about, and yet we still do. This is known as “unhealthy” or “inappropriate” guilt because it serves no rational purpose.

If you're feeling guilty for eating five chocolate bars in a row, that's your brain's way of trying to get the message to you about a behavior you probably already recognize is a little extreme. Such behavior may be self-destructive and ultimately harmful to your health and well-being. So the rational purpose of this guilt is simply to try and convince you to change this behavior.

2. Make amends or changes sooner rather than later.

If your guilt is for a specific and rational purpose – e.g., it's healthy guilt – take action to fix the problem behavior. While many of us are gluttons for self-punishment, ongoing guilt weighs us down as we try and move forward in life. It's easy enough to apologize to someone whom we've offended by a careless remark. It's a little more challenging to not only recognize how your 80-hour-a-week career may be harming your family, but to also change your work schedule (assuming that there were legitimate reasons for working 80-hours a week in the first place).

Healthy guilt is telling us we need to do something different in order to repair relationships important to us (or our own self-esteem). (Unhealthy guilt's purpose, on the other hand, is only to make us feel badly for little legitimate reason.) While sometimes we already know the lesson guilt is trying to teach us, it will return time and time again until we've actually learned the lesson fully. It can be frustrating, but it seems to be the way guilt works for most people. The sooner we “learn the lesson” – e.g., make amends, work to not engage in the same hurtful behavior in the future, etc. – the sooner the guilt will disappear. If successful, it will never return for that issue again.

3. Accept you did something wrong, but move on.

If you did something wrong or hurtful, you will have to accept that you cannot change the past. But you can make amends for your behavior, if and when it's appropriate. Do so, apologize, or make-up for the inappropriate behavior in a timely manner, but then let it go. The more we focus on believing we need to do something more, the more it will continue to bother us and interfere with our relationships with others.

Guilt is usually very situational. That means we get into a situation, we do something inappropriate or hurtful, and then we feel badly for a time. Either the behavior wasn't so bad or time passes, and we feel less guilty. If we recognize the problem behavior and take action sooner rather than later, we'll feel better about things (and so will the other person) and the guilt will be alleviated. Obsessing about it, however, and not taking any type of compensatory behavior (such as apologizing, or changing one's negative behavior) keeps the bad feelings going. Accept and acknowledge the inappropriate behavior, make your amends, and then

move on.

4. Learning from our behaviors.

Guilt's purpose isn't to make us feel bad just for the sake of it. The feeling of guilt is trying to get our attention so that we can learn something from the experience. If we learn from our behavior, we'll be less likely to do it again in the future. If I've accidentally said something insulting to another person, my guilt is telling me I should (a) apologize to the person and (b) think a little more before I open my mouth.

If your guilt isn't trying to correct an actual mistake you made in your behavior (e.g., it's unhealthy guilt), then there's not a whole lot you need to learn. Instead of learning how to change that behavior, a person can instead try to understand why a simple behavior most people wouldn't feel guilty about is making one feel guilty. For instance, I felt guilty for spending some time playing a game during regular work hours. Since I work for myself, however, I don't really keep "regular work hours," but it's hard for me to change that mindset after years of working for others.

5. Perfection doesn't exist in anyone.

Nobody is perfect, even our friends or family members who appear to lead perfect, guilt-free lives. Striving for perfection in any part of our lives is a recipe for failure, since it can never be attained.

We all make mistakes and many of us go down a path in our lives that can make us feel guilty later on when we finally realize our mistake. The key, however, is to realize the mistake and accept that you're only human. Don't engage in days, weeks or months of self-blame or battering your self-esteem because you should've known, should've acted differently, or should've been an ideal person. You're not, and neither am I. That's just life.

Guilt is one of those emotions that we feel is telling us something important. Be aware that not every emotion, and certainly not every guilty feeling, is a rational one that has a purpose. Focus on the guilt that causes loved ones or friends harm. And remember to be skeptical the next time you feel guilty – is it trying to teach you something rational and helpful about your behavior, or is it just an emotional, irrational response to a situation? The answer to that question will be your first step to helping you better cope with guilt in the future." (Dr. John Grohol).

Dealing with shame requires that you understand where does shame come from, why do you sometimes feel shameful and what is the difference between shame and guilt.

While guilt is an emotion that is experienced when you violate your own values, shame is a feeling that is experienced when you feel dishonored or disgraced.

Guilt is a message that notifies you that you are deviating from your values, but shame is a feeling that tells you that you may not be adequate or worthy!!

Shame is strongly tied to self-esteem because the more shame you carry the less worthy you will feel. If guilt stems from realizing that you have made a mistake, then shame comes from believing that you are a mistake!!

The nature of shame

Shame is getting the feeling that something is wrong about yourself, and it's usually tied to your self worth. Feelings of shame are sometimes a result of feeling that something inappropriate has happened to them.

How to deal with shame

University of Alberta researcher Jessica Van Vliet's study, published in the British Psychological Society journal, *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, indicates that, while it may seem difficult when one is stuck in shame, there is hope for moving beyond this painful emotion.

"Shame can prompt us to make changes that will help protect our relationships and also preserve the fabric of society. It's important to emphasize that shame is essential and has value," said Van Vliet. "The problem is when people get paralyzed with shame and withdraw from others. Not only can this create mental health problems for people, but also they no longer contribute as fully to society."

Van Vliet's research shows that people who feel debilitated by shame tend to internalize and over-personalize the situation. They also seem resigned to being unable to change their feelings or their fate.

"When people experience shame, they may say to themselves 'I'm to blame, it's all my fault, all of me is bad, and there's nothing I can do to change the situation,'" said Van Vliet. "They identify so much with shame that it takes over their entire view of themselves. That leads to an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness."

Van Vliet notes that one of the key components to overcoming these feelings is to step back from the problem and view the picture in a different light. When sufferers can identify external factors that contributed to their actions or situation (for example, discrimination or peer pressure) and differentiate between being a bad person versus doing something bad, they can begin to break the grip of

hopelessness that plagues them.

"When people move from a sense of uncontrollability to the belief that maybe there's something they can do about their situation, such as apologizing or making amends for their actions, it starts increasing a sense of hope for the future," she said.

Van Vliet found that one of the key steps to overcoming a profound sense of shame is making connections, be it with family and friends, a higher power, or humanity as a whole. While it is one of several aspects of moving forward, Van Vliet notes that the step can often blend or lead into others.

"Connecting to others helps to increase self-acceptance, and with self-acceptance can come a greater acceptance of other people as well," said Van Vliet. "People start to realize that it's not just them. Other people do things that are as bad or even worse sometimes so they're not the worst person on the planet. They start to say to themselves, 'This is human, I am human, others are human.'"