GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt and shame are not the same. Understanding the differences between them can help us work through our negative self-judgments. When we are better able to grasp the difference between healthy guilt, irrational guilt, and shame, we can begin to halt self-criticism and reject shame messages. Guilt is often experienced when we act against our values. Shame, on the other hand, is a deeply held belief about our unworthiness as a person.

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|  | Appropriate Guilt | Irrational Guilt | Shame |
| Definition | A feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done that is objectively wrong. | A feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done against our irrationally high standards. | An intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed. |
| Example | Greg hit someone while driving drunk and feels guilty. | Sam forgot his coworker’s name and feels terribly guilty. | Tommy feels as though he shouldn’t take up space in the world and doesn’t deserve to exist. |
| Cause Of Feeling | Actions or behaviors that break objective definitions of right and wrong | Actions or behaviors that break irrationally high standards. | Innate sense of being worthless or inherently defective. |
| When It Develops | We can experience guilt as early as 3-6 years old. | We can experience guilt as early as 3-6 years old. | We can experience shame as early as 15 months of age. |
| Why We Feel This | We act in a way that breaks objective standards of moral behavior. | We act in a way that breaks irrational standards of behavior developed early in childhood to please adults. | We see ourselves as unworthy and deeply flawed. |
| Outcome | Potentially positive. Healthy guilt allows us to seek forgiveness and correct a wrong. It can lead to healing. | Negative. Irrational guilt leads us to emphasize self-punishment over behavior change, trapping us in guilt. | Negative. Causes us to fear that we will be rejected, so we disconnect from others and avoid what causes the shame. Can exacerbate depression and substance abuse. |
| Resolution | Appropriate guilt resolves as we repair the damage we caused. | Irrational guilt remains until we correct our irrational beliefs. | Shame is internalized and deeply connected to our sense of self, which makes it more difficult to resolve. |
| How To Work With | Face the behavior that hurt self and others. Take responsibility for the harm done. Seek forgiveness. Change destructive behavior that created the harm. | Practice self-compassion and work to understand that everyone possesses a combination of strengths and weaknesses. | Exercise self-compassion. Pursue relationships. Nurture connections and a sense of belonging with others. |