



Understanding and Coping with Guilt and Shame

Guilt: a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined.

Another simple way to explain guilt is:

Guilt is the uncomfortable feeling we often experience when we have done something wrong

- Guilt is based on a failure of *doing* – (which is usually a direct result of our behaviors and choices)
- Guilt involves a violation of *standards*

Guilt can be positive and at times it is even necessary-

- Guilt can be a motivator for positive change – In other words, when we do something wrong, then we feel guilty about it, those feelings can motivate us to change our behavior so we don't make the same mistake or negative choices
- Guilt is based on values, morals, and standards, all of which are necessary and important with regard to guiding people's behavior in a positive direction

When looking at guilt as a violation of standards, it is important to think about the following –

- Whose standards were violated?
- Where did these standards come from? (Our family, our experience, our beliefs, peer group, society, media, politics, our own ethics, etc.?)
- Remember, one person's standards can be very different from another's which can result in very different ways people experience (or do not experience) guilt

Is it possible never to feel guilty? –

- It is quite normal to feel guilt on occasion because we all make mistakes



10 Suggestions for How to Cope with Feelings of Guilt –

1. Face the feelings of guilt. Release feelings of guilt by talking about them, sharing, confessing, getting honest
2. Learn to forgive yourself. – Do you judge yourself too harshly?
3. Examine the origins of your guilt – Is the reason that you feel guilt *rational* and *reasonable*? Inappropriate or irrational guilt involves feeling guilty in relation to something that in reality you had little or nothing to do with.
4. Change the related behavior so that the action or actions triggering feelings of guilt and remorse cease. Simply put: If something you are doing is causing you to feel guilty, then stop doing it and you will no longer have a reason to feel guilty any longer.
5. Clarify new values for yourself and take realistic action in the present instead of dwelling on the past. Think about positive action you can take in your life now to feel better. What can you do to improve things going forward?
6. Practice forgiving others, helping others and doing good for others. Learning to empathize and forgive others can help you to learn to forgive yourself.
7. Apologize or just seek peace. Is there something you can say or do in order to try to show that you are willing to make peace where there has been hurt, conflict, or disagreement?
8. Let go - The past is the past, so at some point, even if there are things you have done to hurt others, if you are sorry now, you need to let them go. Or, if you are truly remorseful over something you have done wrong in the past and you tried to make peace or amends, you can still forgive yourself even when others do not forgive you. By the same token, if someone who hurt you is sorry, learn to let it go yourself so you can forget about the hurt and then focus on moving forward
9. Was there a legitimate cause for your past actions that was beyond your control at the time? For example, perhaps you hurt others while you were experiencing untreated mental illness or as the result of active drug or alcohol addiction that you are now making efforts to properly care for. If your behavior was influenced by substance abuse and/or untreated mental health issues then you should give yourself some slack with regard to judging yourself too harshly with regard to whatever you might have done when you were not well. Instead focus on behavior change which will influence better decisions in the present and future
10. Avoid **Shame** – See below –



Shame – Is a basic feeling of inferiority. Shame involves the perception of oneself as a failure or feeling unacceptable to others. Shame can involve feeling “flawed” “unworthy” or “not good enough”

Shame often involves forgetting or disregarding the fact that we are human and we make mistakes but that alone does not make us less of a person. Shame is about self-blame and is directly linked to low self-esteem. Shame most often comes from the negative messages we may receive as children from our family of origin. (People who were put down or insulted as children, either directly or indirectly, may end up much more prone to shame-based thinking as adults)

Irrational thoughts and beliefs can fuel shame and inappropriate guilt – These untruths can perpetuate negative feelings we have about ourselves –

- I must get everyone’s approval
- I must be perfect
- Mistakes are bad
- If I am not like _____ then I am not a valuable person
- Everyone can see my faults
- I am not worthy of forgiveness

Activity – Think of the rational and reasonable alternative statements for each of the above shame-based thoughts. For example, for the first one, “I must get everyone’s approval” the more rational alternative might be something like, “I can still feel good about myself even if some people do not approve of me”. Try this for the rest of the statements above

Final Activity - The Shame Game - Questions for thought and discussion about guilt and shame: List 1 through 27 in a place where everyone can see. People can then randomly pick a number and then they should answer the corresponding question. Cross off each number as the questions are answered.

1. How have you used guilt with others to try to get what you need?
2. What is one way that you feel guilt or shame with regard to your substance use?
3. When was the last time that you can remember lying to someone? Do you feel guilty about it?
4. When is the last time you let someone down? How do you feel about it now?
5. When is the last time you felt shame (like a bad person for some reason)?
6. Do you ever feel like a “bad” parent, spouse, or child?
7. What is one of the worst things that you have ever done that you can still remember?
8. What do you feel guilt or shame about when it comes to your family?
9. Did you ever deliberately hurt someone?



10. Do you think that you have a problem dealing with guilt? If so, how do you know?
11. Do you ever feel like you should have been there for someone but you weren't?
12. What is something that you got away with?
13. Have you ever gone out of your way to try to make someone else feel guilty?
14. How do other people use "guilt trips" to manipulate you?
15. Do you ever feel guilty that you do not spend enough quality time with someone?
16. What is one thing that comes to mind right now that you are sorry for?
17. Do you feel any stress or guilt about the way that you have spoken to someone recently?
18. What is one thing that you can think of that maybe you should feel guilty about but you don't?
19. What have you done to make amends to someone you have wronged or hurt?
20. Who would you most want forgiveness from today and why?
21. Do you ever feel guilty when you are not supposed to?
22. What is one of the worst things that you ever got caught doing or trying to do?
23. Describe a situation you used to feel guilt or shame over but now that weight has been lifted.
24. Is there anything that you are having trouble forgiving someone else for?
25. Is there anything that you are having trouble forgiving yourself for?
26. What negative messages did your parents say to you when you were growing up?
27. What negative messages do you sometimes say to yourself when you feel bad?

BECAUSE THIS TOPIC CAN BE CHALLENGING, ALWAYS END ON QUESTIONS 28, 29 and 30 TO END ON A POSITIVE NOTE -

28. What is one thing that you have changed for the better in your life?
29. What is one thing that you can think of that you have done to help someone else in need?
30. What is one more thing in your life right now that you feel positive and grateful about today?