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Guilt, the Destroyer

Have you ever lost your temper and then felt guilty? Losing your temper is not a problem. It is a symptom of someone or something not living up to your expectations. Guilt is an option. It can ruin your life and make a profound difference in your success and happiness!

What do you believe about guilt?

True or False: *"The ability to feel guilt is what keeps people in line. Without guilt, people would do whatever they wanted: rape, pillage, burn, etc. Guilt is the emotion that holds the fabric of our society together. Guilt is what gets people to do what they should do and keeps them from doing what they should not do. Guilt helps us find and keep healthy boundaries. Without guilt, there would be no civil behavior in our society."*

Or

True or False: Guilt is a destructive emotion and is not helpful. For example, in the court system nobody wants the defendant to feel guilty. What the court is looking for is remorse. "The defendant showed no remorse." You will never hear "The defendant showed no guilt." One more problem with guilt is that it is often connected with some degree of depression. And, it certainly does not give the guilty person a sense of self-worth.

Okay. Maybe there are two types of guilt: "Healthy Guilt vs. False/ Harmful Guilt." An example of false or harmful guilt would be a person who is attacked and raped by a stranger. When asked what she is feeling, the answer is often: "I feel dirty and guilty, and yet I know I did nothing wrong." Many women will tell about how, after the rape, that she felt so dirty, she would stand in the shower for hours until the water was so cold that she could not stand it anymore. Do you see her guilt as being helpful or harmful?

Other people will insist that "Guilt is what stops us from doing behaviors that enslave us through our own destructive nature and appetites." "If you do something bad, then you should feel guilty."

Let us look at the apostle Paul when he found himself with a bunch of guilt from his "I shoulds" in Romans 7:15-20. He appears to be losing his struggle with guilt when he comes to this truth about himself. "¹⁵*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do*

what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Paul ends up concluding “Oh, wretched man that I am who shall deliver me. . . .”

Many people have concluded that “Guilt is a tool of the devil.” Whenever you feel guilty, you set yourself up to be punished.

It is no wonder the court system would prefer that perpetrators not feel guilty. When is the last time you heard the news reporter say, “The perpetrator showed no guilt?” Never. Instead, what you will hear is that “the perpetrator showed no remorse.” Perpetrators who feel guilty have higher rates of recidivism.

**“Whenever you feel guilty,
you will set yourself up to be punished.”**

What is the difference between guilt and remorse?

Remorse involves self-reproof, admitting one's own mistakes, and taking responsibility for your actions. **Remorse** comes from true empathy for the pain the other person is feeling because of your actions.

With both **Guilt** and **Shame**, the person may regret an action, but it is hard to see true remorse in their response. They may regret an action because it hurt them, or it cost them something emotionally or financially, or led to a punishment or an undesirable result.

Remorse and Guilt are vastly different. Guilt is when I feel bad (bad is a judgment) about something I have said or done to someone else or to myself. “Bad guilt” is an emotion on which I have put a negative judgment.

How did guilt and punishment get paired together? One way this happened was through Stimulus—Response (S-R) training as children. The two became paired when mother said, “Just wait until your father gets home. Then you’re really going to get it.” How many times have you done something you felt guilty about and were left to wait for the punishment? By linking guilt to punishment, children and adults learn that ***whenever they feel guilty, they are going to get punished.***

Remorse, on the other hand, is being able to feel the emotional pain that you have caused. You do not have to judge yourself or blame anyone for your behavior. The blaming part comes when you feel the guilt and want to avoid the feelings of guilt. So, you start blaming. "You made me angry."

Guilt leads a person to “try” to avoid punishment in the future.

Remorse leads to avoiding hurtful actions towards others in the future.

With remorse, all you need to do is to allow yourself to feel what the other person is feeling. Remorse is most often seen in people with high Emotional Quotient (EQ). Courts are looking for remorse. ***If you can feel the pain that you have caused someone, then you will not repeat it, because then you will feel their pain yourself.***

Remorse comes from the ability to feel empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and experience the feelings of another. To be able to do this, you first must be able to identify and accept your own feelings and behaviors without judging them. If you cannot accept your own feelings and behaviors, you will not be able to accept another's feelings and behaviors.

Acceptance does not mean approval. Acceptance is the ability to say, "This is where I am until I can be someplace else." This allows you to "put yourself in someone else's shoes." And, it allows them to be where they are until they can be someplace else. If you cannot feel empathy for someone, it will be impossible for you to feel remorse for what you might have done.

Footnote:

Some people experience the feelings of embarrassment, guilt and/or shame all at the same event. This connection is most often seen in Asian cultures. For these people, guilt and/or shame is an integral part of the feeling of embarrassment. (It is often spoken of as "losing face.")

If shame is a part of your embarrassment, then what you are experiencing is shame, not embarrassment.

It is what you think and believe, that creates your feelings. Guilt, shame, and embarrassment each have different belief(s) that create a specific feeling. If you do not like what you are feeling, then change what you think/believe. You choose to think, and you can think anything you wish to think.

Can you have more than one feeling at a time? Of course! It is the same way you can have more than one belief at a time. In fact, you could hold contradictory beliefs which will create contradictory feelings!

For example, you can love and hate the same person at the same moment in time. You can desire someone and like to be close to them, while at the same time be afraid of being around them.

When this occurs, all it means is that you have more than one belief about the thing or person. These beliefs are creating one or more feelings, such as fear and shame, embarrassment and guilt.

**You feel the way you do right now
because of the thoughts you are thinking at this moment.**

David Burns MD, Psychiatrist

Your feelings of shame and/or guilt are not the result of events, words, or gestures, your own or others. They are dependent on what you think, the meaning(s) that you put on external stimuli. Walking into the “wrong” bathroom, for some, may be just embarrassing. For others, it may be shameful.

Could you feel guilt and/or shame and embarrassment all at the same time for walking into the wrong bathroom? Yes, depending on what you choose to believe about your behavior.

Or

You could choose to just feel embarrassed, *“I made a mistake. (A very human thing to do.) If there was any doubt, I guess that proves I’m human!”*

If you find that you are feeling guilt or shame with your embarrassment, you need to do an inventory of your beliefs about that behavior. Then consider what else you could believe about walking into the wrong bathroom.

Homework,

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- ❖ What beliefs do you need to embrace so that you **will** feel guilt?
 - ❖ What beliefs do you need to embrace so that you can feel empathy and remorse?
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