

GUILT vs SHAME

Guilt and shame are not quite the same - although, they can be considered two sides of the same coin. Understanding the difference between them can help us work through our negative self-judgements and help us learn skills to stop self-criticism and reject shame messages.

Guilt is experienced when we behave in ways that don't align with our values (or the standards of society).

Shame is a deeper emotional, internalized sense of guilt ~ but, it can also have external influences. Shame can be a deeply held belief about our worthiness as a person. It's an intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed.

Is there such a thing as Helpful Guilt? YES.

Guilt can manifest as a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we've done that is objectively wrong. Examples – If you cheat, steal, lie, etc.

The cause of the feeling is created by actions/behaviours that break objective and societal definitions of right and wrong. We can experience guilt as early as 3 years old. Developmentally, guilt is a more mature emotion than shame.

Helpful guilt can be potentially positive - allowing us to correct a wrong and seek forgiveness. This can lead to healing. Healthy guilt can resolve itself as we repair the damage we may have caused.

What's Unhelpful Guilt?

A feeling of psychological discomfort about something we've done against our *irrationally high standards*. Example: You forgot someone's name, or someone's birthday; You didn't volunteer for a charitable cause; You didn't clean the bathroom before guests arrived; You call in sick when you're really not sick, etc.

The feeling is caused by actions/behaviours that break *irrationally high standards* that often developed as a child - usually while trying to meet the expectations of the adults in our lives at the time. *Unhelpful guilt can keep us trapped in self-punishment.*

The best way to work with unhealthy guilt is to practice self-compassion, and work to understand and appreciate that everyone has a combination of strengths and weaknesses. You are not alone! Seek to connect with your fellow-fallible humans for peer-support.

Is it possible to turn unhelpful guilty (irrational) thoughts into helpful remorseful (rational) thoughts? YES!

Unhelpful Guilty Thoughts – “Why did I do this? What was I thinking? I'm so stupid. I should know better. What's wrong with me!”

Helpful Remorseful Thoughts – “I am sorry that I did what I did, and now that I know better I'll do better. I feel bad about what I did. I know I can do better than this. I can improve if I work at it. I acted impulsively. I can think things through next time and achieve a better result.”

Is there such thing as Helpful Shame: YES.

Shame is a deeper, emotional sense of guilt that's caused when we don't meet our own expectations, and it's mostly internalized.

We can experience shame as early as 15 months old, which is why it's more deeply wired in our brain and is more challenging to reverse.

When overcoming feelings of shame, it's important to move awareness away from self-criticism and toward self-compassion. It's also important to discriminate between internal shame and external shame (societal shame).

It helps to connect with peer support groups to have a sense of belonging with others in the same boat!

Is it possible to turn unhelpful (irrational) shameful thoughts into helpful (rational) disappointment thoughts? YES!

Unhelpful Shameful Thoughts - "I am so ashamed of myself for doing that. I have to hide this. I'm a horrible person. Why do I do/say these things?!"

Helpful Disappointment Thoughts - "I reacted inappropriately. I'm disappointed that I made a bad decision. I have made good decisions in the past and can make a good decision again. I am not defined by my bad decisions or my bad behaviour. I am defined by a multitude of characteristics... some bad, and some that are very good. I am a caring individual who is working on changing my behaviour. I would prefer that I did not make that bad decision, however all I can do now is move forward knowing that I can change and make better decisions going forward."

To help avoid feelings of guilt and shame, stay mindful & extend self-compassion.

Remember this catchy slogan: ***Catch It, Check It, Change It!***

Catch it - Notice it. Awareness is the first step to progress.

Check it - Question it, and take responsibility for any harm done.

Change it - Seek forgiveness from any people affected, and resolve to change the behaviour and attitudes that created any harm.

*May the force be with you,
and remember...*

YOU are the force ❤️

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