

Working with Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are often treated as poisonous emotions that none of us should ever experience. Like all of our other emotions, however, they are potentially valuable and helpful.

We feel guilt when we have behaved in a manner that does not live up to our own standards for our behavior. We believe we should have done better, but didn't. Shame is a response to a perceived inadequacy in our personality or makeup. Guilt, then, is about what we *do*, whereas shame is about what we *are*.

Guilt may seem useless, but it is essential to be a functioning member of society. Our behavior can have a profound effect on others. If we are to live together, we must be conscious of these effects, and guide our behavior based partly on our own needs and desires, and partly on the rights of others. Our rights end where those of others begin. Guilt tells us that we have crossed the line, or broken the rules, and guides us toward future change.

The critical question, of course, is this: What *are* the rules? Many of us feel a vague ongoing sense of guilt much of the time, and we are unclear what we may have done wrong. Our standards are sometimes obscure even to us.

Rather than fighting guilt, you can welcome it at the door. You can use it as a cue to ask the critical two-letter question: "*Of?*" Never leave guilt as guilt alone; always finish the sentence. "*Guilty of...?*" If the discomfort of guilt is a penalty for something, then know the crime before you pay the price. Define exactly what it is that you have done wrong.

Sometimes you will discover that you have violated a standard that you hold dear. You want your children to feel loved and you have not hugged them in a week. You struck the dog in anger. You borrowed a friend's car but didn't put gas in it afterward. And you feel guilty. Fine. Define what it is that you want to do next time, or how you could correct things this time (mail a check to the friend, for example).

Sometimes, however, you will discover that there is something wrong with the standard you have been holding. For example:

- It is someone else's standard, not yours. *"I feel guilty for sleeping with my boyfriend before marriage, but I don't really think that's such a bad thing."*
- The standard to which you have held yourself is hopelessly unrealistic. *"I feel guilty for not stopping my friend from getting on that flight that crashed."* *"I feel guilty for not having a perfect house, or for having children that sometimes cry in public."*
- Two standards you hold may be incompatible. *"I want to work enough overtime to thrill the boss, and be a perfect parent and spouse."*

When you discover that a standard you hold is unrealistic, ask yourself what *would* be realistic. Sometimes you won't know. *"I feel guilty that I don't iron the sheets, but I'm not sure how many other people iron theirs."* In that case, it's time to do a survey. Ask some people what they actually do, then take this into account when revising your own standard. You don't have to adopt the standards of your friends (high or low), but you can use their standards as input in coming up with your own.

Note that if you are depressed, you may not be able to work to your full capacity. Consequently, you will have to content yourself with having somewhat more relaxed standards than you might prefer. If normally you like having an extremely tidy house, you might have to make do with a "relatively sanitary" house for a while. Consider adopting a standard that you can actually achieve. Later, when you feel better, you can revise your standard again. *"Okay, now I'm ready to say that we should get take-out only twice a week, not six times a week."* Be careful, however, not to raise your goal back to an unrealistic level.

Once you have a revised standard in mind, identify the situations that trigger your guilt. *"Taking sheets out of the drier and folding them without ironing."* Then repeat your new standard to yourself in those situations. *"I'm putting these away because I've decided for myself that I don't have to iron them."* You may feel a little silly talking to yourself at first, but eventually you will adopt the new standard more whole-heartedly.

As an aside, it can sometimes be valuable to identify where you learned the original distorted standard. This isn't essential, but it can sometimes help you let go of the standard more readily. *"It was Uncle Frank who said that the woman of the house should always be the one to cook."* Think about why they might have held that belief, and about their other beliefs that you don't necessarily agree with. When you feel guilty because of the distorted standard, remind yourself who gave you that belief, and that the voice of guilt is theirs, not your own. You don't have to paint them as villains, but you can see them as holding standards different from your own. *"Uncle Frank was from a different time."*

If guilt seems potentially useful, then shame might seem less so. After all, we can change what we do, but how do you change what you *are*? Shame, though, breeds humility, the opposite of arrogance. None of us is perfect, none of us has every talent, none of us has all the answers. Healthy shame reminds us of our humanity, of our very real limits. It enables us to look outward with admiration at others who can do the things we cannot.

Unhealthy shame, however, breeds envy and resentment. It can come from shaming experiences in childhood, or throughout life. Unhealthy shame tells us that we are hopeless. Rather than inviting us into the fold of humanity, it expels us as subhuman. Unhealthy shame, like inappropriate guilt, often comes from unrealistic or unworkable standards for ourselves.

If shame is a problem for you, it is worth asking what it would take for you to be *good enough*. We can think of self-image as falling on either side of a dividing line: Not good enough or good enough. Where is that dividing line for you? What defines a “good enough” person? Notice that we are not attempting to identify your *ideal* person or your *ideal* self, the standard that few of us can attain. We are only interested in that dividing line. If you feel shame about your sexual prowess, ask yourself what would be “good enough” in that area.

There is a problem, however. If you survey enough areas of your life, you will eventually find one in which you are genuinely not “good enough” to meet your standard. This, too, is part of the nature of humanity. There are personal characteristics that you value, that you envy, that you wish you could have, and at which you are not and may never be “good enough.” And yet, perhaps as a human being you are still “good enough” overall. Some things you can change, others you can’t. Shame can offer you the opportunity to practice accepting yourself, faults included. As you do so, it may turn out that some of the “faults” you find are not faults at all, but only shades of the natural diversity found between different people.

Which is a bigger problem for you, shame or guilt? Or are both a significant problem?

Describe a situation recently in which you experienced shame or guilt.

What was your standard for yourself? What should you have done? What would be “good enough”?

Evaluate your standard. Is it realistic? Do most people seem to hold this standard? What is the unrealistic aspect of it? If your standard needs revising, what would be a more reasonable standard? (This should be something that you could actually meet.)

Remind yourself of the new standard in situations in which you tend to feel this way.
What situations are those?

Continue to use shame and guilt as cues to evaluate your standards and, where appropriate, shift your future behavior. Avoid using them as cues to destroy your self-esteem or motivation, or to attack yourself.