

GETTING A GRIP ON GUILT

Guilt, self-depreciation, and shame are an integral part of depression. Whether they are the cause or a by-product is not known. A combination of both life experience and biochemistry help explain why some people constantly put themselves on trial.

Guilt and Shame	
<p>Early experience of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abandonment or massive rejection Being given too much responsibility Constant criticism Being told not to feel a certain way Being blamed for others' problems/feelings Repeatedly having your needs put aside A family trauma: divorce, illness, abuse Having a family where little goes wrong <p>Biochemistry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An underreactive temperament The sluggish biochemistry of depression 	<p>Creates a mindset of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'm defective, bad, or unlovable." "I'm responsible (for things I can't control)." "I don't do enough." "I have to be perfect." "My feelings are wrong." "I have to keep people happy." "Others' feelings come before my own." "I'm responsible (for things I don't cause)." "I can prevent bad things from happening." <p>Leads to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introspection and excessive self-analysis Difficulty responding to new information

FALSE GUILT

If you are predisposed by life experience or biochemistry to self-condemnation, it is easy to have a false or disproportionate sense of responsibility for anything that goes wrong. You may magnify what you've done, take personal responsibility for everything that goes wrong, "should yourself" instead of understand yourself, and unrealistically expect yourself to only have positive feelings. Rarely is an undesirable state of affairs all one person's fault or as bad as it seems at the moment. Make your introspection work for you by reexamining your "wrongdoings" and putting them in perspective.

GUILT TEST
<p>Directions: Identify something you feel bad about. Determine a percentage for your intention of causing the event, your contribution to it, the amount of control you had over it and the degree to which it was bad. Get a second opinion on all your ratings in case you have not yet learned that guilt comes in shades of gray.</p>
<p>I feel bad about:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I had ___% intention of making this turn out the way it did. 2. I am ___% responsible for the other person's distress or negative outcome. 3. The other person is ___% responsible for his or her distress or negative outcome. 4. I had ___% control over achieving the outcome I wanted. 5. I was ___% capable of preventing what happened when it happened. 6. Other factors (lack of experience information) contributed to ___% of the outcome. 7. I was ___% successful in achieving the outcome I wanted. 8. The world or other person was ___% damaged by what I did. 9. The ultimate outcome of what happened was ___% negative and ___% positive.

Some people seem to prefer to condemn themselves rather than place responsibility where it is due. Just recognizing what you are doing is the first step of change. Decide if you are guilty of the following false guilt payoffs:

- If I cannot do anything right, then I do not need to try to improve or act differently. Change means I would have to make an effort and possibly fail.
- If I am responsible for the bad things that have happened to me, then I can control future misfortunes. Change means I would have to give up my “illusion of control.”
- I am not sure what it will mean to change negative views. Therefore, I look at life events in a way that reinforces my current perceptions.¹

PROPER GUILT

Most people don't learn to skate without falling, and it is impossible to go through life without making blunders. It is proper to feel remorse when you have unnecessarily or willfully acted in a hurtful manner toward yourself or another person in a way that violates your standards.² However, no matter how bad your transgression, you are not innately bad or evil. Good people do wrong things! The very fact that you feel regret means you have a conscience. It is better to take one or more of the following actions to relieve your distress than to wallow in “poor-awful-me-ism”:

- Pinpoint your mistakes: Take responsibility for your contribution to a problem, but only for your part!
- Express your regret: “I am sorry for. . . .” Do not make excuses by saying “I'm sorry I . . . , but” This is a sneaky attempt to gain absolution. You can explain why you did something only if you are asked!
- Express the wish behind the regret: “I wish I had. . . .” Identify a specific action that could have made the situation different. This will help you learn from your mistakes.
- Change your pattern: In future situations, change your actions. Even if you are unable to do this with the person you hurt, you still make amends by being different with others.
- Do not ask for forgiveness: forgiveness is entirely the choice of the “injured” party.

Most people feel either too much or too little guilt. The chronically guilty take responsible for everything bad that has ever happened to them or their loved ones. The forever innocent do not hold themselves accountable for the bad consequences of their actions or how they respond to others' blunders. It is easier to tone down a sense of overresponsibility than to build one in people who have little. However, by owning your part of a problem and only your part, you model how to make amends and make it more difficult for others to shift blame.

¹ See “Cognitive Dissonance” in *Breaking the Patterns of Depression* by Michael Yapko (Doubleday, 1997), p. 224.

² See “Guilt” in *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns (Avon Books, 1980), p. 199.