

Five Types of Guilt

The five types of guilt and how you can cope with each

Excerpt, 'The Definitive Guide to Guilt'

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Guilt comes in many forms, but when all is said and done, it can be boiled down to a set of five basic types. Guilt is, first and foremost, an emotion. You may think of guilt as a good way to get someone to do something for you out of a sense of obligation. Guilt is not a very good motivator. It's more accurate to think of guilt as an internal state. In the overall scheme of emotions, guilt is in the general category of negative feeling states.

From a cognitive point of view, guilt is an emotion that people experience because they're convinced they've caused harm. In cognitive theory, the thoughts cause the emotions. The guilt of emotion follows directly from the thought that you are responsible for someone else's misfortune, whether or not this is the case. People who experience guilt on a chronic basis, mistakenly suffer under the illusion that they have caused people harm. Their negative emotion follows from their tendency to misinterpret what happens to them and not to question the logic of their conclusions.

According to the cognitive view, if you change your thoughts, you can change your emotions. Once you realize that you're inaccurately seeing yourself as causing others to suffer, you can readjust your mental set and more realistically figure out your role in whatever grief came their way.

Armed with this background, let's examine the five types of guilt and—more importantly—how you can cope when guilty feelings come your way.

Guilt Cause #1: Guilt for something you did.

The most obvious reason to feel guilty is that you actually did something wrong. This type of guilt may involve harm to others, such as causing someone physical or psychological pain. You may also feel guilty because you violated your own ethical or moral code, such as cheating, lying or stealing. Guilt over your own behavior can also be caused by doing something you swore you would never do again (such as smoking, drinking, or overeating). In each of these cases, there's no doubt that the behavior occurred.

It's appropriate to feel guilty when you've done something wrong. Feeling the emotion of guilt for an action deserving of remorse is normal; to not feel guilty, in these cases, may be a sign of psychopathy.

The problems occur when you ruminate over this guilt. An action in the past cannot be changed, no matter how much you wish it would. Accept the fact that this happened, apologize to the person or persons you harmed, and then figure out how to avoid committing the same act in the future.

If you've violated your own personal standards (such as through overuse of alcohol or cheating on your partner), you can best avoid straying in the future by seeking support from others who can help you rid yourself of this habit or help you to keep on the up and up.

Finally, because of our natural tendency toward egocentrism, we assume that others place far more importance on our thoughts and actions than they actually do. The behavior over which you are

tormented by guilt, such as inadvertently insulting a friend, may hardly have even penetrated that friend's consciousness.

Guilt Cause #2: Guilt for something you didn't do, but want to.

You're thinking about committing an act in which you deviate from your own moral code or engage in behavior that is dishonest, unfaithful, or illegal. This is a tough type of guilt to handle. It's true that you didn't actually commit the act, and so you're still sitting on the moral high ground. However, we all know that the very fact that you're contemplating an act that violates your own standards can be as guilt-provoking as the act itself.

If you're beating yourself up for these forbidden and taboo thoughts, you can try the defense mechanism of repression (where you stop up the hidden desire) or denial (where you don't acknowledge it). However, this is unlikely to lead to a satisfactory outcome because by defending against your feelings, you may actually fall prey to them and behave in a way that gives you reason to feel guilty. Or, you can recognize that you have these illicit thoughts, accept them as part of who you are right now, and then, commit yourself to changing your behavior so that you don't follow through on them. Rather than shove them under the surface, you can embrace your illicit thoughts and desires and work on reducing them through conscious effort.

Guilt Cause #3: Guilt for something you *think* you did.

Much of the unhappiness we experience is due to our own irrational thoughts about situations. If you think you did something wrong, you can experience almost as much guilt as if you actually committed the act-or even more.

One fairly typical cognitive source of guilt is the magical belief that you can jinx people by thinking about them in a negative or hurtful way. Perhaps you've wished that a romantic rival would experience some evil twist of fate. Should that evil twist of fate come to pass, you may, at some level, believe that it was due to your own vengeful wish. At some level you "know" that you're being illogical, but it's hard to rid yourself completely of this belief.

We also know that our memory for past events is highly flawed. It's possible for you to have done nothing wrong at all but to misremember and think that you did, particularly when there are highly charged feelings involved. Suspects can have false memories implanted into them that convince them that they not only were at the scene of a crime, but actually committed it.

Before you start accusing yourself of wrongdoing, make sure that the wrongdoing actually took place. If you're distorting your recollection of events to make you seem more at fault than you are, it's time for a hearty dose of reality testing.

Guilt Cause #4: Guilt that you didn't do enough to help someone.

Perhaps you have a friend who is very ill or who is caring for an ill relative. You've given hours of your free time to help that person, but now you have other obligations that you absolutely must fulfill. Or perhaps your neighbors suffered a tragic loss such as the death of a relative or fire that destroyed their home. You've offered days and weeks of your free time but, again, you find you can't continue to do so. The guilt now starts to get to you and you try desperately to figure out ways to help them despite the toll it's taking on you.

Psychologists use the term compassion fatigue to capture this feeling of burnout. Though used typically to describe professional helpers, it can also occur among people who offer continued informal support to others in need. Adding to the overall emotional drain of the situation is the guilt you overlay on top of the fatigue because you think you should be doing more.

You can decide or not whether you want to continue to make the sacrifices needed to help these individuals. However, it's important to separate your desire to help from the guilt you fear will overwhelm you if you don't. Acting out of guilt can only drain you further and ultimately make you a less effective helper.

Guilt Cause #5: Guilt that you're doing better than someone else.

The experience of survivor guilt is one recognized by professionals who work with combat veterans who outlive their fellow troops. Survivor guilt also occurs when people who lose families, friends, or neighbors in disasters themselves remain untouched or, at least, alive.

Applying not only to people who live when others in the same situation have died, though, survivor guilt also characterizes those who make a better life for themselves than do their family or friends. First-generation college students, for example, often feel torn by conflicting emotions about their success in school. They want to do well (and their families want them to also), but the students themselves feel guilty that they are getting opportunities that their parents or siblings did not. To "protect" their family members, they may engage in self-destructive behaviors that ensure they won't make it in school. Logic would dictate that the family truly want the student to succeed (and thus bring honor to the family), but this logic is lost on the student due to survivor guilt.

The only way to cure yourself of survivor guilt is to remind yourself of how proud, glad, and invested those who love and care for you. Remind yourself, as hard as it might be, that your own failure will not help bring someone back to life, nor will it make others who love you feel better about themselves. You need to gain your inspiration from the knowledge that your efforts are a tribute to them. Don't get down on yourself if you can't reach your loftiest goals (or the ones they have or had for you) but at least know that you're giving yourself the shot at success that they would want you to have.

There's no doubt that guilt is a complex and interesting emotion. It can even cause you to spend more than you want to or can when buying gifts for your friends and family. You can't live a completely guilt-free life but you can keep it within manageable bounds. Guilt can also help you gain greater self-understanding by helping you to recognize when, in fact, you've done someone else harm.

Guilt, in and of itself, isn't a destructive emotion. If you let it become all-consuming, however, guilt can get the best-or the worst-of you.