

Do You Often Feel Guilty or Ashamed?

Objective

To help you explore your frequent feelings of guilt and shame and learn some strategies for working through those feelings.

You Should Know

If you feel guilty or ashamed about actions that you have or have not taken—ways you might have disappointed or hurt someone, mistakes you’ve made, or errors of judgment that have caused harm or trouble—consider yourself a living, breathing human being.

Yes, that’s right. Guilt and shame over our actual or perceived transgressions are normal human emotions that can help us learn, grow, and, through forgiveness, deepen our relationships. Guilt and shame can serve to remind us of our flaws, our vulnerabilities, and make us humble, which can be a wonderful thing to know—that we are imperfect. Guilt can also be a motivator—if I messed up this time, maybe I can do better next time.

However, if you are someone who tends to feel guilty and ashamed *a lot*, or even *all the time*, then it is possible that you are suffering as a result and stuck in a place that you feel you cannot get out of. Many experts have written and taught about guilt and shame and their place in our lives. What is the difference between guilt and shame? John Bradshaw, an author, counselor, and motivational speaker, said that guilt leads us to think, “I made a mistake,” but shame often leads us to think, “I *am* a mistake.” Guilt says “What I did was bad,” whereas shame says “I am bad.”

If you struggle with hanging on to either guilt or shame or both, feeling bad about yourself and blaming yourself, and having difficulty ever letting up on yourself, it is possible to learn ways to think about your actions differently and create new pathways for self-compassion and self-forgiveness. In this worksheet, you will describe some of your experiences and feelings of guilt and shame and then explore some strategies for being kinder to yourself.

What to Do

On the lines below, write down five important experiences or encounters that you have had in your life about which you feel guilty or ashamed. Note the general time period (or your age), what happened, with whom, and what the aftermath of the experience was.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Pick one or two from your list above and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What could I have done differently in that situation? What did I learn from it?

2. Have I apologized if I have hurt another person? Why or why not?

3. What do I need to do to have closure about this situation for myself and/or with the other person(s)?

4. Is it possible I am hanging on to self-criticism for a hurt or mistake I made that was unintended? Describe.

5. What do I need to do or say to be able to forgive myself?

6. Are there any positive gains for my hanging on to guilt and shame in my life? Describe.

7. What are the negative consequences of my hanging on to guilt and shame?

Practice Self-Compassion: One key technique to work on letting go of persistent feelings of guilt and shame is to practice self-compassion. It takes time to believe that you are a worthy and valuable human being, especially if you are in the habit of being hard on yourself, but if you make it a practice to infuse your head and heart with self-compassion, many scientific studies show there can be a significant improvement in your mood and outlook. If you continue to feel overwhelmed with negative feelings about yourself, you might seek professional help to explore the roots of your guilt and shame.

Here's a way to start:

Make list of kind and loving statements you can say to yourself on a regular basis, even when you're not feeling guilty or ashamed. If this is hard, first think of statements you might say to a friend or family member whom you care about a lot who might be going through a hard time and who needs your support. Write them below.

Now think of a situation when you were feeling guilty or ashamed and wished someone was there to help you out. What is the situation? What can you say to yourself that is kind and compassionate? If you have trouble thinking of something to say, look at what you might say to a loved one and write that down.

Here are some possible phrases:

I am OK as I am.	I forgive myself.
I am a good person.	I have normal needs and desires.
I love myself.	I am allowed to make mistakes.
I am trying hard and deserve support.	It's OK to be imperfect.
I have a lot to offer.	I am a kind, loving person.
I am doing the best I can.	It's OK to apologize to others.

Here are some more phrases, drawn from the mindfulness literature on *metta*, or lovingkindness, which begin with the words, "May I . . ." Think of these statements as wishes or, if you like, prayers.

May I be safe.	May I be free of physical suffering.
May I be peaceful.	May I love and be loved.
May I be healthy.	May I accept myself as I am.
May I be happy.	May I be kind to myself.
May I be free from sorrow.	May I live with ease.

Set aside time each day, maybe when you wake up or as you're falling asleep. Pick a few self-compassionate phrases that have meaning for you, or write down some of your own. The exact language isn't important—do what works for you. Repeat these phrases a few times, or as many times as you like. Notice how you feel.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What phrases would you like to repeat to yourself in the coming week?

2. How does repeating those phrases feel?

3. What self-compassionate phrases would you like to repeat to yourself on a regular basis?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
