

GUILT

Some of the most important and intense trials do not occur in the courtroom. The greatest battles are often those that rage inside of us as we take on the roles of prosecutor, defendant, judge and jury, debating our own guilt!

Often our verdict is “GUILTY!” even when such guilt is irrational or undeserved. Guilt is present in addictions, anxiety, depression and even, physical illnesses. Relationship problems and self-defeating behaviors are also linked to guilt.

WHAT IS GUILT? Guilt, shame and conscience are related concepts but they are different...

GUILT IS THE REGRET OR PAIN WE EXPERIENCE WHEN WE CHOOSE TO ACT IN CONFLICT WITH OUR CONSCIENCE AND BELIEFS. GUILT IS PRODUCED BY WHAT WE DO WHILE WE FEEL SHAME ABOUT WHO WE ARE.

CONSCIENCE IS THE SET OF BELIEFS OR VALUES TO WHICH WE ADHERE.

WHY DO I FEEL GUILTY? Most of us are taught in childhood that anger is wrong so that when we feel angry we also feel guilty for having angry thoughts. We have a strong need to be loved and accepted; when we aren't, we become guilty and anxious about some action (real or imagined) that we may have done to cause the problem.

Guilt feelings create chronic worrying and other negative behaviors. We may not even realize that we feel guilty. For instance, a parent may feel guilty about not being home more often but yell at his/her child over something else.

Not all guilt is bad. Guilt can be **real** or **neurotic**. Real guilt occurs when we have promised something and then forget. It is felt when we had control of a situation and did not follow through as we had promised, causing pain or inconvenience to someone else.

Neurotic guilt can be **irrational**---about things that you have not control, such as feeling guilty when some one dies in a traffic accident. Or it can be **displaced**---transferred from the real source of the guilt to another less-threatening situation, such as being late is easier to bear than the guilt of being the driver in an auto accident. Neurotic guilt can also be **excessive**---when one assumes that “Whatever’s wrong, it must be my fault!” This is often a form of self-abasement for angry thoughts.

WHO FEELS GUILT? No one is immune to guilt, and some religions instill various kinds of guilt in its members. Many Catholic and Jewish jokes are created using themes of excessive guilt.

Studies show that women have a stronger sense of guilt than men. They also feel guilty for different reasons than men. Historically their guilt is related to their second class

status, which increases feelings of guilt. There are more recent sources of gender-specific guilt.

Women feel much more guilt than men about leaving children in another's care.

Many women feel guilty about not being a superwoman, filling the roles of wife, mother and homemaker perfectly.

Many men feel in a "Catch-22" guilty when they express emotions but also guilty if they don't.

Men feel anger over their new roles and rebel against childcare and cooking, and they feel guilty about their anger

Undefined roles in today's society create misunderstanding, anxiety and anger. As we define and accept new roles, hopefully there will be less guilt.

CHILDREN AND GUILT

The common reasons for children's guilt include anger at their parents and mixed messages from parents that leave them confused about what's wrong but assuming it is their fault. Physical, verbal and sexual abuse leads children to believe that they are bad and deserve such treatment and feel guilt about being "bad." Studies reveal that children of depressed mothers feel more guilt than those with healthy mothers. Children also feel guilty when their parents divorce.

Signs of guilt in children include hypersensitivity, excessive self-blame and bizarre or delinquent behaviors.

Some ways to help your children avoid unnecessary guilt include

1. giving them clear messages
2. teaching them to accept the difference between the FEELING (anger) which is O.K. and some expressions of it (hitting people) that aren't O.K.
3. not using your child as a CONFIDANT. They feel guilty for not finding solutions to your problems.
4. having your own life—living for your children makes them feel guilty about normal drives for independence.

TIPS FOR HANDLING GUILT

Some ideas for reducing or managing neurotic guilt (we are never free of it!) are:

ACKNOWLEDGE THE FEELINGS: denying guilt prevents you from getting to the root of the problem

ACCEPT THE FEELINGS: This may involve unlearning what you were taught as a child. It is O.K. to feel angry, jealous or scared. They are natural human responses to situations. Everyone experiences them at some time.

FORGIVE YOURSELF: Let go of past “misdeeds” that you still feel guilty about. If you have hurt someone, apologize and move on. Letting go of your guilt is a gift that you give to yourself and everybody around you. It will make you a happier and more pleasant person.

SET REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS: We often feel guilt when we fail to live up to our expectations. Refuse to accept unreasonable demands from others. You will reduce failure and subsequent guilt.

KEEP YOUR PERSPECTIVE: Neurotic guilt is very destructive. People can become paralyzed by guilt over things that are insignificant or unpreventable. Stored up guilt from the past can create more anxiety and depression.

GET HELP: When you feel overwhelmed by guilt a professional therapist may be able to help you discover the sources of the guilt and differentiate between realistic and neurotic guilt.

Local mental health agencies, a priest or minister, and a doctor all good places too obtain a referral. Choose a therapist with whom you feel comfortable and understood.

“Don’t punish yourself with imaginary crimes such as disappointing parents, ‘marrying wrong,’ exceeding the accomplishments of others or stealing parental love from siblings. The one REAL crime is punishing yourself with guilt.”