

Chapter 7. Managing Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are similar in some ways. Whereas anger and fear are usually focused on some external injustice or threat, guilt and shame are about oneself, about what we've done or who we are. With guilt and shame, we are looking in the mirror, not out the window.

Guilt and shame are similar in this respect, but there is a crucial distinction between them, which is often misunderstood. Guilt is about what you DO, whereas shame is about who you ARE. That is, guilt involves remorse and regret regarding which you have done, in your behavior, whereas shame involves embarrassment, humiliation, or rejection of who you are, and thus involves distress regarding your identity as a person. Because it is about identity, not just a behavior or a mistake, shame is much more personal. It is about the essence of who you are as a person. In its toxic form, shame is the psychonuclear emotion, the negative feeling which most of us are most motivated to avoid. I can feel guilty about a transgression, but apologize. I can be pissed at your unthoughtfulness, but forgive you. I can be afraid of you, and avoid you. But I can't run from myself, from who I am. And as we shall see, if I try to run away from being ashamed of myself (my self), there is an even bigger price to be paid. Make a short mental list of the three negative emotions you would most like to avoid. Shame probably doesn't make the cut. Shame is perhaps the most misunderstood of all of our emotions, for one simple reason. It is intolerable. Therefore we cover it, suppress it, and avoid it at all costs. And that cost is often immense. But first, let's take a look at guilt.

There are both healthy and unhealthy forms of guilt, as well as productive and self-damaging ways to manage guilt. Moral guilt can be contrasted with codependent guilt. Guilt is about responsibility. If I have done something to harm you, and I feel responsible, I feel guilty. Guilt is about my behavior, and MY responsibility for my behavior. It is about ME more than it is about you (as in anger). And it is about my BEHAVIOR, not my identity (as with shame). If we are driving together and I am at the wheel, and we run into a motorcyclist, you feel horror, sadness, etc., but I feel guilt as well. Despite your other intense emotions, you don't feel guilt, unless you were yapping away and distracted me, because you don't feel responsible for what happened.

Responsibility for behavior can be imported or exported. We can export responsibility for our behavior and blame others. Blame is the mother of anger. When I punch you in the mouth, I can blame you for having insulting me, and thereby justify my behavior. By blaming you, I can

export responsibility for my behavior onto you, and feel anger rather than guilt. You pissed me off. You made me mad. You deserved the punch. I wouldn't have punched you if you hadn't insulted me. Therefore, YOU are responsible for MY behavior. Of course, this violates the principle that each of us is 100% responsible for our own behavior, regardless of the external provocation, but that is exactly the point. In its unhealthy form, anger involves exportation of responsibility for one's own behavior, via blaming. While anger can involve a healthy objection to injustice, it all too often involves a blaming of others for our own response to that real or imagined injustice. Responsibility for behavior can be imported as well as exported. I can blame myself for your insulting behavior because I showed up late for our get together. I can import what should be your responsibility for your behavior by telling myself that I caused your behavior. If I hadn't been late, you wouldn't have felt unimportant, rejected, hurt, frustrated or angry, and you wouldn't have insulted me. I am to blame for your behavior. Thus, just as blaming others sets up anger, blaming oneself sets up guilt. Blame involves assignment of responsibility. When this attribution of responsibility is distorted, a distorted feeling results. When responsibility for behavior is consistently distorted, character defects arise, in the form of characterological anger if we consistently blame others for our own feelings or behavior, or characterological/codependent guilt if we blame ourselves for someone else's feelings or behavior. We can feel healthy anger over a real injustice perpetrated against us by someone, but still take full responsibility for our own response to that injustice. Likewise, we can feel healthy moral guilt regarding our behavior toward someone else, but still hold them responsible for their response. If we attend to the boundaries of responsibility, we can prevent undue exporting or importing of responsibility for our own and others' behavior. But if these boundaries are invisible to us, we are at risk for unhealthy versions of anger or guilt.

Couples often find themselves uncannily attracted to partners who complement them on various salient dimensions of personality. If you are uncomfortably shy, you may find yourself consistently attracted to outgoing friends and lovers. Otherwise, the silence can be deafening between two shy partners, or conversely, two gregarious partners can battle over airtime. Likewise, an angry person will often find oneself with a guilt prone partner. While the ultimate consequences of such an arrangement can be quite negative, often occurring in a courtroom, there is a perfect symmetry and reciprocity to such a complementary relationship. Every exporter needs an importer, and vice versa. If I am a blamer, a chronically angry person who needs to export responsibility for my behavior onto someone else, my

(pathologically) ideal partner is a guilt prone, codependent accomplice who will import blame without complaint, presenting a willing toilet for my crap. And if I am guilt prone, perhaps codependently focused on pleasing others to obtain external approval because I cannot find inherent value in myself, I will likely find myself attracting self centered, controlling, and often angry partners who find me to be a perfect receiving dock for their exported responsibility. Anger and guilt are mirror images of each other, complementary opposites, which in our more pathological moments, involves the export or import of responsibility for others' and our own behavior.

As noted previously, we can distinguish between healthy and characterological anger. Anger can be an emotional signal that we are the target of an injustice, and a healthy emotional response to that injustice. Or, with consistent blaming, anger can become a character defect, a consistent exporting of responsibility for our behavior, targeting those around us as dumpsites. Likewise, guilt can be healthy or pathological. We can contrast moral guilt with codependent guilt. Moral guilt involves the recognition that our behavior has violated our own moral values or ethics. Moral guilt is a signal from our conscience that we have erred, and that we need to attend to, correct, or at least prevent a repetition of such errors. Moral guilt is uncomfortable but healthy. If we turn the volume down too low on our conscience, we may temporarily avoid the discomfort of moral guilt, but our behavior will become twisted in a self centered detour without our moral compass. Eventually, or periodically, when the reality of our behavior breaks through our denial, we will feel lost, consumed by the accumulation of our suppressed guilt, or worse still, quickly back to our pathologically self centered norm if we can turn the volume of our conscience back down quickly enough. Just as frustration can be encapsulated as the equation $F=E/R$, where the amount of frustration is determined by the extent to which reality meets our expectations, guilt can be viewed as the extent to which our behavior conforms to our moral values ($G=B/V$). To reduce moral guilt, we can either change our behavior to bring it in line with our ethical values, or we can adjust the volume of our conscience to fit our behavior.

Codependent guilt is the term I use to describe the pathological, characterological form of guilt. Codependency is an often slippery term which can have multiple meanings, so allow me to expound a bit before I apply this term to the unhealthy version of guilt. From one perspective, codependency is the opposite of egotism, involving other-centeredness rather than self-centeredness. In response to an early lack of validation and support, the egotist overfocuses upon his or her own feelings and needs

while ignoring others, whereas the codependent becomes acutely aware of others feeling and needs, in order to please them, and thereby gather external approval and validation to compensate for one's own inability to self-nurture. From a related angle, codependency involves erection of a false self, a public façade designed to camouflage one's real self, and the shame associated with this real identity. To please others enough to garner external validation of the false self (the real self is seldom exposed and therefore cannot be validated, ultimately rendering this strategy bankrupt), the codependent must be exquisitely attuned to the feelings and needs of one's partner. Excessive responsibility is taken for satisfaction of the partner's needs, and for protection from potential negative feelings, and disapproval or criticism when the partner's needs, desires, or expectations go unmet. And since guilt requires perceived responsibility, this excessive responsibility generates excessive, codependent guilt.

Thus, whereas moral guilt involves appropriate responsibility for violating one's own moral code and other's reasonable rights, codependent guilt involves excessive responsibility for others' feelings and needs. Likewise, unhealthy reactions to guilt can be found at two extremes, specifically, ignoring the moral guilt generated appropriately by your conscience, or beating yourself with a guilt club, regardless of whether the guilt is healthy moral guilt or excessive codependent guilt. If you carry a great deal of guilt, you must first determine if it is moral or codependent guilt. In other words, you must assess your boundaries regarding responsibility, and determine whether you are actually responsible for your partner's feelings and needs. While the argument can be taken too far, by and large, each of us is responsible for our own needs, feelings, behaviors, and expectations. Sure, if I hit you over the head with a two by four, I am responsible for your feeling of pain. But I am not responsible for your ensuing behavior. You choose from the various responses in your repertoire. And aside from the extremes illustrated above, you often are not responsible for my feelings, because my feelings result from the interaction between your behavior and my own needs, desires, and EXPECTATIONS. I emphasize expectations because they exert a powerful but often hidden influence upon feelings. Remember that frustration involves the difference between others behavior and your own expectations. Some expectations are shared or even universal. We expect each other to stop at stop signs. If we violate shared expectations, a case can be made that we caused, or are responsible for, the frustration or other vulnerable feelings of the receiving party. Nonetheless, they are responsible for their own choice of behavioral responses, including their defenses, such as conversion of frustration into

anger. If I blow through a stop sign and you have to slam on your brakes to avoid an accident, we can reasonably conclude that I frustrated your expectations, and because these are shared, common expectations, we can conclude that I am responsible for your frustration. But let's say that two cars had to slam on their brakes, and I apologize profusely for my inattention, but one of you is a forgiving soul and essentially says "No harm, no foul," while the other is an angry type who proceeds to yell and curse. Am I responsible for their anger, or for your forgiveness? I think not.

And what about unshared expectations? What if we are partners, and you expect to get your needs met 70% of the time that we have differing preferences, or you expect me to give in and apologize in order to resolve most of our arguments? Am I responsible for your frustration or anger if I don't submit to your selfish expectations or dominating control? Again, I think not. But this is exactly what happens in the codependent dance. The codependent person takes responsibility for satisfaction of the partner's obvious needs and desires, as well as their more subtle expectations, and for their partner's resulting feelings and responses. Codependent behavior (self-sacrifice, submission, people pleasing) is often more apparent than codependent feelings (guilt), but both are more obvious than codependent thinking. This is important, because often unrecognized codependent thinking generates codependent guilt, which in turn creates codependent behavior. The thinking is the first domino, but is often subtle and camouflaged, involving a subconscious and unwitting swallowing of the partner's expectations. Is your partner's frustration due to your obvious behavior, as you are accused, or is it due to their expressed or unspoken expectations, which you may or may not share? When you take responsibility for their expectations, you create guilt. If you agree with their expectations, and these expectations are reasonable, you may be experiencing moral guilt. But if you don't agree, or if you characteristically internalize their expectations, even when they are unreasonable, you are more likely trapped by codependent guilt.

Once you have determined whether you are experiencing moral or codependent guilt, you can seek a remedy for this guilt. If it is codependent guilt, you could choose to assert yourself, by noting the self-centeredness of others' expectations or demands, and by holding them accountable for their own expectations and resulting frustration and anger. Or perhaps it is only your perception that they hold such expectations, or your attempt to please in the absence of any such external expectations. If so, your battle is purely internal. But if their expectations are real and excessive, you will need to be able to maintain your boundary, and not internalize their criticism and

disapproval. But to do this, you will need to learn how to provide your own self esteem, so you are less vulnerable to unreasonable criticism. This is a much harder task if you are enmeshed in the codependent dance. We will address this task in a later chapter on codependency and inner child dynamics.

If you are experiencing moral guilt, the healthy alternative is to listen to your conscience, and accept your guilt as healthy feedback from the wise and moral part of yourself regarding the need to change your behavior. You can deal with your moral guilt in one of two ways. You can genuinely apologize, make amends, and invest sufficient energy to change your behavior in the future, or you can criticize and punish yourself. You do not have to punish or attack yourself for your unhealthy behaviors; self-rejection is not a requirement for behavior change. Keep in mind the distinction that we all try to make when correcting our children, between behavior and identity. We try to get them to change the behavior while maintaining their self-esteem, and we find ourselves telling them, "I love you, but I'm angry regarding your behavior." If you're in the habit of attacking yourself for your mistakes and failures, you're wasting a great deal of energy that could be invested into productive behavior change. Instead of punishing yourself, try investing that same energy into developing a Plan B for new behavior, and catching yourself before the old Plan A behavior progress is too far. By remaining on "manual pilot," i.e., investing energy into monitoring your behavior so you can catch your mistakes before they unfold, you can catch and stop yourself, and substitute plan B. If you are in the habit of punishing and criticizing yourself for your mistakes, you will also need to develop your self nurturance skills, while addressing any shame that may power your self rejection. On the other hand, if you have numbed your own conscience, you have essentially divorced yourself from the moral side of yourself that is the guardian of your integrity as a person. You will need to learn to listen to the moral feedback that guilt provides you if you are going to regain this integrity. Again, you may also need to attend to any underlying shame, as rejection of yourself may blind you to your mistakes as a means of protecting your conscious self image. You might also review your capacity for attachment to and appreciation of others, while learning to reduce your expectations, if you are going to manage the self-centeredness that may contribute to your need to neutralize guilt.

Let us now move from our discussion of guilt to a review of shame. Shame involves rejection of who you are as a person. As such, shame is a particularly corrosive emotion, because it involves a wholesale rejection of your identity (not just your behaviors), which in turn prevents the adequate

development of genuine self-esteem. Shame is therefore a building block, and sometimes the very bedrock of depression. While guilt is the emotion which results when you make a mistake, shame is about BEING a mistake, being flawed at your core, not just having a flawed behavior. Thus, shame is about identity, not just behavior, and as such, it is a much more powerful emotion, with far-reaching repercussions. While your guilty behaviors may contribute to shame, your shame may be more related to others' behavior. You may carry another person's shame if they are family member. For example, you may carry your mother's shame if you were born out of wedlock, or the product of a rape. Or you can develop shame in association with the embarrassing behavior of those around you, e.g., when you are too ashamed to expose your friends to your alcoholic parents. But shame is not always unhealthy. As John Bradshaw points out in his classic book, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, shame has healthy and unhealthy variants. Healthy shame is an antidote to omnipotence. It puts the brakes on otherwise unrestrained egotism or pursuit of pleasure, reminds us of our limits, and adds humility to our self-esteem. Self-esteem with humility is a healthy combination of opposites, in contrast to the extremes of omnipotent cockiness or humiliating inadequacy. Some of the old-timers in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) beautifully illustrate this healthy combination of self-esteem and humility, as they talk about their horrible past behaviors while displaying a surprising inner peace. Healthy shame, in the form of humility, reminds us that each of us, and perhaps our species as well, are only a speck of dust in the universe, yet special and unique at the same time. Again, note the healthy combination of opposite perspectives. As for the more toxic form of shame, young members of AA progressively find that their humiliation evaporates by the light of day. Their shame regarding alcoholism, and underlying toxic shame contributing to drinking, may have inhibited them from joining AA for quite some time. But once they begin sharing their shameful secrets in a supportive atmosphere, their shame gradually dissipates as they become able to esteem themselves while rejecting their past drinking behavior. The goal is to develop humility, or healthy shame, and work through/neutralize your toxic shame, so you no longer feel so humiliated that you have to hide your true self behind the camouflage of a false self as your public façade.

As the old AA saying goes, "You're only as sick as your secrets." This principle applies to shame that is born in childhood as well. Perhaps the best example of an experience which can result in shame is the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. The sheer frequency of sexual abuse of children on our planet is appalling, but it is fortunately the target of societal concern and

intervention in the last few decades. Children who have been subjected to sexual abuse typically harbor a great deal of shame, even when they have not been indoctrinated into feeling responsible or guilty regarding the abuse itself. It is if they have been marked with a scarlet letter of abuse as a tainted or a bad person. By concealing this dark secret, they encapsulate their shame and carry it forward into their adult lives. Such toxic shame requires camouflage, a façade or false self to cover the shameful secret and the flawed identity. As such, shame sets in motion a series of mental health dominoes in multiple directions. In one direction, shame results in low self-esteem, which in turn leads to social anxiety, because we tend to imagine others thinking about us in the same manner that we think about ourselves. In another direction, shame interferes with our capacity for intimacy, because intimacy involves shared vulnerability, and if we are too full of toxic shame to share our vulnerable secrets, feelings, and histories, our partner never really gets a chance to know us, and never has a true opportunity to love us. Only the false self gets exposed, and any incoming love is discounted, because you think, “If they only knew.” The shame and other intense feelings at the core of your injured, true self need to be identified, explored, accepted, and expressed in the company of supportive others before it can dissipate, to be gradually replaced with self nurturance, self-esteem, and healthy humility in the place of humiliation. Only then can the false self be discarded as an unnecessary façade, while one’s true self, with its strengths and imperfections, is revealed to others, creating the opportunity (and risk) of true intimacy and love.

We will further address recovery from shame in later chapters, especially the chapter on codependency and inner child work, since shame generates the codependent, false self, and is not only a feeling, but an identity issue requiring ego state communication. That is, it requires internal communication in order to improve internal connectedness, which is best addressed in our section dealing with internal and external connectedness.