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Steps to work through guilt

By Brad Klontz
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The Honolulu man — let's call him Robert — cringed every time he thought about what he had done. After arguing with his wife, he lashed out with words he didn't mean: He called his wife "lazy."

Perhaps there are worse things a person can say; however, to a hard-working woman of Japanese descent, there aren't many. Robert saw the hurt on his wife's face and felt remorse.

Guilt feels horrible. We associate it with depression and pain. Ruminating about a mistake can be excruciating.

You may be surprised to learn what behavioral scientists have known for years: Feelings of guilt can be good for you. Studies show that guilt is associated with healthy emotional functioning and satisfying relationships. In fact, without guilt we would live in a world of psychopaths, hurting each other without a second thought.

The pain of guilt motivates us to make up for our mistakes. Robert's feelings of guilt signal that his behavior was inconsistent with his principles. He knows he needs to apologize and repair his relationship with his wife.

While guilt lets us know we made a mistake and encourages us to make things right, shame tells us we are the mistake. Studies have shown that shame is linked to stress, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. When we feel shame, we feel worthless and incompetent. As a result, we give up, shut down, or repeat or exaggerate the problem behavior.

As a psychologist in Hawai'i, I see shame as a frequent affliction in my clients' lives. "I feel shame" or "Why, you not shame?" are all-too frequent utterances.

Shame robs us of the benefits that feelings of guilt provide us. If Robert's guilt turns into shame, he may become self-absorbed, verbally beating himself up with statements such as "She deserves someone better than me" — talk that will damage Robert's self-esteem and interfere with his ability to be a good partner.

Do your best to separate your self-worth from your bad behaviors, and consider taking the following steps:

Step 1. Accept responsibility for your behavior. Healthy emotional functioning requires us to take responsibility for our actions. Making excuses for why we did something we know we should not have done is an exercise in futility. You feel guilty for a reason. You messed up.

Step 2. Seek to understand. Making mistakes means you're human. Regardless of the severity of your misdeed, it is important for you to have compassion. Without excusing your actions, ask yourself: Did I intend to do harm? Did I do the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time? Remember that your regretted action or inaction was a behavior and not a personality trait. You screwed up, but you aren't a "screw-up."

Step 3. Make a confession. Share with someone you trust the full details of your actions. Explore the context from which your action or inaction arose. Talk about your intentions, whether they were good or bad. Allow yourself to express your feelings of sadness, regret, frustration, or anger.

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Step 4. Make a repair plan. The more harmful or hurtful your actions, the more time you need to put into developing a repair plan. The advice of a mentor, psychologist or clergy member may be essential. Be careful not to do more harm in the process of trying to make things right.

Step 5. Take reparative action. If you are going to make a direct apology, allow the person you offended to share how your actions affected them. Do not interrupt. Make apologies with the intent of making the other person feel better, not you. Do not apologize expecting your apology to be accepted.

Step 6. Don't do it again. If you do it again, see Step 1. If you can't stop doing the same thing over and over, seek professional help.

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