

## *What Is Guilt?*

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Feelings of guilt come to us in a variety of forms - a niggling wish that we hadn't done or said something, a sense of acute shame or a general feeling of being unworthy and not good enough.

Guilt is not a comfortable emotion and we often try to bury it, or run away from it. But this can lead to depression, self-harm or to blaming other people and being angry with them. This in turn can lead on to other health problems.

## *So how do we deal with guilt?*

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Instead of running away from our guilt, we can use it to teach us about ourselves and to show us areas in our lives where we can grow and change. This is usually a long journey. Below there are three steps that may help you along that journey. Each of them takes a lot of courage but is worth it in the end.

### **1. Face into the guilt.**

Don't be afraid of guilt; instead of running from it, face into it.

Ask yourself:

- What is it that I have done that I feel guilty about? Be specific. Sort out what exactly you wish you had never done from all the things that were OK.
- Whom have I hurt? List all the people who have been affected by your action. You may need to listen to the one you have wronged to hear what it has done to them. Sometimes our words and actions have caused hurt and harm that we did not intend. We still need to recognise that this has happened.

- Recognise that this is what you did. Accept responsibility for your own actions without trying to make excuse. This is who you are and what you have done. This can be a very difficult step. We try so hard to excuse ourselves or to blame others. 'Well, so-and-so should have helped ..... it was their fault for starting it .... etc.' I need to admit to myself without excuse that I did wrong.
- A very hard, but very helpful, step here is to admit our fault to another person; to someone who will take us seriously, not excusing and not blaming, but able to hear what we are confessing. This breaks the cycle of shame and secrecy and helps us see things in perspective.

**False Guilt:** Sometimes we feel guilty when in fact we have done nothing wrong. Perhaps the guilt feeling is due to not meeting the expectations put on us by others or by ourselves. Often these expectations are not realistic, and put us under undue pressure. This then leads to false guilt. We can also feel false guilt when we have been abused or if we have survived an accident in which others have been killed. Trying to clearly identify, and find evidence for, what we are guilty of may help us realise that we haven't actually done or said anything wrong. To then identify these false expectations and to challenge them, can help us deal with these feelings of unworthiness.

It is important to work through this first step before moving on to Steps 2 and 3. But it is also important not to stick at Step 1. Sometimes when we face into our guilt, we can come to hate ourselves and to feel unworthy of forgiveness or love from anyone. But remember that we are all human - not born to be perfect, but born with huge potential and the ability to grow and to change. To refuse this is a denial

of our very humanness. So Step 2 is to use our guilt feelings to motivate change.

### **2. Use Your Guilt Feelings to Motivate Change**

By admitting to yourself and maybe to another what you have done, you have paved the way for growth and change.

Ask yourself:

- What made me do it? What led up to it? Why did I do it? This is not excusing yourself; rather it seeks to understand yourself.
- Is there a weak area in my ways of responding to life? How can I change? How can I learn different patterns of behaviour?

This may involve counselling to help you understand why you behaved as you did; it may involve things like anger management, dealing with an alcohol problem etc.

### **3. Work for Healing and Wholeness.**

We are not isolated individuals, but we live in a web of inter-connectedness. By doing wrong, it is as though we have made a tear in that web of life that connects all things together.

Although we can never undo the past, there may be ways that we can seek to mend those tears.

- **Confessing and saying** sorry to the individuals affected by our actions and words. This means taking responsibility for our actions and admitting that we cannot undo them. All that we can do is to say and mean that we are sorry. It is important that we say sorry with no strings attached. The other person may choose to forgive or they may not. That is up to them. Our side is simply to say sorry.
- In some situations it may also be appropriate to make **public confession** and apologise to the group or community that you have hurt.

- You may wish to participate in some kind of **ritual of healing** and/or reconciliation. This may be a religious ritual or it may be some practical symbolic action that is meaningful to you and, where applicable, to the person that you have hurt.
- **Seeking reconciliation.** This does not mean trying to pretend that we never did the wrong that we have done. Rather it is looking at the effects of that wrong and trying to put them right where possible. It also means looking at what kind of a relationship, if any, we will have with this person in the future. This may mean releasing the other person to live their life without us or developing a different kind of relationship from what we had in the past. It may mean giving up something that matters to us but that has caused hurt.
- **Forgiving others.** As we seek to receive forgiveness then it is important to learn to forgive others. There is a leaflet in the surgery called 'Learning Forgiveness' which may help.
- **Receiving forgiveness.** We can never demand that others forgive us. We can only say sorry. But it is important that when forgiveness is offered we receive it. Sometimes we can refuse it because we feel we should be punished. But if we have genuinely admitted our fault and genuinely put right as much as we can, then continuing to punish ourselves is in effect refusing to mend the tear in the web of life. It is very humbling to receive forgiveness, because it is an admission that we can never undo what we have done. We can only humbly receive the other person's forgiveness with gratitude.
- **Forgiving myself.** Having done all we can to put things right it is important that we forgive ourselves. Even when the other person does

not forgive, once we have done all we can to put it right we need to draw a line under it and accept that we can never put it right by punishing ourselves.

### *Receiving Help from Beyond Ourselves*

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To face into our guilt can be extremely painful. We are forced to see the darker side that lurks within. Can we ever be truly loved? The God that Jesus shows us is a God who loves us and unconditionally releases us from all debt. The one who created us has already forgiven us by absorbing the pain, the wrong and the guilt of all that we have done and said. This happened when Jesus was killed on the cross for us. This God longs that we might bring our messed up lives to Jesus, so that he can begin to help us mend the tears in the web of life that we can never put right by ourselves.

#### **Further Help:**

It can often help to talk these things through with someone outside the immediate situation.

Leaflet available from reception:

- Learning Forgiveness

This leaflet is produced by Brookside Group Practice as one means of providing whole person care.

## Feelings of GUILT

...and how to deal with them