

## Is It Shame or Guilt?

By Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

“I feel so guilty. I always stay with my mother when I visit her. The last time, I decided to stay at a hotel. She fell down during the night and ended up in the hospital.”

“My father drives me crazy, but when I talk back to him, I feel guilty.”

But is “guilt” really what these two people in distress feel?

In almost every workshop that I teach on shame, someone asks me to explain the difference between shame and guilt. There is a common wisdom here, which I basically agree with: Guilt is “I did something bad or wrong,” shame is “I *am* something bad or wrong.” Guilt is about actions, shame is about your very being. While useful in many ways, there is a basic problem with this distinction. Many people use the word “guilt” when they are really talking about shame.

Guilt is an emotion that many people are willing to own: “I did something wrong and I feel bad about it.” It is connected to remorse. There is a natural tendency to try and make it right. In fact, feeling guilty about something can show the world—and yourself—what a good person you are. That was an isolated act, not at all typical of me. I can try to fix it, or at least not do it again.

Shame, on the other hand, goes to the soul. “I am a bad person.” The bad action was revelatory. It revealed that I am a bad person.

Daniel Siegel and others have spoken of the importance of having a “coherent narrative”—a story that describes and explains what happened in your life and makes some sense out of it. Shame is an incredibly powerful and compelling coherent narrative. Whatever happened, it was my fault. It happened because I am bad, inherently flawed. A shame-bound client said that when the Skylab satellite fell out of the sky, she thought it was her fault. That is not guilt, it is shame.

While guilt is a socially acceptable emotion, shame is not. In our society, there is terrible shame about having shame. Shame shows that we are wounded, flawed. The emotion of shame is terribly painful and people flee from it, react against it. Shame isolates us from others and leaves us alone. In fact, shame originates from what Gershen Kaufman calls, “the breaking of the interpersonal bridge.” The ultimate in shame and shaming is exile from the tribe. When something goes wrong in the present, it connects with deep roots of broken attachment from the past. For these reason, people often use the word “guilt” when they mean “shame,” to minimize their distress.

In the two examples above, is Valerie\*, the first speaker, guilty or ashamed? How about Norm\*, the second speaker? The answer is: Their words don't tell us. We need a lot more information about how deeply they have been affected, how the emotion has influenced

their life. How often and to what degree do they feel “guilty”?

When we think of shame as one of just a few primary emotions, we can develop a shame continuum of all the different ways shame manifests and all the different words people use to describe it, from “embarrassed” and “shy” through “stupid” to “humiliated” and “worthless.” On such a continuum, we can actually see guilt as a particular form of shame. Donald Nathanson, in his book *Shame and Pride*, has a diagram of reactions to shame. Sheila Rubin and I have expanded that diagram and added an extra and unique reaction. That is the reaction of “healthy shame,” which I wrote about in the previous email. Healthy shame involves looking at shameful incidents with compassion for self and others, seeing the big picture, taking responsibility for your part of what went wrong and having humility—a sense of your limitations as an imperfect human being.

When a client uses the word “guilt,” I suggest, as an experiment, he or she replace it with the word “shame.” When I suggested this to Valerie, she wanted to try it immediately. As she said “I feel so ashamed of what I did,” she began to cry. Valerie's mother had died several years before, soon after her hospitalization. Valerie had worked hard on getting rid of her “guilt,” but it was always with her. Others had told her it was not her fault, it wasn't her obligation to stay at her mother's house, but it had had no effect. When she used the word “shame,” she began to encounter the depth of her feelings. “I do, I do, feel ashamed,” she said. “I shouldn't have left her on her own. I was a bad daughter.”

In the next session, I explained the concept of healthy shame. Then I said, “You weren't perfect. You made a mistake. It turned out to be a terrible mistake. That's what happened. You do bear some responsibility for what happened. But that wasn't your intention. You were trying to take care of yourself, not hurt her.”

I spoke strongly, calling Valerie's action “a terrible mistake” to match in some way her feelings about it. I did not want her to think I was sugar-coating or dismissing an action that felt so wrong to her. I made the distinction between outcome and intention. So much of what happens—what we do or what others do—that causes harm is not intended. So—*both* the harm that is done and the good (or at least neutral) intentions need to be mentioned in order to help the client get the complexity of the situation.

After I finished speaking, Valerie looked at me with interest.

“You think I had good intentions, even though something so bad happened.”

“I do.”

“I was just trying to take care of myself. I wasn't trying to hurt her.”

We sat together in silence.

That was the beginning of Valerie being able to come to terms with what happened. In later sessions, we looked at the reasons she wanted to stay in a hotel—the difficult

dynamic between her and her mother. We unpacked her thought process and how she had made her decision. There was room for her to express her grief for her mother, which had been overshadowed (bound) by the shame. And she was able to see herself as a well-meaning person who had unintentionally caused pain, which helped her move on with her life. In the way I understand it, Valerie had moved from toxic shame, which kept her stuck and suffering, to healthy shame, which allowed her to see herself as a flawed human being and reengage with life.

Norm did not resonate with the word “shame.” “No, I’m not ashamed. I just feel guilty, that’s all.” So we worked with “guilt.” After about six months, Norm came in one day and said, “You know, I realized something. I don’t want to talk to my father because he’s always putting me down. He shames me. When I get off the phone, I feel ashamed.” After trying to use the term “shame” a few times, I had dropped it, only to see Norm come to it on his own.

There are clients who never get comfortable with the word “shame,” so I use whatever words work for them. But for some clients, using the word shame instead of guilt—or fear—can open up a door to deeper self-understanding and resolution.

\*Names have been changed to protect client privacy.

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