

# Got Guilt?

## Put away destructive guilty feelings; grow with productive guilty feelings.

Sitting down, head in hands, the gentleman sharing with me had no idea how he could ever move beyond the carnage. He caused a lot of pain by his lapses in judgement. While it was so long ago, he still struggled with the lingering effects of a mistake.

He went to church. The man served on the deacon board, was active in Bible study, had a loving family, and what he felt was a growing, dynamic relationship with God. But like clockwork these recurring feelings of guilt shrouded him in a cloud of despair. He struggled, fighting back tears as he re-lived the details which plagued his dreams, consumed his prayers. He knew he was overcompensating in his generosity to dispel the pain of his past. Listening to his struggle, I connected in many ways to the growing remorse that painfully came from the re-telling of his story.

### Blameworthy

If I were to be honest, I had been there before, and maybe so have you. We've been at the meeting place of disappointment and disgust in ourselves for the mistakes. The feelings, whether warranted or not, true or untrue, that cause us to replay in our minds past failures, misguided actions, or choices that turned out less than ideal.

Guilt can be associated with remorse that we feel as a result of doing or thinking something that we feel is wrong. Webster's Dictionary has a variety of definitions I can appreciate: "the fact of having committed a breach of conduct especially violating law and involving a penalty; the state of one who has committed an offense especially consciously; feelings of deserving blame for offenses."

The *Dictionary of Psychology* published by the American Psychological Association contends that guilt is a "self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action designed to undo or mitigate this wrong."

### Moving Cycle of Guilt

Guilt is a very powerful, yet complex response. It is action-oriented and prompts us cognitively or emotionally do something in response to how we think or how we feel. It can be real, based on actual events or derived from some false perception of our actions that if we really thought about it, could be traced to our inner misguided voices which heighten our sensitivity to the lies we tell ourselves.

Guilt is not just associated with doing wrong. There are some of us who feel guilty for the right things that we do. For instance, placing an aging relative in a nursing home because they cannot take care of themselves.

### Self-Condensation

The conscious plays a selective role which, Thomas Aquinas, the early church philosopher, suggests is a compass that either accuses or excuses our

behavior. Because of the selectiveness of the conscience we can perceive even right actions that harm others indirectly, as being worthy of our self-condemnation.

Productive guilt drives us to repent, make recompense for our wrongs. But punitive guilt forces us to internalize our struggles and can oftentimes lead to shame. Shame is allowing the guilt to grow to the point that it moves from what we do; to who we are. We go from making mistakes to being defined by them to the point that we become our mistakes.

## **Get-Rid-of-Guilt Plan**

### ***▪ Make guilt useful.***

Victor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* suggests that we can utilize guilt as a motivating factor in making ourselves better individuals. He states that "you are responsible for overcoming guilt, by growing beyond yourself." What he is alluding to is the power within each of us to rise above the negative self-talk and constant beating up of ourselves to do something productive with the mistakes we have made.

### ***▪ Allow guilt to teach you.***

Your past does not define you. No matter what you have done, as long as you are still alive you can find forgiveness and recompense. God is far more concerned with who you are becoming than who you have been. Past mistakes can teach us, but also serve to help us teach others. The beauty of the scars from our past is the ability to point to them as we share our story with others to help them avoid where we have been.

### ***▪ Take responsibility, but don't beat yourself up.***

Accept that you made a mistake and resist the seduction to think that you are so special that you can be the only other perfect person (other than Jesus) to walk the face of the earth. Mistakes are a part of the human condition.

### ***▪ Challenge your negative thoughts and feelings.***

Determine the source of your guilt. Is the guilt you are feeling truthful, or are you feeling guilty based off some misconception? Are you having persistent feelings of sadness, isolation, anxiety, depression? If those feelings are tied to your perception of your mistakes, it is time to do some serious introspection.

## ▪ ***Accept that you are forgiven.***

Stop beating yourself up and thinking that you deserve to die or to suffer for your mistakes. Someone has already done that for you. In *Grace for the Afflicted*, Matthew Stanford contends that guilt can be used as a demonic accusation that can lead us to call into question the validity of the word of God. It can prompt us to read the promises of the Bible that tell us “as far as the east is from the west, so far He has removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12), or “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:19) as fanciful tales. Guilt can cause us to take the word of God which unequivocally assures us that we are forgiven for our past mistakes, our present ones, and the future ones as a lie, and can cause us to forever feel that we stand accused even for those things for which we have ardently sought forgiveness.

## ▪ ***Let go.***

We cannot move forward and hold on at the same time. In order for us to be free from the guilt we carry, we have to let it go. The pathway to being able to let go of the condemnation and barrage of self-criticism, is truthfulness and honesty, which leads me to my last suggestion...

## ▪ ***Seek help.***

There is nothing wrong with going to talk to someone who can keep your confidence about your thoughts, feelings or actions. Suffering in silence is one of the most unproductive things you can do. Talk to a counselor, pastor, or even a friend. Negative feelings grow when we keep them hidden, but there is something about bringing our darkness to the light that makes the burdens lighter that we carry because we are able to share them with someone else.