

# SHAME vs. GUILT

by Sue Kastensen 13 March 2025

Thanks for your interest in reading what I've come up with regarding these difficult emotions.

I thought I would be able to write this fairly quickly because I had immersed myself in information-gathering while trying to figure out how to surmount painful feelings I was experiencing. But I was wrong. I couldn't put any words of knowledge down. Shame is funny that way; it's filled with debilitating self-doubt.

Pushing through the paralysis, I can say one thing with confidence: we all feel emotions differently. When I say I feel shame or guilt, what I'm talking about are feelings that are unique to me. So, even though I can share broad ideas about these feelings, I recognize that what you feel is unique to you, and that the level with which you feel these emotions is unique to you, too. To make things harder, what we feel can vary with context, and over time.

Since this topic is so complex, I'm writing this as a person in the middle of a process, rather than someone who has knowledge to share.

Emotions are tough! And until quite recently, children did not learn about them at all in school. One more thing I can say with confidence is: If we can manage something this hard, we are really strong. I believe we can find relief by shifting our strength from pain to growth.

As I mentioned in the newsletter, a difficult transition - the loss of a loved one - prompted this deep exploration. I felt deeply guilty for not doing enough, or being sensitive enough, and for failing to see the places where I could have provided better support. I wished I would have done things differently, and I also felt like I failed because I am incompetent and untrustworthy.

During my search, situations from my past started to surface. I had thought about them now and then throughout my life, but I never looked at them critically. I realized then that, for me, shame is a thread that weaves through my 60+ year life, always there as a thin and persistent strand of my identity.

As anyone who experiences it knows, shame impacts our perspective. We can fail to recognize opportunities when we are full of self-doubt. And we may wish to hide from new experiences, rather than accept the risks that come with learning. We may downplay our gifts because we believe we are not 'good enough' to share them. Feelings, after all, drive our thinking and our behavior.

I turned to experts like Helen Block Lewis, Brene' Brown, and others to learn from their research and ideas. Here are a few things that smart people say about guilt and shame:

**GUILT** = You did something wrong. You messed up. You can fix it. It doesn't feel good, but it's a useful feeling because you can use what you learn to correct the problem. Guilt focuses on behavior. When people feel guilt, they feel bad about something specific that they've done or failed to do. Guilt can motivate you to take responsibility and repair damage. You can be a good person, but do a bad thing.

Brene' Brown says "I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort."

**SHAME** = You ARE wrong. You feel defective. You likely want to hide or withdraw from others. You may be able to do a good thing, but you'll always be a bad person.

Brene' Brown says "I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of connection, love and belonging." She believes shame is a universal emotion and everyone feels shame about something.

June Tangney believes that "if you feel both shame and guilt, shame takes over."

June also says "women and girls score higher than men or boys on both shame and guilt." I wonder, though: is it the girls and women, or are their feelings a response to our cultural demands of girls and women in general?

Apparently, studies have shown that religious people and non-religious people feel roughly the same amount of shame.

Studies have also shown that shame does not motivate a person to behave a certain way; for example, shaming people doesn't make them quit smoking.

Labeling, such as 'I'm an idiot' or 'I have no ideas to contribute' can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, says Brown.

I've noticed that having a rational way to look at my feelings, such as reading articles that cite research, can pull me back from the depressing places that my mind can go.

As many of us know all too well, children can grow up in an environment where shame seems inevitable. Extremely strict religious homes, homes where children live caregivers experiencing addiction or codependency, and homes where the children are not accepted as the authentic and unique person that they are, provide just a few examples of environments where children can start to feel unloved, unworthy, inferior or inadequate. The toxic shame we may find in adults is often associated with abuse they experienced in childhood. Also, the use of alcohol and drugs, which often begins as

self-medication, can contribute to feelings of shame, especially when the use turns into addiction.

"My addiction got so bad I ended up in prison for 4 years which saved my life. My journey towards healing started there." - Omar K. Veteran and shame/abuse survivor

## LIVING AMENDS

"Living amends bridges the gap between living in shame and regret and finding forgiveness." - Dr. Alejandra Vasquez

Living Amends is a way to process our feelings when we can no longer reach out to the person we've harmed or failed to support or...(fill in the blank). It is a process to find compassion for ourselves, feel our inherent worth and turn some of our shame into guilt...to then turn into healing action, when we serve others in some way.

Here are some ideas to help you get started with the amends-making process: (edited from the list found here: <https://www.silvermistrecovery.com/step-9-the-best-5-tips-for-living-amends>)

**REFLECTION:** Take time to reflect on the situation and what you wish you could have done differently.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** Make amends to yourself. Acknowledge your actions and take responsibility for the hurt caused.

**COMPASSION:** Work towards forgiving yourself, understanding that you can learn and grow from your mistakes. We need this compassion to feel more capable and confident in the future...to forgive to others and to again feel good about our contributions.

**WRITE A LETTER:** Compose a letter expressing your feelings, apologies, regrets and what you wish you would have done...and then tear it up or read it out loud to the person that isn't there.

**MAKE CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE** Use the memory of that relationship to make positive changes in your life and other relationships.

I realize that one act, or one type of amends, does not satisfy the full spectrum of shame. A commitment to small but steady activities, however, can help us see that shame is not one big wall. It was built over time and consists of many small, bonded pieces that we can chip away at over the course of our lives.

Although people love to suggest that we 'talk to someone', I find that it's very hard to find folks that are willing - or able - to really hear me. I find that taking time to simply reflect can be helpful, or writing my thoughts in a journal, can be therapeutic and also interesting to read in a few months or a year.

Something else that has been providing relief is creating a routine specifically to find compassion for the suffering person inside me. I do it every day for a month, and then I change it! Switching my routine like that can build my flexibility for new things and it can also jolt me out of 'autopilot'...so I can widen my perspective. I make a space for healing, and add a little zing for the future.

Taking measures to build your self-esteem could also help you avoid or reduce shame. This could include strategies like reciting positive affirmations daily, making a list of your positive qualities and past achievements, and challenging negative thoughts

Please remember: emotions are constructed. We've built them throughout our entire lifespan with little or no formal training to understand them. Our feelings are based on our experiences, which we often accepted without question. This is an excellent time to question the assumptions that are at the foundation of our feelings.

When I feel shame, I deeply doubt my contribution to humanity. Working on this article has been helpful. I feel our connection as I write. I believe this is how we can get stronger from adversity. Through our own strength-building, we can find empathy for others experiencing guilt and/or shame.

This exercise has not 'cured' me. I'm not done feeling shame, and that is okay. I can't let it consume me...because if it did, I'd have to give up my power...and I have committed myself to too many things to lose control over my life.

I am grateful for the guilt that gives me the oomph to fix what I can. It is both therapeutic and cathartic to find ways to send love to those who are suffering whom I will never meet.

Understanding my shame, and my pain, a little better, has helped me to see why I am so passionate about building Fair Shake.

The most important thing, I believe, is to resist inaction. This is where trust and/or faith is crucial. It is critical to plant seeds of determination and hope in the moments when you feel a little lighter, so they will be there for you to reach out to when you need to remember that the hope that you feel is real, and the feeling of inadequacy that arises is just shame. When all else fails, I have to remember that I'm not doing any one any good, myself included, while I'm stuck.

Since I'll soon turn 62, and I've lived with shame since I was a kid (things I still feel really bad about), I don't think the feeling will ever go away completely for me. I'm okay with that. I just hope I won't dive into a bad place in my head and get stuck there when I start to lose my mind! ~ : ) For that reason, and many others, I will continue to try to own it, question it, and transform my shame, as much as I possibly can.

My conclusion? Life is hard! And intention...or is it attention?...is everything. Thankfully, we are strong, we are capable, and we can get through this.

I hope you could find some value in this piece. Would you care to share your thoughts? I'd love to hear them.

Ubuntu! ~ sue

7 Lessons from Gershen Kaufman's book "The Psychology of Shame":

1. Shame is a powerful emotion that can have a significant impact on our self-esteem, relationships, and overall well-being.
2. Shame is often learned through social interactions and cultural norms. It can be internalized and perpetuated, leading to self-doubt and negative self-talk.
3. Shame can contribute to a variety of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.
4. Practicing self-compassion can help mitigate the effects of shame. By being kind to ourselves, we can reduce feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism.
5. Sharing our vulnerabilities with others can help us connect with them on a deeper level and reduce feelings of shame.
6. Therapy can be a valuable tool for addressing shame-based issues. A therapist can provide a safe and supportive space to explore these feelings and develop coping strategies.
7. Building strong social connections can help counteract feelings of isolation and shame.

From the author: "By understanding the nature of shame and implementing strategies to address it, we can improve our mental health and cultivate greater self-worth.

All of us embrace a common humanity in which we search for meaning in living, for essential belonging with others, and for valuing of who we are as unique individuals. We strive toward feeling that we are worthwhile in some special way, as well as whole inside. We yearn to feel that our lives are useful, that what we do and who we are, do matter. Yet times come upon us when doubt creeps inside, as if an inner voice whispers despair."

## QUOTES

To feel shame is to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense. - Gershen Kaufman

Forgive yourself; you are not perfect. Show yourself grace; you are still learning. Show yourself patience; you are on a journey. – Shannon Yvette Tanner

"All of us walk around with some degree of shame. We can't talk ourselves out of it, or even have someone else explain to us why we shouldn't feel it. No one can be cured of shame, but we all can experience healing." - Mark Baker, PhD

"Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery." – J.K. Rowling

"You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." – Buddha

"The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing." – Henry Ford

"Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor." – Thich Nhat Hanh