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## **Guilt**

The emotion of guilt is a negative feeling that people can experience for a wrongdoing, such as being untruthful or deceptive to others. This differs from the legal meaning of guilt, which refers to a person's culpability for an offense that violates a particular law. It is also useful to distinguish guilt, which stems from a negative evaluation of a wrongful behavior, from shame, a related emotion that arises from a negative evaluation of the self. The capacity to experience guilt differs from person to person, with some individuals feeling guilty more often than others for a variety of interpersonal and private misdeeds. Individuals can feel guilty for offenses in the past, present, or that are anticipated in the future, as well as for violations committed by close others or by one's group. Overall, years of research evidence suggests that moderate feelings of guilt are adaptive and important for social functioning.

Feelings of guilt can occur following a focus on a specific action or nonaction that goes against personal or societal standards. Lying, cheating, and stealing are some of the most common examples of acts that can elicit feelings of guilt. Guilt is considered to be a self-conscious and moral emotion because it involves an evaluation of the self, and it plays a crucial role in guiding moral behavior. Beyond feeling bad, guilt is also characterized by feelings of regret and tension. Moreover, guilt is sometimes described metaphorically as a heavy burden or weight on one's conscience.

## **Guilt and Shame**

Guilt is often confused with shame. People may refer to these emotions incorrectly or interchangeably; however, much evidence suggests that they are distinct. Similar to guilt, shame is an unpleasant feeling, but shame tends to be a more painful experience and is characterized by feeling worthless, exposed, and small. There are not reliable distinctions between the types of situations that can separately evoke guilt or shame, and it is possible to feel a certain level of both emotions after a misdeed or failure. For example, compared to shame, guilt more often arises from private rather than public wrongdoings; however, individuals can feel guilty for public misdeeds and feel shameful for private acts.

Instead of a particular context, guilt and shame can be distinguished by the negative evaluations that individuals make after lying or following some other harmful action. Negatively judging the self by focusing on what "I" did wrong can elicit shame, whereas negatively judging the wrongful

behavior by focusing on what I “did” wrong can evoke guilt. Thus, it is perhaps easier to understand why guilt may feel less painful than shame, because guilt stems from a greater focus on a temporary act as “terrible” rather than a global evaluation of the self as a “terrible person.” Guilt and shame may also be distinguished by the type of behaviors following a wrongdoing. Shame tends to be associated with withdrawal behaviors such as avoiding others. Guilt is more often linked with repair behaviors, such as taking responsibility, apologizing, or putting in additional effort with others.

### **Guilt Proneness**

People vary markedly in their propensity to feel guilty. Across a number of situations involving perceived wrongdoing, some individuals will reliably experience guilt more often than others. That is, guilt proneness is a personality trait that occurs on a continuum, with individuals being more or less guilt-prone. This means that some people will feel intense guilt after being deceptive whereas others will feel little to no guilt following the same act. Guilt proneness is believed to decrease people's frequency of engaging in unethical behaviors because guilt-prone individuals anticipate unpleasant guilty feelings for committing acts that they perceive to be wrong.

Although many measures of guilt proneness have been created, it has been more recently assessed by asking individuals to imagine brief scenarios of wrongdoing and indicate how likely they would respond in ways that are theoretically aligned with feelings of guilt. Those higher in guilt proneness tend to self-report engaging in less unethical behavior than those lower in guilt proneness. There is also evidence from laboratory settings that guilt proneness predicts likelihood of lying or behaving dishonestly. For example, following a monetary incentive to lie to another person, 45 percent of those low on guilt proneness lied, compared to 20 percent of those high on guilt proneness. In workplace settings, more guilt-prone individuals are less likely to be counterproductive, or commit acts that harm others in their office or their organization. Higher scores of guilt proneness are also related to lower frequencies of delinquent behaviors, such as entering a venue without paying or calling in sick when healthy.

Such evidence from everyday life supports the view that guilt is adaptive because of its role in regulating moral behavior. Even among those in jail, a proclivity to feel guilty is related to committing less severe crimes and having fewer criminal convictions. An important distinction between clinically diagnosed psychopaths and those in the normal population is the ability to experience moral emotions, such as guilt. Consistent with this notion, infrequent feelings of guilt

are associated with higher levels of psychopathy and antisocial personality, psychological conditions that are more common in prison populations.

The capacity to feel guilty for violations of personal or societal standards has links to other important psychological factors. In particular, individuals who feel guilty, whether it is for a specific event or a tendency in general, are also more likely to experience empathy. That is, stronger feelings of guilt are also related to a greater ability to take on other people's perspectives, feel more compassion for others, and have a greater concern for one's effect on others. This association is noteworthy because empathy is fundamental in promoting positive interpersonal relationships and prosocial behaviors and inhibiting aggression toward others. In addition to empathy, those who are guilt prone are also more likely to be agreeable and conscientious individuals.

A tendency to experience guilt is unrelated to levels of self-esteem, neuroticism, anxiety, rumination, and related psychological conditions. In other words, a propensity to feel guilty does not predict the occurrence of many common psychological disorders; instead, the ability to feel a moderate amount of guilt appears to have healthy interpersonal consequences. In general, it may be beneficial to know individuals' degrees of guilt proneness, as it may be useful in predicting future patterns of unethical actions and interpersonal functioning. However, the results of research conducted on guilt proneness is better suited to describing groups of individuals across situations rather than a specific individual case, and current measures of guilt proneness may be susceptible to malingering. Thus, some caution is warranted when determining guilt proneness and applying the results of research.

### **Collective Guilt**

In addition to feeling guilty for personal wrongdoing, individuals can feel guilty for acts committed by close others or their group. Only limited research has examined vicarious guilt for the actions of those interpersonally close to an individual; however, there is relatively more known about collective guilt for harm committed by one's group. While the unpleasant experience of collective guilt can feel similar to personal guilt, collective guilt is distinct from guilt related to personal responsibility for wrongdoing. Individuals may feel collective guilt when they identify with members of a group that has committed harmful actions in the past, or plans to do harm in the future. Some examples of harmful group acts include lying, stealing, or perpetrating violence against another group.

Group members are often motivated to protect positive views of their group, and thus they may engage in a variety of protective psychological processes that prevent or assuage collective guilt. Such factors may partly explain why collective guilt is experienced less frequently than individual guilt. For instance, group members may be prone to minimize or “forget” harmful actions committed by their group. When the action cannot be denied, group members may be less likely to accept full responsibility for the harm or they may legitimize their group's wrongdoing. If, however, conditions lead to the acceptance of illegitimate harmful group actions and feelings of collective guilt, then this experience, in conjunction with other psychological factors, may play a role in support for reparations or fostering intergroup relations.

## Conclusion

Although feeling guilty is an unpleasant experience, it is an adaptive emotion that has a role in preventing destructive behavior and repairing harm committed, outcomes which have important implications for personal and societal functioning.

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## Further Readings

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**See Also:**

- [Cheating](#)
- [Dishonesty](#)
- [Emotions](#)
- [Lying, Prevalence of](#)
- [Morals and Ethics](#)

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