Shining a Light on Shame and Guilt
Reviewed May 17, 2015

Just mentioning the words guilt and shame can cause bad responses—feelings of inadequacies, regrets, hurtful words, bad thoughts or painful experiences. Although not often talked about, these feelings offer chances to courageously learn about yourself and to heal emotionally.

**Differences between shame and guilt**

*Shame* focuses on the core of a person’s being with the belief “I am a bad person,” while *guilt* is about regrets over your actions: “I did something bad.” Shame says “I am a mistake” while guilt says “I made a mistake.”

Author John Bradshaw, Ph.D. calls shame “toxic” and says it is the fuel for most harmful, compulsive, addictive behaviors. Shame causes inward-focused actions such as self-treating emotions with substances (food, alcohol or drugs) or avoiding others. Feelings of shame are highly correlated with addiction, aggression, violence, depression, bullying, suicide and eating disorders.

Guilt can drive outward behavior change such as paying a speeding ticket or apologizing. A person’s ability to feel guilt can be a call to take action.

**Shame by gender**

The experience of shame for males and females is not the same, says author Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.

For females, shame is like a straightjacket. Most women grow up thinking that being all things to all people is what makes a woman great. Women typically define themselves and get their sense of self from their roles—employee, wife, mother, sister, daughter, friend, etc. Our society also places expectations on females for behavior such as “to be nice, thin, modest, calm, loving, self-sacrificing.” This creates a web of unattainable, conflicting roles and expectations for females. When females fall short, feelings of inadequacy can lead to guilt and, even worse, shame.

To conform to societal norms, men are expected to be strong at all costs—both physically and emotionally—to be exceptional providers, work hard at all times, be emotionally in control, and never be afraid. Being viewed as weak in any form by anyone is shameful. Men are expected to succeed—at work, on the football field, in marriage, as a parent.

**What helps in the face of guilt and shame**

Guilt can lead to good changes, but shame is always harmful. When a person feels badly about her
behavior, that guilt can drive an apology and the wish to make amends. When a person feels ashamed, she can be paralyzed because she feels like an outsider, flawed, full of self-loathing, fearing rejection and unworthy of acceptance. A person who feels shame is more likely to keep doing the actions that cause it, getting stuck in a downward spiral. Addressing guilt, choosing to be accountable and to do something to make the situation better can create an upward spiral.

Guilt and shame: Steps for growth

- **Look inside yourself and identify shame and guilt.** Listen to self-talk about your looks, work, career, money, marriage, spouse, parenting, kids, friends, health, intelligence, even your upbringing. Look at any stereotyping or labeling. Do you hear shame talking, believing you are flawed at the core? Messages like “I’m never good enough” are a red-flag for shame.

Guilt can come when a person feels to blame for an action he regrets. Values and conscience determine feelings of guilt. An example might be saying hurtful words out of anger. Guilt can motivate an apology—a wish to mend the damage.

- **If you feel guilty, make it right.** Measure your level of responsibility for what happened and the seriousness of the results. A sincere apology has the potential to help heal wounds both for the person who feels guilty and for the one wronged. Take responsibility for your actions and recognize the feelings of the person hurt, even if your aim was not to be hurtful. Work on forgiving yourself. See mistakes as learning opportunities, not personal failures.

- **Build “shame resilience.”** Brown says this can be developed. It calls for courage—the ability to be authentic and to share your story with someone empathetic and understanding. Shame grows in an environment of secrecy, silence and judgment and dissipates with courage, compassion and connection. To foster shame resilience, be gentle with yourself, reach out and connect with a nonjudgmental family member, friend or counselor.

- **Seek help if you feel stuck.** Professional, private help is available through your employee assistance program (available through some employers or health plans) or other mental health professionals.

*By Kris Hooks, M.Ed., LPC, LMFT, CEAP*
© 2013 Achieve Solutions

Contact Us:
855-281-1601

© 2016 Achieve Solutions® is a Beacon Health Options website.

https://www.achievesolutions.net/achievesolutions/en/shclpch/