

GUILT vs SHAME

Guilt and shame are not the same. Understanding the differences between them can help us work through our negative self-judgments.

When we are better able to grasp the difference between healthy guilt, unhealthy guilt, and shame, we can begin to halt self-criticism and reject shame messages.

Guilt is often experienced when we act against our values. Shame, on the other hand, is a deeply-held belief about our unworthiness as a person.

Here's a way to visualize it:

	HELPFUL GUILT (HEALTHY)	UNHELPFUL GUILT (UNHEALTHY)	SHAME
DEFINITION	Helpful guilt is a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we've done that is objectively wrong.	Unhelpful guilt is a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we've done against our unrealistically high standards.	Shame is an intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed.
EXAMPLE	Chris hit someone while driving drunk and feels guilty.	Pat forgot a coworker's name and feels terribly guilty about it.	Jamie feels like a worthless person who is only taking up people's time and wasting space in the world.
CAUSE OF FEELING	Helpful guilt is caused by actions or behaviors that break objective definitions of right and wrong.	Unhelpful guilt is caused by actions or behaviors that break unrealistically high standards.	Shame is caused by an innate sense of being worthless or inherently defective.
WHEN IT DEVELOPS	We can experience guilt as early as age 3-6. (Developmentally, guilt is a more mature emotion than shame.)	We can experience guilt as early as age 3-6.	We can experience shame as early as 15 months. (That's why shame is more deeply wired in our brain and is more difficult to reverse.)
WHY WE FEEL THIS	We act in a way that breaks objective standards of moral behavior.	We act in a way that breaks unrealistic standards of behavior developed early in childhood to please an adult.	We see ourselves as unworthy and deeply flawed.
OUTCOME	Potentially positive. Healthy guilt allows us to seek forgiveness and correct a wrong. It can lead to healing.	Negative. Unhealthy guilt leads us to emphasize self-punishment over behavior change, trapping us in guilt.	Negative. Shame causes us to fear that we will be rejected, so it tempts us to disconnect from others and avoid what causes us shame. It could even start us down a path of deeper mental health problems like depression and substance abuse.
RESOLUTION	Healthy guilt resolves as we repair the damage we caused.	Unhealthy guilt remains until we correct irrational beliefs.	Shame is internalized and deeply connected to our sense of who we are which makes it more difficult to resolve.
HOW TO WORK WITH	Face the behavior that hurt self and others. Take responsibility for the harm done. Seek forgiveness from the person affected. Change destructive behavior and attitudes that created the harm. Reclaim wholeness and heal relationship with the person affected.	Separate and resolve healthy guilt to uncover unhealthy guilt. Practice self-compassion and work to understand that everyone possesses a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Seek connection with others. Joining a self-help group can offer support.	Exercise self-compassion to shift feelings of shame and move awareness away from self-criticism or proof of inadequacy. Pursue relationships. Nurture connections and a sense of belonging with others.