



DEALING WITH SHAME AND GUILT

3D Recovery ® Resource 3.8

Contributed by Jeff E. Harris & Monserrat Moreno © 2015

Adaptive Guilt

The feeling of guilt is an adaptive response to wrongdoing or hurting someone else. Guilt can be adaptive if it motivates people to improve their behavior. Feeling guilty after hurting someone may help encourage you to correct your actions and make amends.

Maladaptive Guilt

The feeling of guilt can be maladaptive if you are feeling guilty when you have not done anything wrong or if your guilt is disproportional to the mistake you made. If you are feeling guilty without any wrongdoing, the feeling of guilt may interfere with your daily functioning.

Shame

Shame goes beyond feeling regretful about wrongdoing; it often involves the conclusion that “there is something wrong with me because I have done something wrong.” Shame involves a diminished sense of personal worth. Shame is rarely adaptive.

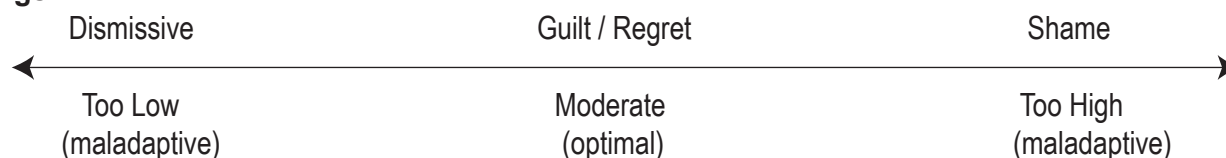
Feeling Words for Guilt and Shame

Mild	Moderate	Intense
Sorry Apologetic Regretful Embarrassed Awkward	Guilty Responsible Contrite Culpable Accountable	Ashamed Remorseful Repentant Pathetic Mortified

Finding an Optimal Level of Guilt

After you have done something wrong or have hurt someone, you may experience too much or not enough guilt. If you feel ashamed after making small mistakes, this may damage your self-esteem. If you feel dismissive and deny responsibility after hurting others, you are likely to alienate those around you. In response to wrongdoing or hurting someone, having moderate feelings of guilt may be optimal. Taking responsibility for mistakes supports accountability and may motivate you to make amends and change your ways.

Feelings:



Thoughts:

“It’s not my fault”

“I made a mistake”
“I’m sorry I hurt you”

“I am an awful person”

Actions:

Denies wrongdoing

Takes responsibility/makes amends

Low feelings of self-worth

Coping with Shame and Guilt

If you are feeling ashamed or guilty, you should reflect on the situation to see if there is something you should take responsibility for or someone to whom you should apologize. You may want to make amends if you can do so without hurting someone. After you take responsibility and make amends, it may be time to forgive yourself and move on. In the long run, it is important to develop a sense of self-compassion and treat yourself kindly even though you have made mistakes.