



Guilt: Let It Go!

In our last article we shared some ideas about shame and how to work with it to raise the vibration and flow of your energy. In that discussion we stated that shame needs to be differentiated from guilt. Many people use these two terms interchangeably but in fact they are different emotions.

Guilt is the feeling you have when you act in a way that violates certain rules that you or society hold as the right or correct way to behave. Shame on the other hand speaks to a quality of your inner SELF versus your actions...you feel that you are bad, wrong or flawed with shame. This is deeper and more complex an issue than guilt.

Guilt can be often be handled fairly easily by:

- 1) Becoming aware of your behavior,
- 2) Understanding which of your values you went against
- 3) Making a commitment to make different choices in the future.

Healthy guilt is merely a reminder that you have transgressed a boundary that compromises your personal integrity. Normally we all want to feel that our values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and action are on the same track. This helps us to know who we are, makes us feel we can trust ourselves and have an inner sense of continuity that helps guide our lives.

A common problem with guilt arises when you begin to believe that you are responsible for things that you really are not. Generally this occurs when you have poorly defined boundaries or a lack of self-awareness. It could be argued that this is infringing on the area of shame. For now we would like to suggest that perhaps there is a middle ground that could be called toxic

guilt. We need to have a way to speak about the feelings we have and by giving them clear names it helps to not only understand but also to adopt appropriate solutions. Toxic guilt can feel vague and pervasive. There is a strong feeling without a clearly defined source.

A common source for this type of generalized guilt is an environment where one or more people do not accept personal responsibility and routinely cast blame outside themselves (this person also lacks a clearly defined, strong sense of self and is just displaying an alternate means of coping with it). Other people within that circle who lack a strong sense of self may be vulnerable to 'picking up' the disowned feelings. Children are particularly vulnerable as their sense of self, boundaries and personal authority are not fully formed *just because they are children*. A person who has not completed those developmental tasks is also a prime candidate for 'guilt by assignment.'

As this article was underway, a wonderful example of guilt came through an unexpected phone call. The person calling was explaining that so many things were going awry and she couldn't understand why. She couldn't understand why she wasn't getting reliable contractors to handle building maintenance work. The jobs were taking longer than the estimates provided. As a result, the contractors felt like they were working without pay or they were being underpaid. In one instance the caller felt so bad, so "guilty" really, that she bought groceries for the person she hired to do some painting and odd jobs, because he was implying that he wouldn't be able to eat for the week. She also purchased a cell phone for this contractor so she could reach him when needed, after she wasn't able to get in touch with him for an important job.

As we talked, another situation surfaced, exemplifying the same pattern. The caller has a roommate, someone she's known for 20 years. The roommate recently announced that she would be paying what amounts to a 40% reduction in monthly rent. The roommate felt that since she was going to school, working and trying to reduce her credit card debt, she should be allowed to reduce her rent. She felt that since the caller had more money that it shouldn't be a problem. It turns out that this situation has been going on for 5 months. Each month the roommate gradually reduced the rent amount she was contributing. The caller felt bad for her and let it slide. The caller felt *guilty* that her roommate was feeling this way. In reality, the caller was subsidizing her roommate and her contractors. She was enabling them to continue to avoid taking responsibility for their lives and their actions.

The pattern with the contractor and the roommate is the same pattern. The source is guilt. The contractor and the roommate were not accepting responsibility for themselves. They were casting blame outside of themselves and the caller was picking it right up. The caller was a perfect match for this because she lacks a strong sense of self. She feels that she is not good enough and that she can't do enough for others. She is vulnerable to picking up their disowned

feelings. She is vulnerable because she has not set her personal boundaries. As a result, the pattern has gone on for years and it continues to repeat itself in her life. The good news is she is ready to change! By becoming aware of her behavior, she is learning which values she has compromised and she is committing to making different choices in the future.

No discussion of guilt is complete without the ever popular 'shoulds,' 'oughts' and 'musts' that abound and are a fertile breeding ground for guilt. Think about how often these words creep into your thought pattern. How often does your self-talk include such thoughts as: I should choose healthier foods, I ought to lose weight, I must exercise every day, I ought to call parents, I should take better care of myself, I must not let others cross my boundaries. When we travel down this road of self-talk, we not only invite guilt in and allow it to take over our energy field; we also intensify that which is already there. Watch out for these words in your own patterns. When do you use them? Are you allowing your boundaries to be crossed?

Here are some remedies to alleviate feelings of guilt in your life:

Perspective -- Develop it! Talk with others who have different backgrounds, cultures and family structures. Developing a broad perspective can help you develop clarity.

Boundaries -- Go on an archeological dig for your SELF. Self-excavation can be done with a therapist, in a self help group, and/or to start -- a good reading list.

Values clarification -- There are many excellent books that help with techniques in this area.

Self observation -- *Without* self flagellation become an observer of yourself. Journaling can be of great help with this approach.

Meditation -- Quieting the mind, listening deeply to the softer 'voices within' can be of tremendous help by itself or in combination with some of the other methods named here.

Recognizing and releasing limiting beliefs -- Anything and everything is possible. Observe your patterns and begin to identify beliefs that are holding you back. Choose different thoughts.

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