

GUILT, SHAME & RESPONSIBILITY

We feel guilty when we have not lived up to self-imposed standards or have violated rules that are important to us. If we believe that we “should” not have said that or done that, or we “ought to have” said that or done that, then we may feel guilt. Shame enters in when we believe that our failure to behave in a certain manner means that we are personally flawed in some way. For many of us the things we feel ashamed of remain secret and carry an awful weight on us. The following may help in dealing with guilt and shame:

1. You can begin by **assessing the seriousness of your actions** with the following questions:

Do others consider this experience to be as serious as I do?

Do some people consider it less serious?

How serious would I consider the experience if a friend was responsible instead of me?

How important will this experience be in a month? Year? 5 years?

How serious would I consider the experience if someone did it to me?

Did I know ahead of time the meaning or consequence of my actions (or thoughts)?

Based on what I knew at the time, do my current judgements apply?

Can any damage that occurred be corrected? How long will this take?

Was there an even worse action I considered and avoided?

2. Once the seriousness is evaluated you can **weigh how much of the violation is your sole, personal responsibility**. Begin by listing all the persons (include yourself) and aspects of the situation that has left you feeling guilt or shame. Then, draw a pie and assign slices of responsibility that reflect relative responsibility. Draw your slice last.

3. When secretiveness surrounds shame it may be important to **break the silence** and talk about what has happened with someone you trust and who is accepting (e.g. good friend, therapist).
4. No one, this is worth repeating, no one, is perfect. If, after careful evaluation, you conclude that you have truly done something wrong then **learning to forgive yourself** is helpful in dealing with guilt and shame. Part of this is realizing that even though you make mistakes, this does not mean you are flawed as a person.
5. If you have truly done something wrong, and have injured someone, then it may be important to **make amends** for what you have done. Making amends involves recognizing your transgression, being courageous enough to face the person you have hurt, asking for forgiveness, and determining what you can do to repair the hurt you caused.

Adapted from “Mind Over Mood” by Greenberger & Padesky