

Are Guilt and Shame useful emotions?

Tips from Dr. Darek Dawda of DAVDA Psychology*

By MATHILDA WATERS



According to our expert on well-being, Dr. Darek Dawda of DAVDA Psychology, shame is bad, and guilt is good (in moderation).

MW: Could you start by defining guilt and shame for me?

Dr. DD: Guilt is the bad feeling we get when we do something wrong, or fail to do the right thing. Shame is similar to guilt, but it differs in that it is a deeper overall feeling of inadequacy or unworthiness without clear cause. So guilt stems from doing a bad thing while shame is the feeling that you are a bad person.

MW: These emotions are pretty negative. Are you going to tell me they're useful too?

Dr. DD: Let's start with shame. A 'shaming culture' is one in which people who break the rules are controlled by being shamed. Fear of being shamed then keeps everyone in line. Our own culture uses shaming practices to some extent. However, shaming is potentially very harmful psychologically, because it strikes at the core of the person. If you internalize shaming messages, you end up feeling inherently bad, sinful, worthless or dirty. Serious psychological problems can be traced back to being shamed.

MW: Why is it that shame strikes at the core of the person?

Dr. DD: Because shame is acquired early in life, before we develop the logical capacity to analyze whether the messages we receive make sense. Children don't have the cognitive tools to defend themselves from shaming messages.

MW: What about guilt?

Dr. DD: Guilt is a much more useful emotion, because it targets specific actions, not the whole person. When you do things you shouldn't be doing (e.g., hurt others), or don't do the things you should be doing (e.g., procrastinate), it is a healthy reaction to feel guilty. Guilt gives you very useful information. If you pay attention to it, you will know what changes will lead you to becoming a better person. When your actions are no longer harmful, you won't feel guilty.

MW: So we should let guilt be our guide?

Dr. DD: Yes, at least to some extent. Guilt is the voice of our conscience that helps us distinguish between right and wrong. Never feeling guilty is a sign of psychopathology, which often leads to hurting others.

MW: What about people who feel guilty a lot?

Dr. DD: People who feel a lot of guilt likely experience a good deal of underlying shame. Alternatively, guilt-ridden people may have difficulties taking responsibility for their wrongdoings, and thus end up accumulating unresolved guilt over time.

MW: How does one deal with shame and guilt?

Dr. DD: Ideally, one needs to overcome shame and develop a healthy relationship with guilt.

MW: How is that done?

Dr. DD: The answer isn't simple, but a good place to start is to stop avoiding these feelings. We need to face guilt and shame to learn from these emotions. The problem of course is that guilt and shame don't feel good, and we have a natural tendency to avoid unpleasant feelings. This is true especially of people who have accumulated a lot of unresolved shame and guilt. So instead of acknowledging and overcoming their shame, some people might fall into chronic self-blame that can lead to depression. In extreme cases, people might feel bad no matter what they do. Alternatively, one might unjustly blame others, in order to deflect the feeling of guilt.

MW: So you are saying that in order to feel good about ourselves, we need to allow ourselves to feel bad from time to time?

Dr. DD: Taking responsibility for one's wrongdoings and working towards becoming a better person is one of the most self-empowering things one can do. So the idea is to free yourself from shame, make guilt your friend, and give yourself the opportunity to become the best human being you can be.

* DAVDA Psychology is a psychotherapy and personal coaching clinic. For an initial consultation call 253-2832 (253-DAVDA). Visit www.davda.ca for free SLEEP QUIZ with SLEEP TIPS or for more information. To find other Manitoba psychologists, visit www.mps.ca