

Shame and Guilt

Usually, a person feels guilt about something they have done, and shame for what they are. The feeling of shame can also be caused by something the person has done. Shame and guilt are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another.

Feelings of shame and guilt are often connected to the rules of a community. It's very important for a person to be part of a group and accepted. Communities have conventions and rules, and when a person breaks these, it may result in being excluded from the community. Feelings of shame and guilt have developed in human beings so that they would act according to these rules. The fear of being abandoned makes the feelings of shame and guilt powerful and hard for us human beings. In other people's company, one's own shame and guilt often come to the surface.

Shame and guilt can also be shared feelings. For example, a family, relatives, or a community may share common shame or guilt that is hidden and not talked about. In different cultures, there are different things that cause shame and guilt. A thing that is accepted in one culture may be forbidden in another culture. Common rules change, but slowly. Even if a rule has become obsolete, it may continue to exist in upbringing, religion, and communities, and it can cause experiences of shame.

What is shame?

Shame includes feelings of worthlessness, inability, and failure. A person may be ashamed of what the person is, what the person has done, or what has been done to the person. Shame comes from the idea "IF other persons knew, then what would they think of me". The feeling of shame can come to existence even if no one else knows about the matter. Criticising oneself can also cause the feeling of shame. The experience that causes shame is in contradiction with what kind of a person the person would want to be or experiences being. A person can be reminded of shame by many different things, such as odours, words, being touched, or the facial expressions of another person.

When we experience shame, changes occur in our bodies. We may blush, and our breathing changes. Often, our posture is hunched and our gaze is pointed downwards. It may be difficult to think, and one feels crushed or frozen. One may isolate oneself and avoid other people. Shame can also cause a defensive reaction in the person, where shame erupts as a feeling of anger, and one attacks oneself or others. A person doesn't want to seem vulnerable or weak in the eyes of others.

If a person has experienced shocking things – for example violence – there is often shame connected to the events, even if the person has done nothing wrong. If one has experienced

a lot of unsafety and had a lot of bad experiences, the feeling of shame can be continuous, and it may cover other feelings.

What is guilt?

A person feels guilt about things the person has done wrong, or about things the person experiences having done wrong. Guilt can be experienced, for example, as a sensation of pressure in the stomach, the chest, or the head, or as feeling sick and nauseous.

Guilt can sometimes be appropriate. If one has actually done wrong, it's good to try to make amends and apologise. It's also good to try to understand one's own actions, to accept them, and to try to learn from them, so that in the future, one no longer does wrong. You can think about what it was that you meant to do. Usually, people mean well, but things don't always go as we planned.

Sometimes a person has done wrong, but the person had no other option. The feeling of guilt can be unreasonably strong or excessive compared to the situation. In such a case, it would be good to consider who had the power in the situation. Whose fault was the situation really? What other options were there, or was it the only option? Could one really have done otherwise, or did one do wrong because one had to? Would you have acted in the same way if you had known what was going to happen? A person always makes decisions and choices only according to the knowledge at hand at that moment. Often, we feel guilt even if we have made the best possible choice or could not really have done anything in another way. Especially, if something bad happens to people that are close to us, we experience guilt, even though we have done nothing wrong.

What can be of help?

Shame and guilt can feel so powerful and difficult that instead of working through what has happened, one tries to forget about it. However, when one shares one's feelings in the presence of an understanding person, it often alleviates such feelings. If feelings of shame and guilt are not worked on, they often stay and bother the person, and affect the person's life. It may be hard to be in other people's company, and yet the company of other people and acceptance by them help overcoming shame and guilt.

Adding compassion towards oneself helps to overcome shame and guilt. One can practise this, for example, by thinking or writing the sentence "I accept myself as I am", "I accept my past the way that it is", or "I am not guilty". Excessive feelings of shame and guilt can be worked on by imagining a good friend in the same situation. If your friend felt like you do now, what would you like to say to your friend? What advice or consolation would you offer to your friend?