



Enriching Lives

OVERCOMING GUILT

Maintaining a sense of conscience is essential to being a healthy living person that maintains responsibility for one's actions and lives in accordance to one's values. A manner in which we experience and sustain a sense of conscience is by experiencing guilt. As with all aspects of people's lives, moderation and balance are critical. Any emotion that consumes one can wreak havoc on people's lives. Guilt is one of those primary emotions that can be very helpful when experienced and channeled appropriately. For those that have been enslaved by their unreasonable guilt, they can understand the poisonous effect it can have on one's life. The guilt can sit and simmer until it erodes an individual's sense of self. A memory involving guilt can be replayed in one's mind as a broken record that continuously repeats itself and only frustrates those listening. Guilt has to do with feeling bad about something one did that is in opposition to our values. This essential emotion drives us to engage in prosocial behavior. However, an overly punitive conscience that uses guilt as a weapon to control and defeat can be toxic to one's emotional and mental health.

For this reason, it is paramount that we understand the root of guilt and the type of guilt that is being experienced in order to effectively deal with the guilt. Guilt is an emotion that can weigh heavily on one's spirit and drain one of the joys of life. It can also influence the important choices people make. Given guilt's massive impact on who people are and what they do with their lives, it is imperative that people adequately address guilt in a fashion that will help rather than hinder their identities and how they evolve as human beings. Carrying guilt is detrimental to one's health. It keeps people frozen and stuck. Knowing where guilt comes from allows people to consciously deal with the guilt by making amends for something, processing the guilt or letting it go through forgiveness.

Guilt may manifest itself in several ways:

1. **Natural Guilt:** or remorse over something that one did or failed to do.
2. **Free-floating/Toxic Guilt:** The core feeling of not being a good person.
3. **Existential Guilt:** the uncomfortable feeling that is derived from the injustice that is observed in the world and one's indebted responsibilities to life in general.

Natural Guilt

A person experiences natural guilt when they feel guilty about a situation that is specific and recent. For instance, you said something hurtful to someone you care about out of anger, hurt or frustration. You comprehend that this type of guilt is natural because it is specific to an event and it is recent. Natural guilt is upsetting, particularly when a severe transgression has occurred. Despite the severe transgression, natural guilt is reparable. You have the option of making amends by asking forgiveness,

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paying your debt and making a commitment to changing your behavior. Once you make amends, your guilt should dissipate.

Natural guilt is serviceable. It functions as an internal alarm that assists you in identifying unethical behavior and proceeding in a manner that is consistent with one's beliefs. Natural guilt influences you in being a responsible person. Natural guilt prompts you to turn in wallet that you found. Psychologists believe that natural guilt arises from our ability to empathize. As one imagines a situation from another's perspective, it places one's response in a social context that sparks understanding, compassion and responsibility. Natural guilt allows us to connect socially with compassion to other's suffering. It removes us from our self-centeredness and reconnects us to our interdependence. Our concept of social justice is based on this premise.

Individuals that possess a healthy relationship to their personal guilt do not crucify themselves over guilty feelings. They are not overly punitive and do not perceive themselves as inadequate. Rather, people handle their guilty feelings by being proactive. They use the guilty feelings as a cue to change their behavior. For example, a person deals with their natural guilt about not going to class by making it to class. Or a person apologizes for hurting another person and making a sincere effort to not say what was hurtful. If guilt is derived from a situation that you cannot change, you learn to forgive yourself. For example, if you cannot make it on time for dinner every night with your family, you practice giving yourself a break.

Be cautious because natural guilt can also have a dark side. Natural guilt can turn into a secret weapon for social control. People may find themselves being manipulated by family, friends, coworkers, bosses and spiritual groups. Extreme punishment, manipulation and control are signs that natural guilt has become toxic and is no longer functional. As guilt becomes radical, people find themselves feeling unworthy or defective because the punishment has become excessive. This natural guilt then transforms itself to toxic guilt.

Toxic Guilt

Toxic guilt occurs when natural guilt lingers. It exhibits itself as tormenting feelings of global badness. It sends the message that you and your life are flawed. Such a free-floating guilt is the most difficult to address because it is not specific and comes from your deep subconscious. People are not consciously aware of this free-floating guilt that is non-specific and permeates their very being. This agonizing and inclusive experience makes it arduous to address because individuals are unsure of what they did wrong and how to fix it. If a person is cognizant of what they did and it seems irremediable, it may not seem viable to eradicate the guilt.

It is vital to address toxic guilt because of the unnecessary pain it causes. In fact, toxic pain compounds previous accumulated feelings of guilt which exacerbates current minor transgression making them greater than it really is which impacts people detrimentally through negative self-talk and feelings. Rather than experiencing a proportionate amount of guilt to the transgression, the person finds themselves feeling awful and disgusted with themselves for a minor event.

Sometimes individuals experience toxic guilt as an uninvited guest that moves in and never leaves; and in the meantime places a dent in our overall self-worth. The toxic guilt may latch on to someone as a leech which becomes a part of their personality. When toxic guilt forms such a relationship with a person, there is no need to have an external trigger for it to arise; rather it occasionally and spontaneously comes into one's conscious, causing people to feel defective and unworthy. For others, the toxic guilt can be activated by a mistake the person makes. A minor event can elicit the toxic guilt. Not answering the phone correctly at work, an argument with a lover or forgetting to do something you promised someone can cause it. As toxic guilt becomes excessive, the person reports feeling that they are walking on eggshells and especially cautious to not engage in a behavior that will expose their innate unworthiness.

Toxic guilt most often has its roots in early childhood. Mistakes that children make and were perceived as a big deal and reprimanded by parents, teachers or any authority figure in their lives can create the toxic guilt. The main characteristic of toxic guilt is that it is not related to what you did. Instead it is a pervasive feeling that remains within you regardless of what you do, which makes the minutest situation seem unforgiveable.

Existential Guilt

Existential guilt has to do with an awareness in which we understand that it is impossible to live on this earth without having a negative impact on others, whether it is the wild life that lost their home to build yours. Existential guilt comes from knowing that the resources we use are at the expense of others who go without those resources. The western part of the world especially is affected by existential guilt because we live lavishly in comparison to a large portion of the world. Living in the United States offers people a privileged life that the majority of the world can only dream about.

We all encompass debts to others as a result of living and being helped. When we do not pay those debts by giving back and making a contribution; we suffer from existential guilt. Sadly, modern society has trained individuals to have a consumerist and expendable attitude toward people, material things and spirituality. This sense of entitlement has contributed to the lack of intact families and communities. People have lost touch with the web of life in which we are all connected. If toxic guilt and existential guilt cross paths, individuals may believe they are responsible for everyone's suffering.

Overcoming Guilt

Unhealthy guilt may immobilize us and make us prisoner to our mental anguish. There are many ways that we can cope with distressing guilt. It is imperative that we identify which type of guilt we are experiencing. If we are experiencing natural guilt, we can remediate the situation by paying a debt, changing our behavior and asking for forgiveness. If the guilt we are enduring is toxic or existential, practice the following:

- First it is important to acknowledge that while we are flawed we still encompass an essential goodness.
- Stay optimistic

- Think positively
- Practice gratitude
- In addition, it is important to give as we take. Donating our time, things and money is a manner in which we can give back.
- We should practice compassion toward ourselves and others by caring for each other, the environment and our spiritual essence.
- Ask for forgiveness of yourself

As we make contributions to others and look beyond ourselves we understand that our happiness and suffering is interconnected. Knowing this we no longer need to carry our baggage of guilt.

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