



## Overcoming Guilt and Shame

### Guilt

People can feel **guilty** about things they have done. Feeling guilty is not always a bad feeling. If you're feeling guilty, the guilt usually signals that you've done something that may not agree with your personal morals or values, or that someone else has been hurt. The good news is that the guilt can help you stay connected to your "moral compass," to other people, and to your spirituality. And, when people feel guilty, they are less likely to repeat doing the things that got them to feel guilty in the first place. Their guilt keeps them in line with their values and with what matters to them in life.



In times of war, service members sometimes feel guilty about things that they do or fail to do. Sometimes in the war zone, the requirements of war or of survival conflict with personal ethics. There may not have been a better choice in a particular situation, but service members may feel guilty anyway.

Sometimes service members say that they have done things that just feel "wrong" to them. Even if they were acting under orders, there is guilt about hurting others, and this sometimes creates the sense of not being at peace with themselves or their higher power.



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**Survivor guilt** is one example of guilt about something that could not be helped. It is common for service members to feel guilty that they survived when their buddies did not, even if, realistically, there was nothing they could have done to prevent those losses. They may not understand why someone else died and they did not—they may worry about whether people deserve to die, whether there is a God protecting them, and they may think about how unfair life is.

These common reactions to a traumatic event can cause a lot of distress. Talking to a chaplain, spiritual counselor, or therapist can help individuals gain some clarity as to where responsibilities begin and end, and how to make amends for things for which there was clear responsibility.



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### Shame

People feel guilty about their behavior; but people feel **shame** about **who they are**. When people feel ashamed, instead of focusing on the action, the tendency is to generalize and make a statement about what that action says **about them**. So, instead of feeling guilty about killing people in combat, a service member might think, "I'm a killer. I'm a terrible person because I have killed." This is an example of taking a behavior (killing) and creating a whole identity that now becomes, "terrible person."



All the things that the service member has done that showed a value for life no longer seem to count. Instead, the one action has reduced the individual to this one identity. When people are ashamed, they may think other people will react to them in certain ways. Thinking something like, "If they knew what I did, they would reject me" may indicate feelings of shame. Shame can be linked to other feelings too, like feeling weak, worthless, exposed, or humiliated.<sup>1</sup>

Service members who believe in God or a higher power may also feel ashamed, or unworthy, of continuing to seek a relationship with their higher power or with God. Those who are agnostic or atheist may also feel generally bad or unworthy of being alive. These thoughts can be very painful, and can lead service members to isolate from others or to treat themselves badly. It is important to remember that shame is usually a normal, but **mistaken**, reaction to feelings of guilt. Service members can break through shame by talking to someone about the things that they want to hide or ignore. This way, they can learn that their behaviors don't really make them bad to the core, and that they can do things to make amends for any mistakes they made.

Service members may have done things during deployment that leave them feeling as if they can't be forgiven. They may feel distant from God or from a higher power as well as disconnected from others. As a result, they may try to forget their war experiences. One VA psychiatrist has said, "Many service members may feel trapped by the fear of facing the meaning of their actions. They might attempt to forget, avoid, run, or outlive these memories. This leads to a feeling of bad faith and of breaking covenant with others, with God and also with one's own natures. Often, however, when they face these fears as adults, they realize they can deal with these fears as adults..."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Miller, M. "Shame and Psychotherapy" Retrieved from [http://www.columbiapsych.com/shame\\_miller.html](http://www.columbiapsych.com/shame_miller.html) on 17 July 07.

<sup>2</sup> D Dewey, L. "War and redemption: Treatment and Recovery in Combat-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," Burlington, VT: FAshgate Publishing Company, 2004.



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Here are some steps that can help to overcome feelings of guilt and shame:

- **Consider the seriousness of the act.** Often guilt and shame mean that personal morals and values were violated. Think about these questions:
  - ◇ Do other people think this is as serious as I do?
  - ◇ How serious would I think this was if my best friend did the same thing?
  - ◇ How serious will this seem one month from now? One year? Ten years? How serious would I think this is if someone did the same thing to me?
  - ◇ Did I know ahead of time how serious this was?
  - ◇ Did I know ahead of time the meaning or consequences of my actions?
  - ◇ Can the damage be repaired? How long will that take?
  - ◇ Was there something more serious I considered but didn't do?
- **Evaluate your personal responsibility.** Sometimes people are required to do things and are not given a choice. Was this true for you?
  - ◇ How much of the thing that you feel guilty about was your personal responsibility? To answer this you might try listing (or thinking about) all the people and pieces of a situation that added to this event. Put yourself last. Assign percentages to each person.
  - ◇ Did you want or intend for this to happen? Was this what you signed up for?
- **Break the silence.** Often when people feel guilty about something they've done or ashamed about who they are they prefer to keep quiet about it. People are usually afraid to talk to others because they're embarrassed or they think it might lead to rejection or criticism. It may help to talk to a trusted friend or counselor. Often, people react differently than expected; a friend or counselor might be able to help.



**Talk to someone trusted and allow enough time to say everything and receive feedback.**



### Overcoming Guilt and Shame

- **Forgiveness.** This may include learning how to forgive yourself and others, and might also include receiving forgiveness from God, or a higher power, for what you have done. Part of asking for forgiveness from a higher power could also involve repentance and a commitment to act differently in the future. Forgiving yourself includes changing thinking from, “I am an awful person because of this” to, “I did this based on what I knew at the time; I might have made a mistake but that does not define who I am.” Self-forgiveness means recognizing mistakes and accepting shortcomings.



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- **Making amends.** This can be thought of as the “action” part of forgiveness. It is important to make amends, if possible, for harming another person, if you were in fact responsible for that harm. This begins with recognizing and accepting appropriate responsibility for the hurtful act, and having courage to face the person and ask for forgiveness (even if this needs to be done in your imagination). It is also important to decide what to do in the future to repair the hurt and to avoid similar situations. Making amends may be part of a spiritual or religious practice, too, and is something that some people talk about with spiritual leaders and counselors.