

## UNBURDENING GUILT

No one is exempted from it. Not unless you are a psychopath that cannot tell right from wrong. Or you have a seared conscience and have neither compassion nor empathy for others. If you are neither of these, you will experience this. We are talking about 'guilt'.

Guilt is often connected to a sense of wrongdoing. We sense guilt after we have done something we felt we should not have or did not do what we felt we should have. Then there is guilt connected with a state of being, for eg., one who survives a car accident where fellow passengers die may suffer 'survivor's guilt'. (I should not be the one alive..) Or one born disabled may suffer guilt for how this has affected his family.

Only those who have an inner sense of right and wrong can feel guilt. The boy who breaks his neighbour's window-pane feels guilty because he knows it is wrong. He should have played in the field. The boy's action has violated his value of respect for others. It also affected his need to be a good neighbour. Each of us holds values we consider important. We have needs we want met. When what we did or did not do cause us to fail to live up to those values or meet our needs, we sense 'misalignment'. If the boy does not own up, he further



violates his value of integrity and his need for healthy connection.

Guilt like all God-given emotions is good and useful. The purpose of guilt is to alert us to this misalignment so that we can take appropriate actions to set things right. Living with the 'misalignment' affects our well-being, our spirit, soul and body. But instead of correcting the misalignment, we often choose the easy way out. We get into a bigger mess. Rather than owning up, the child blames his friend for throwing the ball at him causing him to kick it wildly, though they were actually in a playful game.

*Suppressed* guilt leads to a whole host of toxic emotions such as blame, anger directed at self and others, self-accusatory shaming and unforgiveness

of self. While *suppressed* guilt is about not openly admitting to one's wrong though one is aware of the sense of guilt one carries, *repressed* guilt is about not being aware that guilt is present in the subconscious. Although unaware of *repressed* guilt, one experiences all the toxic emotions that come with guilt.

When we get called up to see our child's teacher for his/her misbehaviour, we may become angry with our child and spouse. Deep down in us, we are actually burdened by guilt over what we perceive as our 'failed parenting'. Yet we are not consciously aware of it. The guilt is repressed.

We resort to consciously suppressing our guilt, or allowing repressed guilt to sub-consciously and subtly have free rein because of these possible reasons: - We are clueless about the misalignment we experience, let alone attend to it. We lack courage and honesty to assume responsibility for our wrongdoing or bring about the appropriate action.

One other reason is self-deception. We deceive ourselves into thinking that shouldering guilt is an admission of wrong. We go on to use guilt as a form of self-punishment. 'Since I have committed this wrong, I deserve to carry guilt. I deserve to be punished.'

## Connect-Point

Guilt can be complex and messy. Besides suppressed and repressed guilt mentioned, there is also false or toxic guilt that we often become victim of. Our guilt issues are often more complex than the example of breaking the window pane. More often than not, they come as an entangled mess. Full-time working parents, for instance, are often weighed down by messy guilt over not spending enough time with their children. This guilt is compounded by the issue of care for their elderly parents. Mixed in this mess are parts where we should assume responsibility for (eg. spending too much time on Facebook) other parts we should not (eg. when our children fall short of our or others' expectations of them despite our best parenting efforts.) This other part is toxic or false guilt. Yet because we do not attend to the guilt situations we are in, we tend to shoulder more guilt than we should. The sense of guilt can become overwhelming, causing the situations to spiral into disproportionate frustration and distress.

Toxic guilt mess us up without being found out mainly because of unhealthy false beliefs and irrational expectations we impose on ourselves. For eg., we think we are responsible for other's happiness. So we feel inappropriately guilty when our parents express unhappiness even if it is through no fault of ours. We may hold beliefs that we need to be accepted, approved or loved by everyone. So we feel guilty when we are not available to help, even if we have good reasons for our unavailability. Or we believe we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent and achieving in all possible aspects of life. That we must have perfect control over everything. Since we are bound to slip up, we set ourselves up to feeling undue guilt.

When we fail to live up to these self-imposed expectations and beliefs, misalignment is created. Guilt follows, In this case, toxic or false guilt get mixed into healthy guilt. Unless we attend to the mess, we will not know where to draw the line. We need to work with someone who can recognise false beliefs and unhealthy thoughts to help us tease out the toxic guilt that come with them.

At other times, the untangling process may clarify for us the priority we place in our values and needs, (eg. our guilt of choosing to attend night classes over being home with the family may have



resulted from this) which we may otherwise not be aware of. Invariably, when untangling is done, clarity surfaces. With clarity, we can begin to work on the healthy guilt issues constructively.

This process often involves identifying and connecting with our feelings and bringing our thoughts and experiences into our consciousness. Hence it is best done with someone neutral and objective, a confidante or a counsellor.

The sense of guilt we carry if not processed, can be a gnawing feeling that refuses to go away. Such guilt can weigh us down. It comes with constant self-chiding, self-condemnation, remorse, shame and regret.

Guilt should and can be unburdened. It involves a choice. Do we take the easy way out of ignoring the misalignment or decide to attend to it? Attending to it means moving away from our tendency to protect ourselves from confronting squarely our mistakes or our beliefs. It requires us to embrace new beliefs that there is no shame in being wrong, only in failing to correct our mistakes. That it is human to err. It challenges us to be honest to own up, to have courage to show up. And add to courage and honesty, a big dose of self-compassion and self-forgiveness.

No one needs to be held hostage by guilt. What we do not confront or admit to will overpower and enslave us. Are you experiencing a sense of misalignment in your life? Attend to it. Let it bring you greater clarity about yourself and the situation you are in. Let guilt work for you.

### Contact Us

For more information on Bethesda CARE Centre's Counselling Service, please visit <http://www.bcure.org.sg>

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