

Guilt & Shame

by Rusty B

Somewhere along on this path of recovery I have walked now for many years, I learned how to deal with shame and guilt. I have said many times that I have not felt guilt or shame, and often I am asked, "how do you do this?" To clarify, I should say I have learned how to NOT use shame or guilt to feed self-destructive behavior. First, it takes years of practice, but mostly it comes from understanding what guilt and shame are, especially that they are "self imposed emotions" – we choose to feel them. Defining them simply I see guilt as the feeling behind "I made a mistake," and shame as the feeling behind "I am a mistake."

Just for today, I choose to believe that I am a creation of my Higher Power, and my HP does not make mistakes. So, for me to feel shame, to feel that I am a mistake, is to dishonor my HP. I am not a mistake, I am a work in process, regardless of who tells me that I am bad / no good / useless / etc. I am right where my HP wants me to be, and you are right where your HP wants you to be. If I choose to feel shame, I am actually using shame to justify turning away from my HP, and if I try to shame you, then I am actually trying to turn you away from your HP. You can now see why I have not used shame since I got clean.

Not using guilt is a little harder to unravel (as the feeling behind "I made a mistake") because making mistakes is a natural, normal part of being human. In fact, we humans don't learn *unless* we make mistakes. We can learn in other ways, but the lion's share of learning is by getting it wrong. Guilt helps us learn because it encourages us to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

If you watch a child in elementary school learning her or his multiplication tables, s/he does two things – repetition and getting it wrong. S/he will work out each answer, get it wrong at times, then do it again until s/he gets it right. Well, that's how we as adults learn too – by getting it wrong, feeling guilt, and because we dislike feeling this way, we learn not to make the same mistake. The problem is that when I beat myself up when I get it wrong, whatever the "it" is, then I am using guilt as an excuse to hurt myself and to keep from learning at all.

I had to realize that guilt was and is part of the normal human experience, and to let the feeling of guilt be to my advantage. Recognizing what guilt is, why it's here, and what's causing it means that I don't have to use this normal, natural feeling as an excuse for me to have a bad day, or to cause me to feel negatively toward myself.

My addiction wants me to feel bad about myself, so I will go use drugs. It's a constant battle between the recovering me and the addicted me. If I give in, then the dark side wins. If I listen to my own internal self-talk that still wants me to use, it can convince me that the mistake I just made is so bad that I will never learn how to live as a normal

human being. This is nothing more than my addiction trying to convince me that I am the mistake.

Not only does my addiction want me to use guilt in a negative way, as a reason to avoid having to learn anything, it wants me to feel so much guilt that it turns into shame, so that I will believe I am incapable of growing at all. When I impose these emotions upon myself, when I choose to use them negatively, I lose the normal natural process of learning from my mistakes and growing as a person.

This is just one of the ways addicts “make mountains out of molehills.”