

The Anatomy of Guilt -Mike Speakman, LISAC

Guilt is a natural feeling that comes to you when you feel you have done something wrong. For instance, most people feel guilty about lying to a friend for their own convenience. If, in your model of the world, lying is against your moral code, then you will feel guilt.

Guilt can be compared to a pain that urges you to take some remedial action. For example, let's say you admit to a friend that you lied to him. The remedial action is that you sincerely say you're sorry, and then ask for his forgiveness. This is how you get rid of the pain of guilt: *you take a right action that makes up for your wrong action.*

Surprisingly, guilt isn't all bad. With **true guilt**, which is also called healthy guilt or real guilt, you can see the wisdom of the emotion. For example, let's say you knew that you had a bad tire and neglected to have the tire repaired. That tire blew, and you had an accident. At that point, you know that the accident was your fault, and you decide to never, ever ignore a bad tire again.

You have learned from the experience. Now you can keep what you've learned and move on, shedding the guilt — you don't need to feel bad about the situation anymore, because *you have learned the lesson.* True guilt helps you know when you've done something wrong and provides pain to motivate you to do what's right. And that's the key point: *once you do what is right, the pain goes away.*

What if you have guilt that does not go away? Either:

- You have some amends to make with people to get rid of your true guilt
- You haven't learned the lesson available to you through your experience
- You're experiencing the all-too-common **false guilt.**

False guilt is just as painful as true guilt, but trickier to get rid of. True guilt can be released by making amends. False guilt, however, is not based on something bad you did knowingly, so you can't make amends. Once again, "knowingly" is the operative word here. Fortunately, you can address this issue through counseling.

Some years ago, I had a personal opportunity to suffer false guilt. I enjoyed, on occasion, taking my son out to dinner to enjoy a good steak. We enjoyed the chance to get together and have a good dinner. About that time, my son began experiencing pain in his midsection. Through a process of elimination, the doctors determined that both of his kidneys were failing. The doctors never found the cause, but he eventually needed and received a kidney transplant. I knew that eating protein was hard on kidneys and I could have felt guilty after enjoying numerous, meat-heavy meals with my son, but we had no way of knowing at the time that it could make his health problems worse. Because I was familiar with the concept of false guilt, I knew better than to feel guilty about a problem I had known nothing about.

How does this apply to addiction? Let's say you gave your addicted son some money and didn't know he was going to buy drugs or alcohol with it. You should not feel guilty for giving him the money, because you didn't *know* he was going to use it to buy drugs or alcohol.

This could become false guilt, however, if maybe days, weeks or years later you learn that giving him money was not the best way to help your son. Then, upon hearing this new information, you go back in time in your mind and pretend that you knew then what you know now and feel guilty for enabling your son to become an addict even though you had no idea what you were doing.

Do you see the mind trick here that we sometimes play on ourselves? I believe false guilt is one the most common sources of emotional pain because it is so easy to accept when you are operating in the vacuum of private shame. Since you can't go back in time and undo the error you made back then, you are stuck with false guilt until you confront it. You can't get rid of false guilt by making amends, because you didn't do anything wrong.

Counseling helps you sort out your false guilt from your true guilt, making this a good topic of discussion between you and your counselor. When all of your true guilt is clear in your mind, you have a roadmap for actions to take to get rid of *all* of your guilt.

What if you got rid of your false guilt first, then dealt with your true guilt? This approach makes more sense, because, for many people, false guilt can be so vast and expansive that it can hide true guilt — because it all mixes together in our minds — making it difficult to deal with either kind. Just having the intellectual knowledge that false guilt is false does not get rid of it.

You must take some kind of action demonstrating your commitment to stop carrying it around. Theoretically, it should be much easier to get rid of false guilt because no new action, such as making amends and asking for forgiveness from those you've harmed, is required. Our complex human minds, however, can make getting rid of false guilt harder than getting rid of true guilt.

False guilt can be released by talking with someone you trust, like a counselor, who helps you sort through your thinking, identify false guilt, and release it. Ritual or ceremony can also be very helpful here. You can pursue these approaches with your counselor, your sponsor, a spiritual advisor, on your own, with a spouse or friend, or any combination thereof.

Also, many people have used prayer to release their false guilt from them, because all it requires is their willingness to let it go. No new action is required, but a change of thinking is, a change based on having greater understanding of a complex problem.

If you are letting your false guilt go through the very personal method of prayer, it might be wise to ask God to only take half of your guilt first. That's because removing all of your false guilt too soon can be a big shock. It's amazing how used to something we can become because of habit and time.

You can get used to an excessive amount of emotional suffering before you take action. Having so much guilt removed so quickly can actually feel dismaying and confusing because you can become so accustomed to negative feelings such as guilt that you have an unconscious desire to hang on to them.

Why would you hang onto them? These negative feelings are what is known to you, and the known is almost always easier to accept than the unknown, even if what is known is truly awful. The security that comes from familiarity — even familiar pain — can be more acceptable than the scary, unknown. In some cases, perhaps forgiving yourself for carrying around so much of this false guilt for so long might be in order.

Be aware, too, that when you release all of your false guilt, your true guilt will come into clear view. This might be unsettling initially, but now that you can see it clearly, you'll be able to see and take the steps you need to shed your true guilt as well. Stop for a moment and think: how would it feel for you to be eventually guilt-free?

A good counselor can help you sort through this. No human being can deal with his or her emotions alone. This is the lesson I learned at age thirty-six when I “hit bottom” and attempted suicide. That attempt scared me enough to sincerely ask for help and listen to a good counselor who began to help me understand my emotions and my emotional pain. As it turned out, guilt was a large part of that pain. A counselor is also a tremendous help if it's unclear to you whether your guilt is justified or not. I believe this is impossible to do alone. And remember, now you are no longer alone.

Working on your guilt issues, especially if they are severe and intense, is a very important step as you help your addicted child. Working on your guilt about your son's or daughter's addiction does not mean that you will lose your motivation for helping your loved one. It does, however, raise the issue of how much of your “help” is motivated by your guilt.

Counseling and support groups can assist you with this common issue because they help you see more clearly when your addicted loved one tries to use guilt to manipulate you.