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Dealing with Guilt

tip: remember to use self-compassion when working through all of these exercises!

When we feel guilty, it's our way of telling ourselves that we have done something wrong and there is some damage that we must repair. In order to do so, we must first understand what we have done wrong, work to repair it and then forgive ourselves. As such, there are three sections to this document: accountability (seeing our role in a situation), atonement (righting the wrong we caused) and acceptance (reducing guilt and moving forward).

For some forms of guilt, such as survivors guilt, we may not have played any role in causing the harm. Many people still find it beneficial to work through the accountability and atonement sections, but you are welcome to skip to the acceptance section if you can say with conviction that you had no role in causing the harm, yet you still feel guilt.

Accountability

Guilt can be a painful and difficult emotion to process, but taking the time to go through why we are guilty and how we played a role in a situation is the first step to getting past the guilt. Unless you can realistically understand your role in an event, you will not be able to move past it.

Try the following to understand your role in harming (emotionally, spiritually, physically, etc) another person:

1. Describe your actions (or inaction!) that lead to the other person feeling harmed.
2. Read through step 1 and remove any excuses or qualifiers
 - Don't say "she said I hurt her" instead, try saying "I hurt her".
 - Don't make excuses such as "he's done the same to me"
3. Summarize the harm the other persons went through. Include physical, emotional and spiritual harm they may have experienced due to your action/inaction.
 - Things to consider: self-esteem, financial hardship, physical pain, embarrassment, resentment, etc
4. Go through step 3, trying to make it as realistic as possible. Try not to give yourself a pass here (such as avoiding some of the harm you caused) but also do not beat yourself up unfairly. Keep in mind that people typically go too hard on themselves rather than too easy.

One way to make sure you are being realistic is to imagine that you are writing a script in which someone is going to act out how you acted. Would your description have the person under-performing, therefore causing less harm, or would your script have the person over-performing, therefore causing more harm than you caused?

5. Take a moment to consider the extenuating circumstances that may have caused the event to unfold as it did.

A few questions that may help you with this category include:

- Did you intend for the situation to unfold as it did?
 - If you did not intend for the situation to unfold as it did, what were your original intentions? Why did those not occur?
 - If you did intend for the situation to unfold as it did, why? What were your reasons for wanting to cause harm?
 - Were you in complete control of the situation or were there other factors that influenced the situation?
 - How were you, emotionally, physically, spiritually, at the time of the event? Tired? Burn out? Grieving? Angry?
6. Going through this process, do you now have a good sense of your role in the situation? Have you been realistic about what you can and cannot be accountable for? For example, some people might say “I am too blame for their feelings because I did not give my 100% at all times”. Have you looked at whether it’s truly realistic to give your 100% at all times? Re-read your steps 1-5 and see if you need to provide yourself with more self-compassion at any point on this list.

Atonement

Now that you have taken the time to truly understand your role in causing another person harm, it’s time to work to righting the wrong. Try to avoid “should” thinking at this stage (I “should” do this to repair the damage). Rather, than “should’s”, which usually come from others, consider looking within to understand how *you* would like to atone for your actions. There is no right or wrong way to atone, so long as it helps *you* move past the incident and leads you to self-forgiveness.

Here are some steps to guide you through this process:

1. Create a list of the changes you would need to make in order decrease the chance of repeating the same action/inaction that caused the person harm. Recognize that there may be some high level changes that you need to make, and have compassion for the time it may take to create these changes.

Consider the following areas:

- Behaviours: do you have any behaviours that need to change? More sleep? Less alcohol use? More time devoted to pausing and taking a few deep breaths?
- Lifestyle: Are you so busy you often harm other (maybe through your absence)? Have you created a lifestyle that neglects your own needs, resulting in you harming others?

- Thinking: does your thinking style cause harm? Do you always blame others and think in a negative way?
2. Now that we've reduced the likelihood of causing harm again, it's time to see what we can do to atone for the harm we have already caused. Go to step 4 of the accountability exercise, and look to see what harm you caused. Now, write the opposite of that harm, where possible. For some harms, there are no direct opposites, but there are still variations that we can do. Here are a few examples to help you understand :

Harm	Reparation
Made person feel rejected	Make them feel connected
Caused them financial loss	Help them financially
Made them mad	Make them happy
Broke their arm (therefore causing pain)	Alleviate another pain they have

Make sure that whatever you write for a reparation is significant enough that it would help you reduce the guilt for what you have done. Remember to be realistic as to your role in creating the harm in the first place. If you are being unrealistic about your role in the process, there is no reparation that will be enough to reduce your guilt. If this is you, go back to the accountability exercise and review what you have written there.

3. Create a way to celebrate the fact that you have atoned for the harm you have caused. You need a way to signal to your guilt that you have worked through it and that it is free to leave you now. Be original here! Again, there is no right or wrong, just whatever works for you! Here are a couple ideas if you are struggling to come up with someone that feels right for you:
- Remove a photo of the person you have harmed from a photo album. When you have completed the task, put the photo back in and literally close the book on your guilt
 - Make dinner or take the person you harmed out for dinner to celebrate that you are guilt free with that person
 - Draw, paint, sculpt something that represents this event to you

Acceptance

Now that you have understood your role in causing harm to another and you have atoned for this harm, it's time to accept what happened and forgive yourself. For those of you who may not have caused actual harm but still feel guilty (such as with survivors guilt), it's important to recognize that it may actually be harder for you to accept

and forgive yourself for this guilt as there may be no atonement that you can do. This is normal; try using self-compassion as much as possible and be gentle with yourself through this process.

Here are some steps to help you move towards acceptance and self-forgiveness. These steps are in no particular order and can be done however you like. Always feel free to modify or change the steps to what makes you feel safe and comfortable.

1. When guilt comes up (and it surely will, this is normal!) remind yourself that you have done what you can to atone for your action/inaction. Take a deep breath and tell yourself that you tried your best to atone for what you have done and that is all that can be asked of you.
2. Share your feelings of guilt with someone safe. Our feelings of guilt/shame live in the dark and die in the dark. What that means is that by sharing them with another, we learn that we are not the only one who makes mistakes and we can begin to forgive ourselves faster. I urge you to find someone safe to share these feelings with; telling them to someone judgmental or someone who struggles with empathy may make you feel worse.
3. Consider all the reasons you need to move to a place of acceptance and forgive yourself for your actions/inactions. What would be the benefit of doing this? How would it help you? Those around you? Think big! Here are a couple examples to help guide your thinking:
 - Unless I forgive myself for making this mistake, I will be unable to move forward and continue helping.
 - If I blame myself for my wife's passing and do not begin to live again, it will be like my children lost both parents.
 - So long as I continue to have guilt for my son breaking his arm, I will stop him from enjoying many activities he loves.
 - If I forgive myself for not being there for my daughter, I will allow myself to recognize what I can do and start doing it now.
4. One way to accept and forgive is to understand that others have gone through the same/similar events and feelings as us and have moved through them to come out on the other side.
Take some time to see if you can find someone who has lived through a similar situation as you (try support groups or the internet); if you can speak with them directly, excellent! If not, see if you can read about their experiences and where they are at now.
Afterwards, consider asking yourself the following questions:
 - Does what they have to say resonate with you in any way?
 - Do you feel any connection to their emotions and journey?

- Does their journey to acceptance and forgiveness provide any clues as to how you may be able to move forward on your own journey?
- How could you apply their situation and feelings to your own?

Remember that when it comes to acceptance and self-forgiveness, this can be a big process! It is not something that happens over-night. Be gentle with yourself through the time it takes to arrive at self-forgiveness and acceptance, but know that it will come!