

Guidebook | Guilt & Shame

Guilt and shame are natural responses to having done something that violates your code of ethics, or from a sense of not having done something better or different.

In combat and emergency response, it can come from many scenarios:

- A decision that cost a brother or sister's life
- Failure to have been able to save someone
- Not having been in the right place at the right time
- Killing an innocent or being helpless to prevent suffering/death
- Being the cause of death and destruction
- Not being present when a brother died
- Feeling that you let others down
- Surviving when others didn't
- Getting better post-trauma when others died or won't get better

Guilt and shame are crushing injuries that can be as crippling as physical injuries. They call into question your self worth, your right to be here, and serve as a way to punish you over and over.

Guilt and shame create a sense of isolation and separate us out from the tribe. We feel as if we don't belong, and it's this sense of needing to be accepted and to belong again that our hearts crave.

There are two types of guilt/shame responses:

1) You feel responsible for something that was not actually in your control. You made the best decision you could in the moment and the situation ended badly. Or circumstances were beyond your control. You hold yourself responsible for something that was not actually your responsibility or fault. Your sense of guilt/shame feels appropriate to you, but to others it's obvious that it was not your fault.

2) You feel responsible for something that you did have control over. When you are actually responsible for the actions that caused death or suffering, feeling guilt and shame feels right. You believe you deserve to be punished and the language you use to talk to yourself will be punishing and severely lacking in compassion.

You may punish yourself with drugs or alcohol, disallow yourself to do or have anything that is "good", push people away because you don't feel you deserve love, and set yourself up to fail over and over. Sometimes, it doesn't show up in your life, but shows up in a belief that you don't deserve to heal or move on with your life. Withholding good, joy, healing, success from yourself are attempts to live out what feels like just punishment to you.

Guilt and shame are powerful feelings that quickly become "truth" and "facts" to you.

So, what do you do?

1) **Confide in someone who holds you in compassion and acceptance.** What you keep inside only grows stronger; when you express it, it loses power. This is a tough call to make because you naturally feel that you will be rejected and judged and shamed by anyone who knows what you did. A counselor, priest, pastor, deeply caring friend, and brother or sister can be wise choices.

2) **Don't assume that your brothers would hate you if they knew.** I've talked with combat vets who carry deep shame and are certain that if their brothers knew, they'd be rejected/hated. Rarely, is that true. Have more faith in their love for you.

3) **Get outside perspective.** You run the story through your mind so many times that it gets set in stone. You lose perspective because the emotions are so strong. I've had other combat vets review the story details for vets carrying guilt/shame around an event and provide perspective on the situation. It can help to hear perspective from others who were there or have been in similar situations.

4) **Recognize that there is a need for redemption.** The human heart has a need for redemption and this doesn't have to come in the form of religious practice. The best redemption is to give life back to life, especially when you are responsible for having caused death or harm. Help others, create good, bring beauty to others. This isn't about your worth, this is about you taking action that gives back what was taken.

5) **Choose to have compassion for your Self.** This is really hard to do when you feel that you deserve punishment, but you need to step back and look at yourself and the situation with the same amount of compassion you'd have for a brother or your child.

6) **Realize that good can come from bad. And good can come from you.** You cannot undo what was done, but you can start right now to live a life with a purpose to do good.

You are tied to the souls of those who died because of your decisions. Their spirits are still alive. Talk to them. They are at peace in the Spirit world, and they wish you peace as well. Make their lives count by being an agent of good for the rest of this lifetime.

What about when you just can't forgive yourself?

What is forgiveness? Many people equate forgiveness with condoning what was done as okay. Or minimizing it. Too often people forgive others as a way to avoid having to deal with the real pain and harm, especially if they're afraid of losing the relationship or of being alone.

Real forgiveness acknowledges all the pain and harm and offers acceptance and belonging as a way to move forward.

Forgiveness does not always mean re-establishing relationship with people though.

There are some things that you will never forgive yourself for. That's just the sign of a good heart. But you do have to make a choice as to how you will live your life.

Redemption through doing good for others is often the only way to do so.

Confession and seeking God's forgiveness can also be powerful ways to manage guilt and shame.

Because guilt and shame are so pervasive, it can also help to remember that you belong among warriors. You are not an outcast or rejected among your brothers and sisters. You belong with us.

Questions to ponder:

- What feeling am I avoiding because it's easier to blame myself than to feel it? (grief, helplessness, vulnerability, rage, brokenness...)
- If a brother had experienced the situation as I have, what would I tell him?
- What does my guilt and shame actually do for anybody?
- What if everyone involved (alive or dead) has already forgiven me, and I'm the only one who hasn't?
- What am I holding onto that isn't mine to hold onto?
- What belief would I need to change in order to understand that no matter what I believe, I am loved and accepted among humanity?
- What would it mean to my heart to let go of the guilt and shame?

Self-punishment does not change the past.

Taking action to do good can change the future.