

GUILT VERSUS SHAME



GUILT VERSUS SHAME: RECOGNITION FOR RESOLUTION

GOALS

1. To establish the definition, theory, and difference between guilt and shame.
2. To increase the recognition of personal pain related to guilt and shame.
3. To recognize authors of literary works and a psychological developmental theory related to guilt and shame.
4. To promote the nursing process and developmental theory as it relates to the resolution of guilt and shame.

KEYWORDS FOR APPLICATION

1. Guilt
2. Shame
3. Shakespeare
4. Tim O'Brien
5. Eric Erickson
6. Mindful Breathing

It can be a confusing world. We often wonder why we feel the way we do! Sometimes we feel guilty, ashamed, or doubt something that feels out of line with what our rational mind is telling us. The questions are, "Why did I do that?" or "Why did I say that!" You are not alone in your feelings and why you respond as you do. The feelings are real and can be stifling for *anybody*. Their origin for such feelings is most often guilt or shame.

In general, guilt and shame are responsible for having wronged someone—and that someone might be yourself! However, suppose your job expects listening to others and empathizing with others using your rhetoric and selected behavior. In that case, it is time, as a nursing administrator, to better understand why all of us, at times, do and say things that are best unsaid or not done.

To better appreciate the feelings of guilt and shame means that the general ability and desire to understand ourselves and others must occur. We must try to understand the behavior of ourselves and others *better*. That is why we are professionals—we strive to know the meaning behind all things related to employees' behaviors and concerns. It is not enough to perform as an assigned/hired nursing administrator or leader. Above all, nursing administrators should know how to help others toward more satisfying and responsible future professional behaviors.

**It is important to know WHAT TO DO as a nursing administrator or leader.
The sense of knowing WHAT TO DO is GOOD—to UNDERSTAND WHY YOU DO (OR SHOULD DO) IS**

DEVINE!

(So, let us get started)

GUILT

The word “guilt” is used as a noun or verb. The word “guilt” can identify places, people, and things. As an implied offense or crime, we experience responsibility for wrongs or inadequacies. These feelings are difficult to control, and the emotions can cause a sense of overwhelming sorrow. The worrying can be related to real or imaged guilt.

A “Guilt Complex” involves a feeling of inadequacies that are difficult for the person to control.

An “Unresolved Guilt” involves continually bringing into personal or other’s focus past mistakes causing guilt. As a result, it interferes with daily life and the ability to cope with the demands of living a productive life.

We know others about their offensive and illegal behaviors/actions or being “guilted” into doing something.

The Physical Effects/Signs of Guilt:

Insomnia
Stomach Pain
Headache
Crying
Muscle Tension
Anxiety
Fear
Sleeplessness
Depression

The Psychological Effects/Signs of Guilt:

Focusing on the behavior of others or other “things.”

The Variations of Guilt Related to Gender and Age:

Women show effects of guilt more than men
Adolescents are more affected by guilt than adults

Shakespearian Classic Examples of Guilt: (Literary Efforts to Present the Sharp Pangs of Guilt):

Guilt was the theme used in two plays – Macbeth and Hamlet. Shakespeare, the playwright, presents guilt as a destabilizing force that makes people desperate and powerless. The destabilizing forces of guilt and shame show the possible devastating consequences of emotional strain resulting from these destabilizing forces.

Macbeth:

In the story of Macbeth, guilt is emphasized in the murdering of King Duncan (the gracious King of Scotland) by Macbeth. Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth (her husband) to murder King Duncan. She then places the dagger near Macbeth's chamberlains, so as it appears they were the murderers.

"Will all great Neptune's oceans wash this blood clean from my hand?"

Macbeth speaks this line when he encounters his wife (Lady Macbeth) right after he murdered King Duncan. He refers to both the literal blood on his hand but also his *sense of guilt*. He uses grand and dramatic language to imply that the blood could stain all the world's oceans red as a metaphor for his guilt. His speech suggests that the consequences of his action will not be easily hidden, even though his wife (Lady Macbeth) tells him (Macbeth) that the blood can be washed away.

She (Lady Macbeth) calls out these lines after she has gone mad from her guilt---

"Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed."

Those are the final words she utters in the play, and they reveal how guilt has crushed her strong and assertive personality. She now has to be cared for like a child and has no plans for the future. No matter how much she repents, the violence and death cannot be undone, and the guilt never will go away.

Hamlet:

In the story of Hamlet, guilt is emphasized in the marriage of Queen Gertrude (the mother of Hamlet), who married the man (Claudius) who killed her husband, *and* the inability of Hamlet (her son) to revenge his father's murder.

Queen Gertrude feels guilt having married her husband's brother so soon after her husband's death. She then drinks the cup of poisoned wine intended for her son Hamlet to acknowledge the evil in Claudius and her wrongdoing in marrying him. Queen Gertrude thinks Hamlet (her son) to be mad and unable to take revenge on Claudius for murdering his father. She tells Hamlet it is poisonous wine as she dies. Hamlet tells Queen Gertrude (his mother) goodbye as she dies:

"Wretched queen, adieu!"

Even though Claudius is considered to be the most guilty, he never says he is sorry for his behavior of killing Hamlet's father. Hamlet feels guilty, too, for not revenging his deceased father's death by the hand of Claudius. Hamlet's character flaw of guilt is known as "hamartia"—personal regret felt as a tragic flaw or error of character.

SHAME

The word "shame" occurs within a person when social norms are violated.

The Physical Signs/Effects of Shame:

Even though the signs/effects can be similar to the signs/effects of guilt, they are usually not as obvious.

The Psychological Signs of Shame:

Feeling by the person being small and wanting to disappear from the situation
Focus by the person on inward thoughts and personal view of happenings and situations
Feeling by the person of humiliation or distress relating to doing wrong or performing foolish behavior
Intense personal negative emotion
A devaluing of the self as a person

Gender and Age Variations:

Women are quicker to feel humiliation related to shame than men
Adolescents feel more intensity related to shame than guilt
Adolescents and women are more susceptible to negative effects of shame (e.g., low self-esteem and depression)

GUILT AND SHAME: THE WRITINGS ABOUT WAR

The author, Tim O'Brien, made a significant contribution to the recognition of guilt and shame related to wartime decisions in two of his several books:

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED
ON THE RAINY RIVER

Trying to skirt the requirement of fulfilling his patriotic duty to serve in the military, he tries to escape by writing about the many wartime behaviors and feelings he believes are related to war's psychological and emotional impact. He reveals the guilt and shame carried through a lifetime by soldiers—even after the war.

ERIK ERICKSON'S THEORY OF DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS—PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFORTS OF UNDERSTANDING

Erik Homberg Erickson (1902-1994) was a German developmental psychologist who encouraged independence, confidence, and the ability to survive world challenges. He encouraged *meaning* in what we do in our lifetime. His identified basic age-related and intellectual virtues/tasks provide strength to resolve a lifetime of crises. Ideally, each virtue/task must be completed in sequence. It proves the appreciation and the importance of early childhood from age five in understanding guilt and shame. Parents and others establish the basis of behaviors and a sense of worth that enhances a lifetime of autonomy and initiative—thereby minimizing shame and guilt throughout a person's lifetime.

Failure to complete the entire developmental sequence in the order stated *reduces* the ability to form a healthy lifetime personality and a sense of self-esteem. It *increases* dependency on others and the likelihood of experiencing a sense of an overabundance of shame and doubt.

For example, when there is parental over-control or excessive criticism of children, there are no opportunities for children to assist themselves in independent survival and confidence. As a result, survival skills become inadequate—and survival skill attributes and abilities allow for more acceptable behaviors in life other than shame and guilt. Without these survival skills, there is an increased dependency on others and a lack of self-esteem, resulting in frequent feelings of guilt and shame.

Therefore, the stages of shame and guilt, ideally, are learned early in life and are the fundamental precursors to the remaining developmental tasks throughout our lives for effective survival in the world as we know it. Moreover, it is our key to psychological stability in an emotional crises of guilt and shame.

Erik Erickson's Stages of Psychosocial Development by Age and Positive Attributes Versus Negative Outcomes as a Result of Interrupted Psychosocial Development

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Infant to 18 months:</i> | <i>Trust vs. Mistrust</i> |
| <i>18 months to 2 years:</i> | <i>Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt</i> |
| <i>2 to 5 years:</i> | <i>Initiative vs. Guilt</i> |
| <i>5 to 13 years:</i> | <i>Industry vs. Inferiority</i> |
| <i>13 to 21 years:</i> | <i>Identity vs. Role Confusion</i> |
| <i>21 to 39 years:</i> | <i>Intimacy vs. Isolation</i> |
| <i>39 to 65 years:</i> | <i>Generativity vs. Stagnation</i> |
| <i>65 and older:</i> | <i>Ego Integrity vs. Despair</i> |

THE CULMINATING CROSS-COMPARISON OF GUILT AND SHAME

Whether the damage is reparable or less reparable, both guilt and shame make a person feel bad. When damage is less reparable, only guilt motivates repair of the damage. Shame will lead to the avoidance of recurring damage. Both are encouraged and desirous.

Both guilt and shame can be felt at the same time. Both are felt publicly and privately as social regulators that encourage a balance between others' urges, rights, and needs. But, even though both guilt and shame share this common ground, they are truly different in many ways.

GUILT

Focus on the behavior of others--->
Outward directed--->
Repair-oriented behaviors--->
Encourages acts toward morality--->
Increase in the desire to repair damage--->
Faces the need to repair damage--->
Generally, an adaptive emotion--->
Emphasis is on failure--->
Responsibility for failure--->
Involves the real world--->

SHAME

Focus on personal behavior
Inward directed
Escape-oriented behaviors
Encourages people to hide and escape
Decrease in the desire to repair damage
Desires to hide and escape from damage
Generally, a maladaptive emotion
Emphasis is on the person
Mistreatment of others regarding failure
Involves feelings and perceptions

THE OUTCOME OF GUILT AND SHAME

These few examples (Shakespeare and Tim O'Brien) represent times when humankind has described an example of guilt and shame. So pronounced were the residual effects, these men spent almost a lifetime expounding on the agonies related to such self-imposed thoughts and behaviors. These authors of painful stories knew the forever presence of residual misery related to our failed behaviors related to guilt and shame. So much was their recognition of the pain that their creative spirits urged their story-telling contributions as described to others (in second-person) and not themselves.

To be human is to experience many feelings and emotions. However, guilt and shame often leave their painful residual far past their recognition and leave their mark on our everyday lives. This painful refinement of the soul reminds us that having such meaningful feelings is intended to refine the spirit and cause lasting contemplation.

FIXING GUILT AND SHAME

Now that we know what encourages guilt and shame, we can explore how to control or “fix” the guilt we find/see in others or experience in ourselves. It is especially difficult, at times, for guilt-ridden and shame-prone to forgive.

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) individuals are known to be characterized by high levels of shame. This diagnosis and other situations causing guilt and shame are often helped by Mindfulness Education--especially focusing on one aspect of breathing called Mindful Breathing.

Mindful breathing (simplified):

1. Choose a “down-time” location, such as in the shower, sitting in a special chair, on the subway, or a special place where you go to find “your quiet place.”
2. Focus on your breathing. Focus on a single aspect of your breathing.
3. Spend at least 5 minutes in this state of awareness.

The Basic Nursing Administrator’s Techniques for Helping Yourself and Others Resolve Unethical, Non-Egregious, or Non-legal Guilt or Shame:

Clarity and understanding occur of guilt or shame by writing feelings down for clarification and effective resolution methods. “Fixing” of guilt or shame includes the following steps:

1. Understanding the origin, the reason for guilt or shame is the first step. That is, where is all my/your guilt or shame originating? Is my/your guilt or shame real---or is it imagined? ---- and, why is there ownership of the guilt or shame?
2. Recognizing and making right the actual or supposed damage.
3. Encouraging self-forgiveness or forgiveness of another person is required—especially when obvious forgiveness by other people is not forthcoming.
4. Listening more than advising—sometimes just listening to yourself or others helps to “cleanse the soul.” If listening to another person, remove all obstacles between you and the person while attempting to listen carefully to what is *really* being said.
5. Watching the non-verbal and then *feeling* the true message.
6. Ignoring other stimulation while listening. No answering of the phone, interruptions, etc. Make necessary arrangements so disruption does not occur.

7. Using the concepts of a written: (Indicative of “The Nursing Process”)
 - Assessment of the guilt or shame
 - Diagnosis of the “real” problem (guilt? — shame?)
 - Establishing a follow-up schedule/plan in writing
 - Implementing the plan by making appropriate psychosocial assignment(s)
 - Evaluating the plan frequently according to the written, structured schedule
8. This caring process by the listener says, “I care about you as a person, I hear what you are saying, and I am here for you, unconditionally!” The concepts (Stages of Psychosocial Developmental) become the written tangible behavioral guide that encourages possible psychosocial job assignments (autonomy or initiative according to shame or guilt) that produce increased personal integrity and enhancement of Eric Erickson’s future psychosocial development.

If shame is the problem, consider how successful *autonomy* (required by Erik Erickson’s second developmental task) can be encouraged and monitored for success under leadership direction. Autonomy means the right to make appropriate decisions or choices within the purview of a job assignment.

If guilt is the problem, consider how successful *initiative* (required by Eric Erickson’s third developmental task) can be encouraged and monitored for success under leadership direction. Initiative means the power to make and initiate change independently.

Erik Erickson’s psychosocial development theory application by a health care administrator enhances the practical understanding and application of autonomy and initiative in psychosocial development. In other words, the nursing leader/administrator recognizes the theoretical link between the employee’s outward expression of guilt and shame and Eric Erickson’s theory of psychosocial development.

Henceforth, the administrator/leader better understands the intended use of developmental tasks and helps employee restitution for the lack of completion of that developmental stage according to the guilt or shame felt by the employee. Success by employees in these early developmental stages will enhance success in the higher stages of psychosocial development.

9. Send the verbal and behavioral message that the feelings of guilt and shame that interrupt any life can be overcome with the help of a structured environment and understanding support. Every person needs support at times for interrupting feelings of guilt and shame. Personal negative feelings of guilt or shame are reparable.
10. Know this—as a “listener” to an employee’s guilt or shame, you have a choice. You can either become part of the problem through inappropriate listening skills or no response. Or, you can be the force for good, a guide for resolution to guilt or shame, and recognize the individual’s worth. You, as the leader, can be (and should be) exemplary of nursing values.

11. If you are a **true** nursing professional/leader in an appointed or chosen, or assigned leadership role, you really should have no choice! If a person trusts you enough to share their pain, your unrelenting response is positive and an example of nursing goodness to everyone on the nursing staff. You may question the employee's thinking to understand the stated reason for their internal feelings; however, you cannot question the pain associated with their honesty. Be the nursing leader who shows understanding, empathy, compassion, and civility.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Meta-Message by this author

Communication (I and II) by this author

Mindful breathing: (Enter Mindful Breathing into the search line for numerous options)

Tim O'Brien: (Enter Tim O'Brien into the search line for additional information and more publications)

Erik Erickson: (Enter Erik Erickson into the search line for additional information)

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