

A thick black L-shaped frame is positioned on the left and bottom edges of the page, framing the central text.

# GUILT & TOXIC GUILT

UNDERSTANDING & MOVING BEYOND  
THESE POWERFUL EMOTIONS

# Plan for Today:

## Understanding Guilt

- Basic definition of guilt
- Types of guilt
- How guilt is different from shame and resentment
- Events & interpretations that can prompt guilt in family members of people with mental health symptoms/addictions

## Moving Beyond Guilt & Toxic Guilt

- Untangling “Good Guilt” from Toxic Guilt
- Effective apologies and amends letters when guilt is justified
- Steps for moving beyond Toxic Guilt

# What Is (Good) Guilt?

## ■ As a noun:

- “a feeling of worry or unhappiness that you have because you have done something wrong, such as causing harm to another person: *He suffered such feelings of guilt over leaving his children.*” (Cambridge Dictionary)
- “a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action to undo or mitigate this wrong.” (American Psychological Association)

## ■ As a verb:

- “to cause (someone) to feel guilty. *Don't listen to Mommy. She's trying to guilt you.*” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
- “to make (someone) feel guilty, especially in order to induce them to do something: *Celeste had been guilted into going by her parents*” (Cambridge Dictionary)

# What Is Good about Guilt?

- It means we have empathy (and not antisocial or narcissistic personality disorder)
- It means we have values and moral standards
- It motivates us for positive behavior and healthier families/communities/societies:
  - *Consider the needs of others and not just be completely self-absorbed*
  - *Can lead to acts of compassion or courage*
  - *Encourages honesty, loyalty and fidelity*
  - *Helps us take responsibility for our actions*
  - *Helps us delay gratification and have self-restraint*
  - *Promotes self-respect*
  - *Other benefits of guilt??*

# Why Guilt Is Hard to Recognize, Name and Tame

- Guilt can hide under other “secondary” emotions like anger or sadness
- Guilt is often stigmatized as bad in American popular society because it’s painful and we tend not to accept pain as part of life
- Guilt can sometimes be too painful to tolerate, so we hide it from ourselves
- Sometimes we punish/criticize those who are doing what we can’t admit we are doing because we are hiding it from ourselves

# 9 Signs of Toxic Guilt (Self-Punishment)

- Like with Good Guilt, it is painful
- We are blinded to or avoid the “hard truth” of our needs/preferences
- We think we are responsible for others’ distress at times when we are not
- We believe we are responsible for crime or abuse committed against us
- We tend to blame ourselves for problems, not just take responsibility for our part in those problems
- We feel enslaved and trapped in unhappy or unhealthy relationships
- We have a lot of self-doubt
- We don’t set limits and boundaries with family, friends, colleagues
- We believe we have to live up to high standards in order to feel loveable and good enough
- We sacrifice ourselves, become suffering heroes, but then feel resentful and burned out

# Survivor Guilt

- Develops in people who have survived a situation or illness that has killed or harmed others
- Compounded if you believe you could have done more to save those who were more affected
- Often accompanied by regret and ruminations about what they could have or should have done
- It can be a symptom of PTSD: Overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself or the world
- *It is common in family members of people with illness or mental illness, especially siblings*

# How is guilt different from shame?

## Guilt

- I'm a good person who did something bad
- Our "bad behavior" is not necessarily seen or acknowledged by others
- Tied to empathy & turning outward
- Makes us want to make apologies & amends
- Overwhelming, toxic guilt can turn into shame and lowered self-esteem

## Shame

- I'm a bad person: I'm a selfish person"
- Can be associated with low self-esteem
- Our "bad behavior" is seen by others
- Shame makes us want to hide and avoid
- Tied to anger toward ourselves or others
- Can lead to unhealthy coping patterns like self-hatred, always blaming others, withdrawing from anything that could prompt shame, or numbing out through denial, substance abuse or thrill seeking



# Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale

- Measures individual differences in the tendency to experience guilt and shame across a range of transgressions

*<https://www.cmu.edu/tepper/faculty-and-research/assets/docs/guilt-shame-proneness-gasp-scale-aug-2011.pdf>*

# Prompting Events for Guilt Common among Families of People with Mental Health & Substance Use Disorders

- Getting messages that families or parents cause these disorders
- Getting messages that we are making the disorder worse
- Believing we caused or contributed to the disorder
- Believing we have made the disorder worse
- After a crisis (suicide attempt, hospitalization, incarceration, homelessness, etc.)
- After any illness or death, especially suicide
- Losing our temper, then feeling guilt
- Being “guilted” for self-care or setting boundaries
- Survivor guilt (especially for siblings)
- *Other Prompting Events??*

# The Many Sources for Parental Guilt

- Parenting Guilt is defined as *“internal conflict parents face when they fall short of their personal parenting expectations.”* Every parent will fall short and make mistakes!
- When a child or adult child develops mental health or substance use, it is common for parents to question how their parenting or genetics played a role in these problems
- These doubts are often reinforced by how they are treated by professionals and even well-meaning family and friends or depictions of mental illness in the media
- Parental Guilt puts us at risk of:
  - *Neglecting our self-care & needs - Instead, put the oxygen mask on ourselves*
  - *Rescuing our children too quickly – Instead, put more responsibility on them*
  - *Focusing only on how ineffective we feel– Instead, learn skills while being kind to ourselves*
  - *Not setting and enforcing our limits & boundaries – Instead, tolerate the pushback*

# Why a Deep Understanding of Guilt is the First Step in Moving Beyond It

Toxic Guilt is like a malignant tumor that grows on healthy tissue: We need the healthy tissue for good mental health, but toxic guilt (bad guilt) can lead to decisions and habits that can destroy our health and mental health.

- Most of our situations include both “Good Guilt” and “Toxic Guilt”
- These 2 types of guilt require different strategies
- By learning to untangle them, we can keep the Good Guilt and manage that effectively...
- AND take steps to shrink Toxic Guilt and keep it from growing in the future

# Step 1A: Separate Our “Good Guilt” from Our “Toxic Guilt” in a situation

- **Example:** Mary has ruminated about guilt since divorcing her only daughter’s father and really struggled with getting remarried. When her daughter drops out of college due to depression and anxiety, Mary’s guilt intensifies and she accepts her daughter’s blame whenever there is conflict and says yes to any request. When her daughter moves in with them, Mary walks on eggshells. She and her 2<sup>nd</sup> husband argue over Mary’s inability to have any house rules for her daughter or getting angry with him when he makes requests of Mary to clean up after herself.
- Invitation for Self reflection:
  - *Think about guilt you’ve been carrying about something you’ve done or didn’t do with with a family member*
  - *What part of this guilt is Good Guilt?*
  - *What, if any, signs of Toxic Guilt have grown from this Good Guilt*

# Step 1B: For our Good Guilt, make effective apologies or amends , then let it go

- You can't change the past, but you can affect the present and future
- You can gain clarity about what happened and what should have happened
- You can gain relief from the guilt you feel (IF you stop ruminating)
- Use self-compassion and self-forgiveness to stop ruminating
- The other person may also find resolution and understanding about the past
- Effective apologizing can help them regain trust in you and possibly forgive you when they are ready
- If the person is deceased, grief can be complicated by guilt. Since you can't make amends to them in life, you can still say what you wish you could say. You can also volunteer for or donate to a cause in their honor.

# Making an Effective Apology

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50LQY6wkRt4>

## Do's

- Acknowledge & take responsibility for your specific actions that hurt or harmed them
- Express empathy for how you imagined it felt. Be open to their corrections.
- Say what you are working on to prevent it from happening again and follow through. Action speaks louder than words.

## Don'ts

- Don't make it about you and your guilt. This puts them in the position of comforting you and makes the apology look self-serving
- Don't make explanations or justifications for your behavior (unless they ask why you did it)
- Don't mention their role in your behavior. *I wouldn't have done \_\_\_ if you hadn't \_\_\_\_\_.*

# Effective Amends Letters

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdSsfTt1RMk>

EXAMPLE LETTER:

*Dear Bill,*

*I am so sorry for the ways I let you down as a parent! I know that I was harsh in many ways, and that was very hurtful to you and affected you deeply. I can understand why this behavior makes it hard for you to spend time with me. It's also true that I was preoccupied in many ways when you were young and I wasn't involved in ways that would have been important to you. I'm so glad you let me know how you feel! I know you would not have cut contact if it wasn't the healthiest thing for you. I do love you very much and I hope I can make it up to you if and when you are ready to talk.*

*Love & Regrets,*

*Dad*

<https://www.bottomlineinc.com/life/relationships/how-to-reconcile-with-your-estranged-son-or-daughter>



## Step 2 if we have Toxic Guilt: **State our truth to ourselves & someone we trust not to judge us**

- *My adult son is running my life. I want to take my life back.*
- *If I keep doing everything for my daughter, how will she survive if I die suddenly?*
- *I'm sick of listening to my parents complain to me about my sister.*
- *I feel like a prisoner in my own home. I want to find other living arrangements for our daughter.*
- *I'm really unhappy in my marriage.*
- *I'm tired of being the only one in the family trying to manage this problem.*
- *I want to move far away from my parents.*
- *I don't want my brother at my wedding.*
- *I want to stop pretending I'm someone I'm not to my family.*

## Step 3 if we have Toxic Guilt: **Claim Our Territory**

- Work on believing that our needs/desires are as important as others'
- Stop allowing others to take over our territory (our needs/desires)
- Stop intruding on others' territory because of our sense of over-responsibility
- Learn the language for claiming territory:
  - *I'm sorry, but that's more than I'm willing to do*
  - *I know you do not agree, but it is my decision*
- Establish consequences if others are not respecting your reclaimed territory
- Guilt about setting consequences can be reduced by giving fair warning so others have time to make plans
- Expect battles as people adjust, but continue to defend your territory

Step 4 if we have Toxic Guilt:

# Brace for Stormy Weather

- Those affected are likely to protest in various ways
- We have to tolerate their distress and anger without completely giving up our territory
- We have to stand our ground in the face of guilt, criticism and threats
- Some negotiation may be necessary, but we have to hold on to our bottom line
- If anger turns to rage and we feel threatened, use de-escalation until escape is possible
- If you suspect suicidal thinking, ask and call 988 if worried or unsure
- Storm Shelters: Turn to others and groups who will support and encourage you as you stand your ground
- Therapy may be helpful

Step 5 if we have Toxic Guilt:

# After taking control, let go of control

- Over what others think of us
- Over how others react to our new claim, unless it is to protect ourselves
- Not allowing others' needs and wishes to interrupt our plans for maintaining our territory
- Accepting what is: Not hanging on to how things were or how we wish they would be
- Faith may help: Putting things in the hands of God or the Universe
- Therapy may help or be necessary
- Forgiveness of others' reactions may help us find freedom and peace

Step 6 if we have Toxic Guilt:

# Patrol Our Borders & Boundaries

- Be on the lookout for our old tendencies to take on too much and give too much
- Work on believing that our self-care comes first: I must survive!
- Work on believing that our needs are as important as others' needs
- Keep practicing these new habits:
  - *Saying to others, “Let me think about this and I will get back to you.”*
  - *Asking ourselves, “Can I step into this situation or say yes to this request while maintaining my emotional balance?”*
  - *Asking ourselves, “What are the pros and cons of saying yes. Is there a middle ground I can propose?”*

# Printed Resources

## ■ Apologies & Amends Letters:

- <https://www.bottomlineinc.com/life/relationships/how-to-reconcile-with-your-estranged-son-or-daughter>
- <https://www.angerresources.com/tasks/WritingAmendsLetter.pdf>

## ■ Book: **Escaping Toxic Guilt** (2008). Susan Carrell. McGraw Hill.

## ■ Book: **Failures of Forgiveness** (2023). Myisha Cherry. Princeton University Press.

## ■ Guilt vs. Shame:

- <https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/guilt.html>
- <https://psychcentral.com/health/guilt-vs-shame#mental-health-conditions>
- <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/guilt/guilt-vs-shame-whats-the-difference-and-why-does-it-matter/>

## ■ Parental Estrangement: <https://www.drjoshuacoleman.com/>

## ■ Parental Guilt: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/liking-the-child-you-love/201810/3-ways-guilt-impacts-parents-struggling-adult-children> Reconciliation after estrangement:

## ■ Survival Guilt: <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/survivors-guilt#symptoms>

# Live Services (In-person & Virtual)

## Free Services

- **NAMI Family Support Groups:**  
*<https://namimainlinepa.org/support/>*
- **NAMI Family-to-Family Education Course**  
*<https://namimainlinepa.org/support/family-to-family-education-basics-programs/>*
- **Consultation with NAMI:**  
*<https://namimainlinepa.org/>*
- **12-step meetings:**  
*<https://coda.org/find-a-meeting/>*
- **Center for Motivation & Change:**  
*<https://cmcffc.org/family-mondays>*
- **Therapy if you have Medical Assistance:**  
*Search for Office of Behavioral Health in your county*

## Services with Fees

- **Recovering Together Family Skill-Building Course (2024):**  
*[edie.mannion@yahoo.com](mailto:edie.mannion@yahoo.com)*
- **Estrangement Consultation & Webinars:**  
*<https://www.drjoshuacoleman.com/>*
- **Private therapy:**  
*<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us>*