

What is the Difference between Shame and Guilt?

Have you ever made a decision you knew you shouldn't have made? How did that feel afterwards? Many times this is a point in our life when we experience a feeling of guilt. And there is nothing wrong with that! Guilt is a natural emotion we feel when we have done something wrong or made a mistake. Go ahead and admit it- you feel guilty, make the necessary corrections, then breathe a sigh of relief knowing that it is okay and feel free to move on from the situation.

Shame, on the other hand, is not quite as easy to move past. This is the intense emotion that makes you want to crawl under your desk just at the mention of the word. Shame and guilt researcher, Brene Brown, LMSW, defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Gobbel, 2013). There are very distinct differences between guilt and shame but often times we get the two emotions confused. Kathy Slaughter, LCSW (2012), writes descriptions of how truly different these two words are in her article, "7 Differences between Shame and Guilt."

Shame means "I am wrong.	" Guilt means "I did something wrong."
Shame stalls positive change.	Guilt leads to positive, healthy change.
Shame leads to disconnection with others.	Guilt leads to healing and overcoming.
Shame is internalizing and connected to who we are.	Guilt is easily passing.
Shame is never healthy or useful.	Guilt can be healthy and useful.
Shame is about causing pain to someone.	Guilt is usually about accountability.
Shame leads to many psycho-social problems.	Guilt does not.

Many times we can learn from our experiences if given proper amounts of support and empowerment. Children and adolescents especially need this encouragement to work through feelings of guilt. Guilt has the potential to yield positive change with minimal or no emotional damage. Shame, however, can create a mountain of emotional trauma that may not be shaken. Shame can lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and many other psycho-social problems. As you speak with others in your family or community, take notice of the words, tone, and body language used in explaining pain or disappointment. Are you simply stating your thoughts of hurt or correcting a mistake or are you casting negativity on the other person's character that may cause them to experience shame? The long-term outcomes will vary significantly.

Slaughter, K. (2012). 7 Differences between shame and guilt. Integrative Health Resources.

Gobbel, R. (2013). Is shame the same as guilt? Central Texas Trauma & Attachment Center.