



# Understanding guilt

## Guilt and mental illness

The experience of mental illness in a person's life, either as a person experiencing mental illness or as a family member or loved one, can have a profound impact on people's emotions. Mental illness, often being episodic and unpredictable, evokes the full range of emotional responses, including anger, grief, embarrassment, shame and despair. A powerful strong emotion that is often presented is guilt.

Guilt can emerge in all sorts of ways and can cause unnecessary anxiety and worry and can be counterproductive to the situation outcome you are trying to achieve. It can be useful to assess the role and impact of guilt on your life.

Common underlying feelings of guilt are:

- 'If I had been more attentive parent, this illness would never have happened...'
- 'If I had never smoked cannabis, I'd never had got sick and my family would never have had to endure all this...'

Always remember: Mental illness is an illness. It can happen to anyone. But feelings are not always rational and guilt is a powerful emotion that needs to be dealt with.

## What is guilt?

- Feeling of responsibility for negative circumstances that have happened to yourself or others
- Feeling of regret for your real or imagined misdeeds, both past and present
- Sense of remorse for thoughts, feelings, or attitudes that were or are negative, uncomplimentary, or non-accepting concerning yourself or others

- Feeling of obligation for not pleasing, not helping, or not placating another
- Feeling of bewilderment and lack of balance for not responding to a situation in your typical or, stereotypical manner
- Feeling of loss and shame for not having done or said something to someone who is no longer available to you
- Accepting of responsibility for someone else's misfortune or problem because it bothers you to see that person suffer
- Motivation to amend all real or perceived wrongs
- Strong moral sense of right and wrong that inhibits you from choosing a 'wrong' course of action; however, you assign your own definitions to the words
- Driving force or mask behind which irrational beliefs hide
- Immobilise you. You can become so overcome and overwhelmed by the fear of doing, acting, saying, or being 'wrong' that you eventually collapse, give in, and choose inactivity, silence, and the status quo
- Interfere in your decision making. It is so important to always be 'right' in your decisions that you become unable to make a decision lest it be wrong
- Be hidden by the mask of self denial. Because it is less guilt inducing to take care of others first, instead of yourself, you hide behind the mask of self denial. You honestly believe it is better to serve others first, unaware that 'guilt' is the motivator for such 'generous' behaviour
- Make you ignore the full array of emotions and feelings available to you. Overcome by guilt or the fear of it, you can become emotionally blocked or closed off. You are unable to enjoy the positive fruits of life but live with negative aspects

## What can guilt do to you?

- Make you become over responsible, striving to make life 'right'. You overwork. You over give of yourself. You are willing to do anything in an attempt to make everyone happy
- Make you over conscientious. You fret over every action you take as to its possible negative consequence to others, even if this means that you must ignore your needs and wants
- Make you over sensitive. You see decisions about right and wrong in every aspect of your life and become obsessed with the tenuous nature of all your personal actions, words and decisions. You are sensitive to cues of others where any implication of your wrong doing is intimated
- Be a motivator to change. Because you feel guilt and the discomfort it brings, you can use it as a barometer of the need to change things in your life and rid yourself of the guilt
- Be a mask for negative self belief. You may actually have low self-esteem, but claim the reason for your negativity is the overwhelming sense of guilt you experience
- Mislead or misdirect you. Because many irrational beliefs lie behind guilt, you may be unable to sort out your feelings. It is important to be objective with yourself when you are experiencing guilt; be sure that your decisions are based on sound, rational thinking

## What irrational beliefs or negative self-scripts are involved in guilt?

- I do not deserve to be happy
- I am responsible for my family's (spouse's) happiness
- There is only one 'right' way to do things
- It's bad to feel hurt and pain
- My children should never suffer in their childhood like I did in mine
- My kids should have more material things than I did
- It is my fault if others in my life are not happy
- If my kids fail in any way, it's my responsibility
- It is wrong to be concerned about myself
- People are constantly judging me, and their judgment is important to me
- It is important to save face with others
- It is wrong to accept the negative aspects of my life without believing that I am responsible for them myself
- I am responsible if either positive or negative events happen to the members of my family
- I must not enjoy myself during a time when others expect me to be in mourning, grief, or loss

- You must never let down your guard; something you're doing could be evil or wrong
- I must always be responsible, conscientious, and giving to others
- How others perceive me is more important than how I perceive myself
- No matter what I do, I am always wrong
- I should never feel guilt
- If you feel guilt, then you must be or have been wrong

## Overcoming guilt?

Like all strong emotions, the first important step is to recognize that you do feel guilt. All emotions have energy and if you do not deal with it, it will deal with you!

You can recognise the role guilt is playing in your life by answering the following questions and taking the time to write down your answers:

1. Why do I feel guilty?
2. How much guilt do I feel? (rating out of 10)
3. What are the consequences of feeling guilt?
4. What do I hope to accomplish by feeling guilt?
5. Does feeling guilty help me accomplish what I want?
6. How would things be different if I didn't feel guilty anymore?

## Useful references

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA) [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

ARAFEMI  
[www.arafemi.org.au](http://www.arafemi.org.au)

beyondblue:  
the national depression initiative  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

## Mental Illness Fellowships of Australia fact sheets

What can family and friends do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Family and carer support services

Understanding worry

Effective communication

Signs of mental illness and what to do

That's what it's like to be a carer

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08 8221 5072 [www.mifa.org.au](http://www.mifa.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc  
07 4725 3664 [www.mifnq.org.au](http://www.mifnq.org.au)

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc  
07 3358 4424 [www.sfq.org.au](http://www.sfq.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship of  
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