

DEALING WITH GUILT — HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY

With the exception of the psychopath and the most hardened of hearts, all of us feel guilt on a fairly regular basis. If we have a scrupulous conscience, we live in a constant state of guilt. Guilt is that unpleasant feeling we experience when we realize that we have done something we believe is wrong or when we fail to do what we know is right.

We can experience guilt about all kinds of things. For example, we may feel guilty about what we *said* or *did* to someone. Upon reflection, we may realize that although it was true, we should not have said or done it in that particular situation. Unwarranted words or actions can occur in our family, parish, work or social setting, and can leave somebody hurt and diminished in a way that is not necessary, and so we feel guilty.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *roles*, *duties* and *responsibilities*. As spouses, parents, priests, sisters, single persons, bosses, employees, we may judge that we are failing in some way. We may feel guilty because we know we are neglecting our duties and responsibilities. We may even feel guilty because we judge that our *best efforts* are not good enough for others or for ourselves. Parents may feel guilty because an adult child is living in with a fiancé/e and has stopped going to church. Adult sons and daughters may feel guilty because they think that they are not giving their aging parents enough time and care. Caregivers may experience a lot of guilt for sometimes wishing their sick loved one to die. Children often carry considerable guilt when there is crisis in the family. They may blame themselves for the fights between their parents or for their parents' divorce, or even for the death of a parent.

We may experience guilt in connection with our *relationship with God*. We feel guilty because of our failure to pray or because we only give God the last few minutes of our day when we are tired. We may be constantly thinking of other things when we are praying and judge that our efforts at prayer are very poor. As parents, we may think that we have done a poor job of passing on our Christian beliefs and practices to our children.

Many people experience a lot of guilt in the area of *sexuality*. Our parents, or the church, may have told

us that the worst kinds of sins are sexual sins. Hence, we may feel guilt because of impure thoughts, words and deeds. When we look at the *poverty* in our world, we feel guilty that we are not generous enough when it comes to sharing our material blessings with the poor. We may carry a lot of guilt because of *past failures*, e.g., abortion, adultery, theft, failure to be a good example to our children, etc. Even though we may have confessed past failures, we may still carry guilt.

I'm sure each of us could add numerous examples to the above list of reasons that generate guilt in our lives.

When it comes to the topic of guilt, it is very important for us to distinguish between what spiritual counselors and psychologists call *healthy* and *unhealthy* guilt (or *true* and *false* guilt, or *appropriate* and *inappropriate* guilt).

Healthy guilt

Because the "guilt thing" was overdone in some homes, schools and churches in the past, some people today *overreact* by trying to free themselves (and their children) from *all* guilt. They want to live "guilt-free" lives—which is a huge mistake.

If we look closely at some of the teachings and actions of Jesus, we notice that he not only tried to free people from their sins and from the guilt around sin (e.g., the Samaritan woman—for her several failed marriages; Peter—for his denial of Jesus), but he also told stories intended to create guilt (and positive action) in people who had become insensitive to wrongdoing in their lives. For example, if we reflect on the parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), we see that Jesus is condemning the behavior of the rich man who was insensitive to the poor, denouncing the Levite and priest for ignoring the wounded man on the side of the road, and reproaching the self-righteous behavior of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus is saying to his audience and to us that we *should feel guilty* if we behave like the rich man, the Levite, the priest and the elder son.

In his book *Whatever Became of Sin?*, the famous and highly regarded psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, lamented that too many of his peers were trying to free their patients from all guilt by helping them to believe that they were not culpable of any wrongdoing. In contrast, Dr. Menninger discovered that *when he helped his patients to take responsibility for their wrongdoing, they invariably started to get better.* When we try to free ourselves or others from real guilt, we are doing no one a favor. When we do or say wrong things, we need to have the courage and humility to acknowledge our wrongdoing and repent of it. Following are some examples of healthy guilt:

- Failing to treat others or their property with respect
- Hurting the good name of others
- Being unjust and untruthful in our relationships with others
- Manipulating others for our selfish gain
- Being totally unresponsive to the issue of world poverty
- Abusing our body with excessive intake of food, alcohol or drugs.
- Using sex not as an expression of committed love but simply for pleasure
- Being lazy and inattentive to our relationship with God; missing Mass for no good reason.

If in the past, parents, schools and churches laid too much guilt on people, there is a danger today that the pendulum is swinging too far in the other direction.

We may need to ask ourselves if we are numbing our consciences, rationalizing our behavior and refusing to feel *appropriate guilt* for actions that are clearly wrong and hurtful to others, ourselves and our relationship to God.

Unhealthy guilt

If there is such a thing as good and healthy guilt, there is also bad and unhealthy guilt, the kind that diminishes us as persons. This happens when we feel guilty for something that we are not responsible for. Some examples:

- Feeling that we are not caring enough for a sick loved one despite our best efforts; feeling resentful that our lives are totally absorbed in the care of our sick loved one; feeling guilty for placing a loved one in a nursing facility because to continue care at home is now endangering our health
- Blaming ourselves for the wrongdoing of our adult children and thinking, "if I had only raised them differently."
- Feeling guilty about past misdeeds which we did not believe to be wrong when we committed them many years ago, e.g. abortion
- Separating from or divorcing an abusive spouse; not being the *perfect* mom or dad, son or daughter, spouse or friend
- Missing church during illness or while traveling in a place where there is no church or the nearest one is impossible to reach
- Perhaps the saddest example of inappropriate guilt is that which children experience when their parents divorce or when they are sexually abused.

Inappropriate guilt takes on excessive form when we feel guilty for just about everything. Spiritual counseling can usually free us from such excessive guilt and from the feeling that God is a tyrant (which scrupulous people believe unconsciously), and introduce us to a God of love.

Dealing with guilt – three responses

When dealing with guilt, there are three different ways to respond to it: (1) suppress the guilt; (2) go around feeling horrible about past failures, but do nothing to free ourselves of our guilt; or (3) face our guilt. The first two responses are obviously not very helpful. As for the third response, we need to determine, as a first step, if our guilt is appropriate or not. We may conclude that "yes, I have indeed violated my conscience." In that case, we can take the necessary action to free ourselves of our guilt. What might be the elements of constructive action that will help us to release appropriate guilt from our lives?

- *First, name our wrongdoing and take responsibility for it.* In the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for their sin of disobedience. It takes *courage* and *humility* to

own up to our wrongdoing. David in the Old Testament is a wonderful example of courage and humility for taking responsibility for his twin sins of adultery and murder.

- *Second, confess our wrongdoing.* We need to remember that our God is a God of infinite mercy. If God could forgive David for adultery and cold-blooded murder, he can forgive us. If Jesus, on the cross, could forgive the repentant thief and his executioners, surely he will forgive our failings. If you have a problem believing in a merciful God, recall the words of Jesus: "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7). In confessing our wrongdoing, an excellent and timely prayer is David's Contrition (Psalm 51)

In the sacrament of Reconciliation, Catholics confess their sins to a priest. Many find the exercise of confiding their misdeeds to another and *hearing* the words of absolution a very healing experience. In sacramental reconciliation, penitents experience God's mercy and grace in a very tangible way. Also, it is important to confess our wrongdoing not only to God but also to the individual we hurt by our words and/or actions. If the person rejects our apology, we need to remember that we only have control over *our own* behavior, and cannot be responsible for other people's behavior.

- *Third, make amends for our wrongdoing.* If we need to make amends to someone, we should endeavor to do it the best way we can. If we cannot make *full* restitution of stolen property, we should return the most we can. If we are unable to make restitution *directly* to a store or institution, we can make up for it by donating to charity. If we hurt someone by our words or deeds, we should let them know we are sorry, either verbally or through a letter. God wants us to do everything we can to make good on the damage of our wrongdoing.

Self-forgiveness

Sometimes, when it comes to dealing with guilt, our problem is not believing that God has forgiven us; our problem is our inability to forgive ourselves. We may have a deep-rooted perfectionist trait that tends to punish ourselves over and over for our faults. We may need professional help with this issue. In the meantime, we need to reflect again and

again on the Scripture verse: "I will forgive you your evil doing and remember your sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). If God can forgive and forget our sins, who are we not to forgive ourselves? Do we want to be tougher on ourselves than God? If so, doesn't that seem a bit arrogant, to say the least? It has been said that the only difference between Peter (who denied Jesus) and Judas (who betrayed Jesus) is that Peter, unlike Judas, was able to accept Jesus' offer of forgiveness. Peter chose life; Judas chose death.

Guilt, like all other emotions, can become a constructive or destructive force in our lives. We can break away from it or we can let it eat away at our sanity—the choice is ours.

If you carry a lot of guilt and have a hard time letting go, consider making an appointment to see one of our priests. With God's grace, we will be able to help you.