

# What should I do when **SHAME & GUILT** consume me?

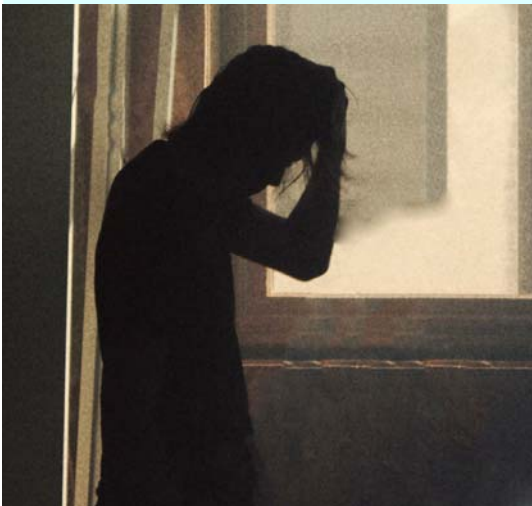
■ by Katie DeYoung, MA, LCPC, LMHC



Have you ever been ashamed or felt guilty because of something you did?

These moments can be brutal and likely result in a plethora of other negative emotions and outcomes as well. I am definitely a supporter of people being able to experience the beautiful and expansive range of emotions available to them or having “all the feels” as I like to say. Let’s be honest though, some of our emotional reactions are far more pleasant than others. Oftentimes, we like to focus on all things happy and try our hardest to simply avoid any unpleasant or uncomfortable emotion that may come up. This approach creates an unbalanced view of how to properly manage one’s emotional well-being. God created emotions as a way for us to express ourselves and more intimately experience life. Having emotions is OK, but it is what we do with our emotions that often needs to be addressed and possibly altered.

As a Christian therapist, I have seen first-hand how shame and guilt can become all-consuming. I am concerned that we don’t know how to properly handle these emotions when they come up, so let’s discuss shame and guilt from a biblical perspective as we learn about their purpose and use in our lives.



## Shame vs Guilt

Let’s start by noting that shame and guilt both have similar undertones. These terms are often used interchangeably; however, each has their own unique definition. Shame is a painful emotion that comes from humiliation or embarrassment when a person knows that they have done something wrong. Whereas, feeling guilty is a logical response to understanding one’s wrong-doing, a feeling of deserved blame for an offense. Guilt is more of a statement of fact; if you do something wrong then you are guilty. Shame is more of an emotional response to doing wrong. Take a moment and think about your own experiences of feeling shame or guilt and see if you can tell how these emotions have felt differently to you.

## God’s purpose for shame and guilt

When recalling those times, think about what the purpose of having those feelings was at that moment. God created emotions to serve a purpose in our lives. They can influence upcoming decisions or help us to better understand ourselves. For example, feeling anxiety or fear informs us to be on our guard as something ahead may be dangerous. So, what could the purpose of shame and guilt be?

Is shame supposed to lower our self-worth? This may be accompanied by thoughts such as: “I can’t believe I did that”, “I don’t want anybody to know what I have done”, and “I can’t do anything right”. Do you think the purpose of guilt is to be a constant reminder of our mistakes resulting in a long-term weight to carry on our shoulders? This may come with thoughts like: “I don’t deserve to be happy or loved by you” and “I deserve to be punished”. These thoughts are worsened by repeated offenses on our part of sinning over and over again.

- Continued on Page 2 -

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- Continued from Page 1 -

## A Christian's response to shame and guilt

Albeit natural and somewhat common, these are incorrect ways of handling shame and guilt, especially for Christians. When Christians experience shame and guilt, the purpose of these emotions is to bring about a sense of conviction for the wrongdoing that occurred. This conviction, if used appropriately, should bring people to the foot of the cross in recognition of what Jesus accomplished for us in salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

Rather than leaving our sins and wrongdoings at the foot of the cross, we carry them with us for weeks, months, and even years. Maybe this sounds familiar. Appropriately so, many people are ashamed of a wrongdoing that they have done and are convicted that they should feel this way. After all, wouldn't it be inappropriate for them to be joyful if they did something wrong? Our immediate emotional response is not necessarily in question; rather it's what we do with it that makes all the difference. Hanging on to our guilt is not healthy and can lead to other mental and emotional issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Is this what God intended when He allowed us to experience these emotions? Are we glorifying God in how we handle moments of shame and guilt? Could it be that we misuse these feelings and their purpose in our lives?

## Seek Biblical Context

In Genesis 2 we learn that Adam and Eve felt no shame in their nakedness, but after the fall they covered up their bodies. In a perfect world, God created us to be unashamed of who we, however the presence of sin changes things and brings guilt into what once was an unblemished relationship between man and God. We are all sinners and therefore are all guilty. Praise God for His forgiveness towards us and cleansing us of our guilt and shame by sending his Son to die on the cross as an offering. As sinners we are guilty, period. Through the conviction of the Holy Spirit a light is shown on our sin and with his help we are able to move past our guilt and experience hope by walking in the light (1 John 1:7, NIV).



So, the next time that you feel ashamed or are guilty of doing something wrong ask yourself:

**Where is this emotion coming from?**

**Is God trying to convict me of something?**

**How can I glorify God in this moment?**

**What do I do with these unpleasant emotions? Where do I go from here?**

I'll let you answer the first three questions on your own. But as for the last one, I'll meet you at the cross my friend- the only object that is able to carry the weight of all our sins so that we don't have to and where thankfulness abounds for all that Jesus has done. ■



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