

GUILT

Even though we intellectually know we can't undo the past, our inner self will sometimes not let us off the hook. For many of us, the perceived deeds or omissions of the past keep coming back, again and again and again, as if a needle were stuck in an old record. Over and over it keeps whispering . . .

- **you should have . . .**
- **you shouldn't have . . .**
- **If only you had . . .**

Sometimes it is an incessant inside voice which will just not stop, even at 3 in the morning. Sometimes we know our fault is imagined. Though it is not visible to the rest of the world, we still cannot seem to let go.

Sometimes our fault is real—we really were clearly wrong. If we only had a chance to do it over, we would now want to do something quite different.

The uncomfortable feelings we have are known as **guilt**.

- Does it help us to know that guilt is common?
- Does it help to know that in most cases, we couldn't or wouldn't really do anything different if we had another chance, particularly if we were operating with the same information we had at the time?
- Does it help to know we are already forgiven by God?
- Our problem may be that we never really learned how to forgive ourselves.

HOW THEN, DO WE DEAL WITH GUILT?

Acknowledge its presence by verbalizing it first to ourselves, and then to another person. Make it a clear statement:

- "When Fred was dying, I was cranky and irritable and never really told him I loved him."
- "Would Joan have died by suicide if she hadn't discovered me having an affair?"
- "I knew Joseph's smoking was killing him, and I never successfully got him to stop."
- "I should have stayed at the hospital the night Harvey died. I was tired, and didn't listen to myself. He died alone and I'm so unhappy that we never got to say goodbye."

We may need to express it in many ways, perhaps in writing or in conversation. We may need to act it out. We may need to identify a color, sound or picture to it. A hidden guilt seems to stay with us forever. A guilt that's brought out into the open loses its power to haunt us.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH OTHERS?

Some people want to tell us that our guilt is groundless, that we couldn't have acted any other way and shouldn't feel the way we do. While most of these comments are gratuitous, at some level it may be helpful to hear that the rest of the world doesn't appear to judge us as harshly as we are judging ourselves. We sometimes have a difficult time listening to these well-meaning people because we know they are incapable of really knowing what we are feeling.

CLARITY

Our feelings are justified in our eyes at the moment we are feeling the way we do. What we often don't recognize is that our perspective is frequently obscured by the traumatic events which have taken place. As we gain clarity, our perspective changes. Our feelings of guilt also have the ability to change.

How do we go about gaining clarity?

Once acknowledging our guilty feelings and listening to others tell us why we should or shouldn't feel this way, it is helpful to clearly review the circumstances which led to our feelings. These should be written down to ensure we haven't missed anything. The next step is to list all the reasons we might be feeling and reacting the way we are. Also list the mitigating circumstances which help to explain why we acted that way.

RESENTMENT

Many psychologists have found a link between resentment and guilt. Since guilt is often a reaction to things resented, it is sometimes useful for us to list all the people, circumstances or things we resented which feeds our guilt.

Examples:

- I resent having had the responsibility to decide whether Henry remained on life support.
- I resent that I was put in the position of needing to be Harry's nurse for the last 3 years. I never asked for that role nor was I particularly qualified for it.
- I resent that Joan treated me so poorly that I felt I needed other personal companionship.
- I resent that I wasn't able to say goodbye.

EXERCISE

For each guilt, put the words **I resent** before the situation. Does it talk to you? Can you associate with the resentment within the situation which you are now using to abuse yourself?