

Shame vs guilt

Shame. How many of you want to hide under your desk just from the mention of that word? Shame is a powerfully negative, full-body, high emotion experience. Shame can be easily confused with its close cousin: guilt. Here are 7 Differences between shame and guilt:

1. Shame means “I am wrong.” Guilt means “I did something wrong.”

Shame hurts our self-image and our belief that we can change things we don't like about ourselves or our situation.

Guilt is about feeling badly about a mistake.

2. Shame does not lead to positive change; guilt does.

When we experience shame, we often will try to ignore or avoid whatever caused the sense of shame. For example, when we feel shame about being overweight, we will avoid the gym or physical activity to avoid the feeling of shame.

Guilt is feeling badly about something and can inspire us to act differently in the future.

3. Shame always leads to disconnection from others. Guilt can lead to healing.

Shame prevents us from feeling strong enough to confess our mistakes, making us defensive when others point them out.

Confessing our errors allows us to be vulnerable with others, so guilty feelings can prompt us to build a connection through communication or changed behavior.

4. Shame is internalized and deeply connected to our sense of who we are. Guilt is often passing.

Shame-based comments appear to be accurate statements about our character or lack thereof. Those comments are easily internalized as truth about who we are, haunting us long after the comment was made.

Guilt, on the other hand, fades with time or after corrective action is taken.

5. Shame is never healthy or useful. Guilt can be healthy and useful.

Often people will make shaming comments with the best of intentions, hoping the comment will inspire someone to change something. As mentioned above, shame has the opposite effect.

Guilt, however, is a useful response that helps interpersonal relationships exist. Be careful how you convey negative feedback – it will work better to simply state the harm caused than to shame the other person.

6. Shame is about causing pain for an individual. Guilt is usually associated with accountability.

Shame is about making someone feel unworthy, different, or less than the speaker. Shameful comments are meant to hurt.

Comments that create guilty feelings are about communicating pain or disappointment, without casting negativity on the person as a whole.

7. Shame underlies a host of psycho-social problems: depression, substance abuse, infidelity, etc. Guilt does not.

Since shame is based on negative assessments of a person's entire being, feeling shame can contribute to larger mental health problems. If shame makes us feel worthless, we are more likely to develop depression. Avoiding overwhelming shame is easier if we drink to excess or abuse drugs. Shame is a trap.