



## **COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:**

### **MANAGING GUILT**

**Version 1, 5/15/2020**

One reaction that many people are feeling during the COVID-19 pandemic is guilt. We often experience guilt when we feel responsible for doing something wrong or are acting against one of our values. For example, if you care about being patient, you may feel guilty when you lose your temper. It doesn't seem to matter whether we really acted against a value or we just fear we *may* have (it feels terrible either way!). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many reasons people seem to feel guilty. They may feel guilty that they: are healthy and others are sick; might have spread the virus to someone else even though they followed the rules; are not teaching their children enough or providing them all the opportunities they wish they could; cannot visit or help out their older parents; have to work outside the home and put their family at increased risk for infection; or are not as productive as usual. Many people report moral injury, which is the guilt and pain associated with feeling like you're not acting according to your values because of situational pressures, demands, and/or circumstances that force you to choose from among a set of equally troubling options. (see picture below). Below are some tips for managing and reducing your guilty feelings, which can help enhance your well-being. Helpful resources are also included.

#### **Label and Monitor Your Guilty Feelings and Reactions to Moral Injury**

- Label what you are feeling as guilt
  - Greet your guilty feelings and be receptive to what they might mean
  - Label your feeling as related to moral injury if this fits best
- Know that feeling guilty can be a common emotion during times of crisis (e.g., guilt may come from having a job while others do not, being healthy while others around you are getting sick, thinking about the possibility of passing on the virus to others if you're asymptomatic, not feeling like you can help in the crisis, not being able to visit or care for family/friends, or being increasingly aware of inequality and the role of privilege in this crisis.)
- Check in with yourself and decide if your guilt is justified
  - Ask yourself, did one of my actions go against my personal values?
  - Ask yourself, do I feel guilty because I witnessed others act in ways that violate my personal morals or values?
- Recognize if guilt is influencing your behaviors in unhelpful ways
  - Notice if you are disconnecting from other people or sources of hope
  - Pay attention if you are not taking good care of yourself (e.g., use substances to cope, not exercising, not eating or sleeping)
  - Apologize if you feel your guilt is from something that could be helped by an apology, such as overreacting with a spouse or being impatient with your



children. This can help resolve your guilty feelings and improve relationships at the same time.

- Be aware when you are overcompensating (e.g., you are apologizing over and over even when you didn't really do anything wrong)
- Use your feeling of guilt to be productive and supportive, even if it cannot be in the ways you'd normally use – call your family member if you're unable to visit them, share a kind word with a frontline worker you encounter, volunteer with a local group in a way you feel comfortable with, or donate to a charity you believe in
- Remember the importance of taking good care of yourself during this stressful time
- Avoid engaging in overcompensating behaviors to reduce your guilty feelings - this can be draining and might not provide you with relief
- Strive to accept your feelings as a normal reaction when the reason for your guilt is out of your control

### **Use Constructive Self-Talk**

- Recognize that guilt feelings often are accompanied by thoughts that may make you feel worse and lead to unhelpful behaviors or reactions
- Pay attention to any of your thoughts that are overly critical or negative
- Try to reframe these negative and unhelpful thoughts in a way that is more fair
  - Consider reframing “I’m a terrible daughter because I haven’t visited my parents” to “I love my parents and I’m doing my best to connect with them safely on a regular basis during this pandemic”
  - Remind yourself that many people are in the same situation
- Avoid comparing yourself to others or holding yourself to unrealistic expectations - this can increase feelings of guilt even though everyone has very different challenges and stressors
- Tell yourself that during this time you are doing the best that you can for that day with the knowledge, resources, and emotional and physical reserves you currently have

### **Practice Self-Compassion**

- Be gentle with yourself and recognize the external stressors associated with the pandemic are greater than normal.
- Incorporate kindness into what you say to yourself each day
  - Create a kind, positive statement about yourself that you can remember easily and build into your daily routine, such as telling yourself: “I did the best I could do today and I’m a good person.”
- Use self-compassion prompts if you like to journal
- Try a guided meditation with a compassion and kindness theme



- Consider how you would counsel a loved one experiencing the same feelings and try to apply the same compassion and empathy to yourself
- Give yourself permission to let go of feelings that weigh you down more heavily than is necessary
  - Try an exercise to physically rid yourself of guilty feelings by writing them on paper and throwing it away or tearing it up

### **Prioritize Self-Care and Mindfulness**

- Maintain or start consistent self-care activities to build resilience and well-being:
  - Exercise
  - Do yoga
  - Eat healthy foods
  - Meditate
  - Express your thoughts and feelings in a journal
  - Do creative activities such as dancing, singing, reading, cooking, puzzles, coloring
  - Use an app-based or online guided meditation
  - Engage with spiritual or religious practices if applicable to you
- Stay connected to prevent isolation and ruminating on guilt
  - Schedule time daily for a virtual meeting or phone call with loved ones
  - Explore online support groups, exercise or yoga classes, and other activities offering virtual connection

### **Prioritize Moral Healing by Aligning your Actions with Your Values**

- Utilize the pain of guilt or moral injury to orient yourself toward values that are important to you
  - Tune into which aspects of the situation cause you pain; this pain can inform which values you want to align your actions with
  - Make different everyday decisions that lead you to behavior or act in ways that help you feel better
- Use a repair action, such as an apology, to reduce your guilty feelings if you acted counter to your values
- Do things that address some of the sources of moral pain related to COVID-19:
  - Call someone you have not talked to in a long time
  - Connect virtually with someone who may be feeling isolated
  - Cook a healthy meal for your family or a neighbor
  - Get involved with organizations that provide aid or relief
  - Interact with groups or communities that promote values you share
  - Post positive or kind messages on social media



- Consider responding to moral injury, or witnessing an action that violates your values, by finding a group with similar values to validate your experience
  - Take collective action (advocacy, action, service) with these groups and communities to serve in response to moral injury.

### **Process Your Feelings and Experiences with Supportive People**

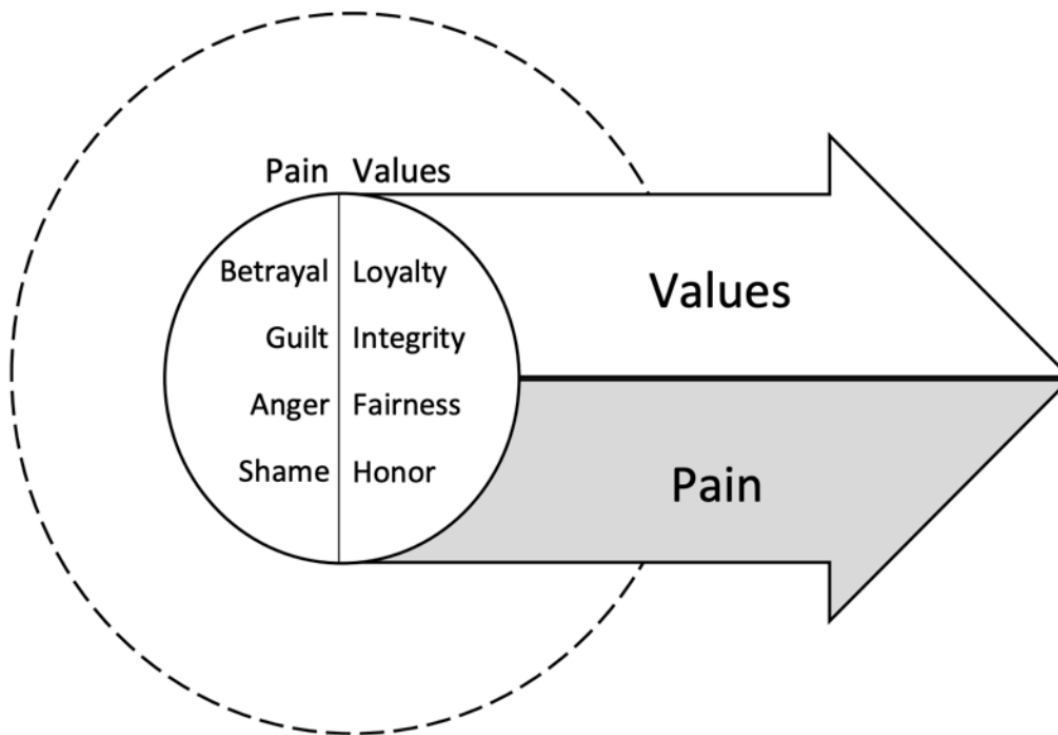
- Remember that others around you may also be experiencing guilt or moral injury, and it may be helpful to support each other
- Reach out to trusted people in your circle to discuss your feelings and reactions (e.g., family, friends, support groups, clergy, or your doctor/mental health professional)
- Choose activities to do together based on shared values, such as volunteering together or contributing in some way

### **Seek Professional Help if Needed**

- Recognize if your guilty feelings are overwhelming or impacting your mood and functioning
- Seek help from a professional for treatment options and recommendations



## Moral Healing



### Helpful Resources

- Band Back Together, <https://bandbacktogether.com/master-resource-links-2/emotions-feelings-resources/guilt-resources/>
- Good Therapy, Overcoming Guilt: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/guilt/overcome>
- Psychology Today, Guilt: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/guilt>
- Mindtools, Dealing with Guilt: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/dealing-with-guilt.htm>
- Psychology Today, Guilt and COVID-19: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fixing-families/202004/survivors-guilt-and-covid-19>
- Psychology Today, Tips for Handling Survivor Guilt: <https://www.psychologytoday.com>



- [com/us/blog/how-be-yourself/201711/six-tips-handling-survivor-guilt](https://www.businessinsider.com/5-steps-to-deal-with-guilt-during-covid-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-4#5-talk-to-yourself-like-a-trusted-friend-5)
- Business Insider: <https://www.businessinsider.com/5-steps-to-deal-with-guilt-during-covid-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-4#5-talk-to-yourself-like-a-trusted-friend-5>
  - Inquirer: <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/coronavirus-african-american-cases-deaths-survivors-guilt-20200506.html>
  - CDC, Taking Care of Your Emotional Health: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/self-care.asp>
  - SAMHSA: <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>
  - Psychology Tools: <https://www.psychologytools.com/psychological-resources-for-coronavirus-covid-19/>
  - Norman, S. B., Wilkins, K. C., Myers, U. S., & Allard, C. B. (2014). Trauma informed guilt reduction therapy with combat veterans. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 21(1), 78-88. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4231534/>
  - Farnsworth, J. K., Borges, L. M., & Walser, R. D. (2019). Moving Moral Injury Into the Future With Functional Contextualism: A Response to Nash’s “Unpacking Two Models for Understanding Moral Injury”(2019). *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 32(4), 633-638.
  - Evans, W. R., Walser, R. D., Drescher, K. D., & Farnsworth, J. K. (2020). [\*The Moral Injury Workbook: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Skills for Moving Beyond Shame, Anger, and Trauma to Reclaim Your Values\*](#). New Harbinger Publications.
  - Farnsworth, J. K., Drescher, K. D., Evans, W., & Walser, R. D. (2017). [A functional approach to understanding and treating military-related moral injury](#). *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 6(4), 391-397.