

# Men and Their Emotions: Guilt

In my last post in this series about a man's emotions, I wrote that pride often comes before a fall (Proverbs 16:18-19). For most of us, the failed actions that come out of our pride, often result in Guilt and Shame, which are among the most painful of human emotions.

As with the other emotions outlined in this series (Pridefulness, Happiness, Sadness, Fear, and Anger, our mismanaged emotions can be destructive and cause us to hide.



But unlike the others, Guilt, when channeled in the right way, can actually help men own their responsibility as a godly man.

Let's first define guilt and shame to better understand how these emotions play into a man's role and responsibility.

## Guilt Defined

Vocabulary.com indicates you experience guilt when you feel bad about doing something wrong or committing some offense. Guilt is the state of having committed the offense – it's also the opposite of "innocence."

The noun guilt stems from the Old English word *gylt*, meaning "crime, sin, fault, or fine." Feelings of guilt are typical after you've done something you shouldn't have, like cheating on your spelling test or stealing from your parent's loose-change jar as a child. As an adult, guilt arises after dating your best friend's girlfriend shortly after their break-up or getting caught in some immoral behavior such as viewing pornography or adultery.

Many believe that apathy among men is the root cause for many of the problems we face these days. Apathy leans toward a "no guilt" attitude to life which causes passivity.

But healthy guilt also helps us form our conscience. We would not want a world without conscience where people are shameless and free of guilt to do anything they wish.

In her article *Men and Shame*, Lisa Ferentz, states that much has been written about the cultural influence of boys and the powerful messages they get about what it means to be "a successful man." These messages include being emotionally strong; handling our challenges alone, and not asking for help. The message leads to men avoiding being vulnerable; exuding a false confidence; appearing clever and pretending to know how to solve all problems. On the positive side, being a

successful man means being responsible for everything in your areas of influence. It's also knowing your self-worth is not contingent upon your job or how much money you make.

Ferentz writes that these cultural messages are inherently unfair to boys and men since –when we “fall short” in any of these areas, it creates anxiety, self-doubt, depression, anger, grief and shame.

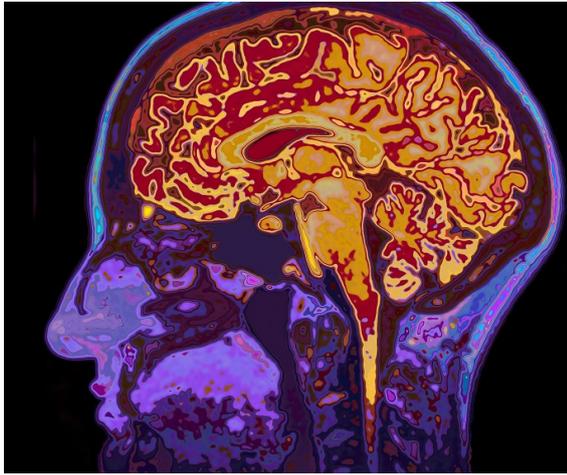
In my opinion, these messages lead many guys to not even wanting to step up to accept their responsibilities as a godly man.

Basically, guilt and shame leads to apathy and passivity.

## **Environmental and Physiological Reaction to Guilt**

The terms guilt and shame are popularly interchangeable, but their psychological meanings are quite different. Shame arises from a negative evaluation of the self (“I did something wrong”) whereas guilt comes from a negative evaluation of one’s behavior (“I did something wrong”). Shame is a general feeling of inadequacy; guilt is a specific sense of transgression.

In the article, [Your Brain on Guilt and Shame at BrainFacts.org](#), the author quotes Daniel Sznycer, a social psychologist and assistant professor at the University of Montreal who says that—while “When we act in a way we are not proud of, the brain broadcasts a signal that prompts us to alter our conduct.”, says Sznycer.



MRI Image Of Head  
Showing Brain

While the emotions of guilt and shame share some neural networks in the frontal and temporal areas of the brain, their patterns are distinctly different. Sznycer's research suggests that the differences serve an important, adaptive function important for human survival.

During fMRI studies, German scientists from Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich found that shame sets off high activity in the right part of the brain but no activity in the amygdala. In the guilt state though, there was high activity in both the amygdala and frontal lobes. The researchers concluded that shame is a more complex emotion whereas; guilt is linked only to a person's learned social standards.

One study also suggests that men feel less guilt than women.

Itziar Etxebarria, at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) wrote about research in the *Spanish Journal of Psychology*, "Our initial hypothesis was that feelings of guilt are more intense among females, not only among adolescents but

*also among young and adult women, and they also show the highest scores for interpersonal sensitivity,"* The research used samplings from three age groups (156 teenagers, 96 young people, and 108 adults) equally divided between males and females. When it came to comparing the measurements of the intensity of habitual guilt, the score was significantly higher for women, in all three age groups. The interpersonal sensitivity of men (especially those aged between 25-33) was "comparatively low" with a particularly stark difference in the 40-50-year-old age group.

So, the main problem is not that women feel a lot of guilt (which they do), but rather that many males feel "too little." according to the study.

## **What the Bible says about Guilt**

In his book *Called To Act: 5 Uncomplicated Disciplines for Men*, author and speaker, Vince Miller writes that since the beginning of Creation, God has searched for a man who will take action in the battle against the sin of apathy. Genesis 2:16-17 explains that Adam and Eve were told they were free to eat anything except for the tree of knowledge or they would die. Ever since the Garden of Eden, the first man did not understand the ramifications of his actions (or his inaction, depending on how you interpret Genesis).

So what happened?



The first couple sinned by disobeying God's instructions. Adam then felt shame but probably not guilt after eating the forbidden fruit. Both Adam and Eve then cover themselves with fig leaves since they feel unworthy and embarrassed. Before they sinned, the couple "were both naked, and they felt no

shame" (Genesis 2:25), but now they are naked and ashamed. When God walks about the garden, they hide. They sense something wrong with themselves, but not with their actions.

Ever since, man has failed with their sins.

But do we feel guilty enough to change our behavior?

The good news is that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1). Paul continues "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13).

This is really good news.

But our guilt must lead to action. The action is repentance, a turning away from our sin, and not returning to it.

## **How God Buddies Respond to Guilt**

Despite our sinful nature, no man wakes up intending to fail on purpose. He also does not wake up intending to sin (well, most men anyway!).

Godly men should feel guilty about failing in their God-given design and standards of masculinity.



But guilt should not appear in the same sentence as accountability. Men need some accountability to act like a godly man.

But it should be proper accountability.

As someone who grew up Catholic, it took me many years to overcome my feelings of guilt and shame without an act of confession or feeling that I must work off my sins with good deeds or wait until they go away in purgatory.

One of my earliest God Buddies, Chris Davolos, helped me understand that difference.

Now as a Presbyterian, I no longer need to carry the guilt of all the sins I have committed or will commit in the future. We do not believe that sins are graded out, nor do we believe we can earn our way out of our sins. Sin is sin and confession is important. But God's grace and forgiveness is a free gift to us who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A God Buddy can help you understand this gift.

Your God Buddy can also help you craft a proper apology for any wrongdoing to ease your feelings of guilt. An apology begins by acknowledging your violations, taking responsibility for the impact of those actions, asking for forgiveness, and ultimately repairing ruptures in your relationships with God and your family and your friends that came out of those actions.

Although it might seem intimidating to "own up" to your bad behaviors, you can ease the feelings of guilt and shame by moving closer to Christlikeness, our ultimate goal as a God Buddy.

Next up in the emotion of Anxiety.