

TOXIC GUILT

By Bob and Marlene Neufeld

Is guilt ever useful?

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert has the realization, “Guilt’s just your ego’s way of tricking you into thinking that you’re making moral progress.” (p. 183)

Guilt is often toxic. It may seem that it is there to help us change, but it doesn’t often actually cause real lasting change. It more often causes self-doubt, self-recrimination, and self-judgment. It reduces self-esteem and self-confidence. Over and over again, we see how toxic guilt paralyzes our clients. It tricks us into thinking that we’re dealing with our mistakes when all we are doing is feeling bad about them. Does feeling bad about something open us to learning? Not in our experience.

In a novel by Gail Anderson-Dargatz called *A Rhinestone Button*, the main character, Job, is exhorted by a fundamentalist preacher to use guilt to convert people. When people are bombarded by guilt, they are more malleable, easier to control. While this example is extreme and, in many ways, a caricature, it demonstrates that many of us are in thrall to guilt and our Inner Critic who keeps telling us how unworthy of love we are, especially unworthy of self-love. Another character in the book says, “God is never going to be happy [with me], is He?” When we see God as needing guilt to bring us to him, then we can never see God as loving and accepting.

Guilt is a combination of two of the core emotions, anger and fear. We have found it useful in our clients and ourselves to explore what we are angry about and what we are afraid about to unravel guilt. **Self flagellation is optional.** It is in fact, a detour, and doesn’t really help us to learn or grow; it actually keeps our destructive patterns in place.

Studies have shown that one negative statement can outweigh seven positive statements. That means that you need seven encouraging loving thoughts to compensate for one self-blaming or self-judging thought. Do you give yourself that many? Every time you feel guilty about something, do you allow yourself to think about seven things you appreciate about yourself? We’re no talking about false praise, ignoring your mistakes. We’re talking about genuinely generating love and appreciation and opening to learning from every interaction.

We would like to distinguish toxic guilt from that inner voice which is often labeled as your conscience. This voice may question your behaviours, or invite you to genuine regret or remorse. This voice is a voice to be listened to, and responded to, and if accepted in a friendly, loving way, can be an impetus for learning and growth.

We recommend that you let go of toxic guilt. We recommend a more loving approach. We recommend that when you make a mistake, you treat yourselves as you would treat a treasured grandchild, with love and encouragement. Ask what you can learn from this, and, if needed, address the consequence of your actions and then do something to handle the source of the mistake so that it doesn’t repeat. But don’t waste valuable time in beating yourself up and feeling guilty.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com.