

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

## News & Views

### *Guilt & Regret*

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## Dealing with Guilt and Regret

*"If matters had fallen out differently, she wondered, might she not have met some other man? She tried to picture to herself the things that might have been-- that different life, that unknown husband. He might have been handsome, intelligent, distinguished, attractive..."*

By Flaubert in Madame Bovary

If we are honest with ourselves, each of us would have to admit that there have been times in our lives when we have pondered over the questions, "If only I had not done this...or what if I would have done that instead?" For some, living in the "what if" and the "if only" can become a way of life that can lead not only to depression and unnecessary guilt, but also bitterness and the inability to enjoy the positive things in one's life.

Regret and guilt are two emotions that we all experience at one time or another. One might look at regret as the sense of sorrow that one feels over things that were done or not done in the realization of how things might have been different if one had chosen to do things in a different way. Short-term regrets frequently grow out of recent or short-term actions in which we can see more immediate negative results. Long-term regrets frequently arise out of inaction and our failure to do certain things that, in the long run, might have had very positive and desirable results. Guilt, on the other hand, is an emotion that one hopefully experiences when he recognizes that he has violated some personally important moral or social standard and often with the result that others may have been intentionally or unintentionally harmed. Guilt arises when there is a difference between one's actual behavior and what she believes she should have done based upon some sense of what is right and wrong.

Guilt and regret often occur due to the same action. One might see guilt as regret associated with a moral or perhaps social violation of generally acceptable behavior. Although one might experience regret without guilt, it is difficult to imagine feeling guilt without at least some regret for most individuals. Before moving on, a couple of distinctions should be made. The first is the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is the emotion one feels when he has done something wrong, while shame is felt when one deeply believes that there is something wrong with who he is. Shame is often the result of our past history and upbringing in which we have often been told that we should feel guilt about what we have done, what we are as a person, or even for characteristics with which we were born, such as skin color, intelligence, or even family background.

### *True Guilt vs. False Guilt*

This brings us to a second issue, which I frequently find relevant in working with my patients. This relates to the issue of "true guilt" versus "false guilt." True guilt is when we have done something wrong and then feel guilty about it and have regrets. This is an emotionally healthy response, and, in fact, one greatly worries when there is no feeling of guilt after doing something wrong. This is often the case with what is known as an antisocial personality. This individual frequently can do wrong things with impunity in committing crimes or in hurting others and yet feel very little remorse, regret, or sense of guilt. These can truly be dangerous individuals. When one experiences true guilt, the healthy response is to first acknowledge that he has done wrong, to try to make amends to those who have been hurt if at all possible, and then to try and commit oneself to not doing the same thing again. Hopefully, in an emotionally healthy individual one can anticipate feeling guilty over certain actions and then avoid doing them. This set of internal guidelines was originally termed the "superego" by Freud, and it is developed through one's upbringing and interaction with surrounding cultural values. However, even good things can become distorted.

False guilt is when an individual feels guilt, but in reality she has not done anything wrong. In my experience, this frequently occurs when one has been raised in an environment where guilt is frequently used to manipulate others. Children are particularly susceptible to this, as children need to be able to trust the adults in their environment in order to feel safe. Therefore, if a trusted adult says that the child has done something wrong, then the child will tend to believe them. Unfortunately, in this environment individuals can grow up thinking that many of the things they do are wrong

even when they are not. Other individuals who are prone to using "guilt trips" to manipulate others often sense this, and therefore individuals prone to false guilt frequently find themselves in relationships in which this may be used to manipulate them. At other times they may need no help at all and frequently are quite adept at replaying for themselves the old "guilt messages" with which they grew up. Individuals who are prone to false guilt need to get into the habit of recognizing when they are feeling guilty, to learn to psychologically "take a step back" in their own mind to question whether or not they have truly done something wrong, and then to act based upon this truth rather than these old messages of false guilt with which they have lived. It's important to remember that you don't have to go on a guilt trip unless you're willing to buy the ticket, so make sure it's a valid ticket.

### *Why Do We Have Regret Anyway?*

Regret and guilt only serve positive functions when they are valid. Therefore, when they occur, each needs to be examined closely as to whether it is based on truth or not. We have already touched on the concept of false guilt, so now let's take a look at regret. Regrets are based upon comparisons between how things are and how we imagine that they could be or should be. One term that can be used to define an imagined alternative outcome has been called a "counterfactual." A counterfactual is a comparison between something that has actually happened and an alternative outcome that we can imagine. It is composed of our imagining a behavior that is changed and the effect that has on an alternative outcome. This alternative outcome could be better or worse than what actually happened. The problem for most of us is that we tend to imagine the glass half empty and therefore imagine our alternative outcomes as being better than what it actually is. This can have a huge impact on how we view our life and whether we have a sense of gratefulness and contentment or are bitter and disgruntled. An example might be a silver medalist in the Olympics who constantly repeats in his mind what he might have done differently to win the gold medal, as opposed to a bronze medalist who focuses on the small things that could have happened or gone wrong that would have prevented him from getting any medal at all. Which will tend to be more grateful for his medal? We each have events in our life every day that we can assess in a similar matter, whether seeing it positively or negatively.

Why do we create these counterfactual thoughts anyway? Sometimes unexpected negative events or feelings will occur, and we need to find an explanation for them to make sense of our world. Sometimes we may experience a very "close call", whether it is positive or negative, and again we are looking for answers to explain events. Trying to understand our world is just part of our being human. At times we may find ourselves or others acting in ways that are hard to understand, and our counterfactual explanations may present what feels like an answer or solution. Things that normally we can control, such as our own behaviors and actions, are often more likely to be questioned and explored through counterfactual thoughts when traumatic life events occur. We again are looking for explanations and understanding in trying to maintain our belief that somehow the world does make sense. For many, their spiritual and religious beliefs help them understand and at times to gain comfort and hope from events that otherwise make no sense.

The result of this counterfactual thinking can be varied. As noted above, it may give us a greater sense of contentment and appreciation of events in our life, or it can become a breeding ground for discontent and bitterness. It may help us to differentiate between true guilt, false guilt, and shame, which as we have seen, can be vital for emotional health. Hopefully, it can also be a source of learning so that we can better handle future events by learning from our past. What we don't want to happen is to become paralyzed by our counterfactual thinking, whether it is about past events or future events. I see many individuals who struggle with making decisions, even minor ones, for fear of making a mistake. The truth is that generally there is no perfect decision that one can completely foresee the outcome. If there were, then there would be no decision to be made, as what needed to be done would be clearly obvious. To make decisions, we try to learn from our realistic past guilt and regrets, gather whatever information is available regarding the decision, consult with those that we trust, pray if one has that spiritual base, and then make the decision recognizing that one can never anticipate all the variables. I would also suggest that we then look for how the glass may be half-full rather than half-empty as events proceed.



Do you have topical requests for future newsletters? Let us know at: NewsletterQuestions@stonebriarps.com



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