



Guilt: Friend or Foe?

by MARIE WALL

Over and over I hear teachers talk about guilt and how it is controlling much of their lives. With this, there is also a sense of powerlessness to do anything about it, except work more and work harder to try to dispel the guilt. This sense of powerlessness stems from the deep misunderstandings about what guilt is, when it is useful, when it is destructive, and how to work with guilt when it arises. In my discussions with teachers, there was the realization that this guilt and powerlessness is a contributor to the levels of stress teachers often experience. Changing how guilt plays out in our lives can be one small step that can have an impact on many areas of life.

People often immediately see guilt as a bad thing; yet “healthy” guilt affects our growth toward responsibility

and wholeness. It is when guilt rules our lives that it becomes detrimental. To understand guilt, we first need to understand what it is and from where it comes. Some say that guilt is not a feeling, but rather a mental concept that produces feelings of shame, grief or anger – feelings that are often internalized and can be destructive. Guilt comes from a social awareness of living and working with others, which calls us to deal fairly in a community setting. We experience guilt when we hurt or offend another person. Guilt is the process of judging or condemning one’s behaviour, thoughts or words. Guilt is a message from our conscience when we offend someone, just as pain is a physiological response when someone is injured. When guilt is appropriate it is useful in helping someone to right a wrong. Confusion results when guilt is constantly present in one’s life and a person is feeling guilty over most everything they do or say.

Two types of guilt can be considered – false and real. False guilt stems from unrealistic expectations of oneself and perceived expectations from others. When false guilt is in its extreme, it dictates a person’s life, gives little or no room for self-appreciation, is a cause of low self-esteem, contributes to higher levels of stress, and can lead to destructive attitudes and behaviours. The source of false guilt is in the need for love and acceptance. As a child, this need would be directed towards the parents. In adulthood the patterns may continue but the need for acceptance is often directed at our family, and particularly our peers. There is no room for compassion or perspective when false guilt is in operation. Yet it is compassion for the person and for oneself that is required when someone has been hurt.

For teachers, much of the guilt that is experienced is false guilt, resulting in self-doubt, suspicion, and stress. As a teacher there are realistic expectations that must be achieved and maintained in order to function well in this education setting; however, it is the idealistic striving for perfection that drives a person into unhealthy habits. To change your patterns with guilt it is important to become reflective and to be willing to live with some discomfort until new methods of coping become more familiar and comfortable.

Real guilt is easier to deal with because it is concrete and can be confronted. It occurs when one’s conscience



WELLNESS TIPS FOR TEACHERS

To work with your emotions use the following process...

- Notice what you are feeling. Name it specifically.
- Ask yourself, “Where did this come from? What is it telling me?”
- Ask yourself if this is a real concern or does it belong to someone else?
- Ask yourself (and trust), “What do I need at this time?”
- Imagine yourself receiving the very thing you need.
- Again, notice and see what has changed.
- Is there anything further you need at this time?

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or “self-evaluator” indicates that a wrong has been committed and a person has been hurt by our behaviour. This harm may sometimes be willful, but more often it is unintentional yet hurtful all the same. Real guilt results in feelings of remorse for one’s actions rather than feelings of shame. Real guilt is much easier to manage because the offending behaviour can be identified and rectified. It is often perpetuated against someone we love or care for and we do not want harm to come to that person. Real guilt causes us to feel remorseful and calls us into action to reconcile with the offended party and change our own behaviour so as not to experience that type of feeling in the future. Real guilt calls us to self-honesty, to become more aware of our actions and their effect on ourselves and others. It demands personal emotional growth in accepting the feelings of remorse and the harm done, to work through these feelings and learn to forgive ourselves and reconcile with the other. This process is an avenue to build self-esteem. When a person acknowledges his or her behaviour, works through the feelings, and takes action to reconcile with the other person, he/she appreciates a deepened acceptance of oneself and the knowledge of being able to handle uncomfortable situations.

There are some things you can do when you experience guilt. The first is to identify if you are feeling real or false guilt. To reflect on what you are feeling, ask yourself, “Am I feeling shame, anger, or remorse?” If the answer is remorse, there are some definite things you can do. Identify what action has been harmful, who has been hurt, and what needs to be done to rectify the situation. On the other hand, if the feelings are shame or anger, false guilt is most likely at play and external expectations are the culprit. In this instance the work becomes yours. Ask yourself, “What am I needing? Is it approval or acceptance?” Then as a mature adult it is essential to learn to give yourself that validation. Accept that some people may not understand your actions or motives. The test is integrity. If you know your actions do not counter the integrity of your work, then you can release the guilt and move on.

Remember, feelings (including guilt) are neither good nor bad. They are messages to help you understand what action needs to be taken. While real guilt is a choice, conscious or unconscious, false guilt is a compulsive pattern that does not allow the freedom to be responsible in one’s actions. The first step to change is always identifying the problem, since if we do not identify the problem, there is no need to change it.

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