

Guilt: when it is useful – and what to do if it takes over your life

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Many people feel guilty when watching horrific things happen to others on the news. It can also hit when we think about a time we broke someone's heart, snapped at a child or deeply hurt a friend's feelings. In fact, most of us feel guilt from time to time, and it can be a deeply unpleasant experience.

But why do we feel guilty so easily – what purpose does it serve? And what can we do if it becomes unbearable? Luckily, psychological research provides some answers.

Guilt alerts us that our moral standards have been somehow violated. It is a feeling of remorse over something terrible that we contribute to, or ignore, which explains why so many people feel guilty when watching the news.

People differ in how easily they feel guilt, based on their personality and life experiences. Those who have high levels of empathy or care a lot about social relationships may be more prone to feeling guilty, while people who have high levels of “dark personality traits”, such as psychopathy or narcissism, may be less inclined to do so.

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Guilt is often contrasted with shame, which describes self-demonisation. When you feel guilty, you think that you did something wrong; when you feel shame, you feel that there is something wrong with you for doing that thing. While shame is rarely useful, and often leads to social withdrawal, guilt may have either positive or negative consequences.

You can experience guilt relating to various life circumstances. For example, eco-guilt relates to feeling guilty about the environment. Survivor's guilt describes guilt experienced by those who got away unharmed from a dangerous situation, such as surviving a war or COVID, when so many other people died. But we also experience guilt when we did something we should not have done.

Guilt can be good for you

Guilt can be what researchers call “adaptive”, meaning it can benefit us and help us survive. When we feel guilty, it is a sign that our moral compass is working, and we can tell the difference between what is right and wrong. This ultimately helps people get on with and care for one another.

Guilt can help us connect with others, especially when bad things happen to them. Seeing someone suffer and feeling guilty makes us more likely to engage in “reparative behaviours”, such as extending an olive branch or being exceptionally generous with our resources, all of which eases the guilt we feel. Experiencing guilt can motivate people to apologise for doing something bad, thereby minimising inequalities in society.

In the same way, guilt can be useful in romantic relationships, too, helping us to treat our partner well – and make up for it if we fail to do so.

When it comes to witnessing wars, famines or disease outbreaks on the news, guilt may inspire us to volunteer or donate money. Watching the generosity of other people who play an active role in helping others is also guilt-provoking, which can in turn activate us to take similar action – thus paying forward.

When guilt gets too much

But guilt can also have negative consequences and become “maladaptive”. There are two types of guilt which are particularly damaging to us: free-floating guilt and contextual guilt. Free-floating guilt occurs when you experience a general feeling of guilt; you feel you are not a good person. On the other hand, contextual guilt relates to taking too much responsibility for something – such as endlessly trying to help an ex in all areas of their life because you feel bad about breaking up with them.



Many parents feel guilt on a daily basis. [fizkes/Shutterstock](#)

But in both cases, there's nothing you can really do to reduce your feelings of guilt. Instead, the feelings and actions continue, which make them maladaptive. For example, if you constantly feel like a bad person, this may get in the way of forming new relationships – you may subconsciously sabotage them because you don't feel you deserve them. And if your guilt never stops, you may spend so much time and energy taking actions to try to address it that you burn out, develop an anxiety disorder or become depressed.

When watching the news, you may start experiencing maladaptive guilt if you cannot pinpoint where the guilt is coming from – it may just become a general feeling. This could also be the case if you feel personal responsibility for the bad news even though there is little you can do to change the circumstances.

The best way to deal with a guilty conscience is to take action that is *appropriate* to the situation. If it is an eco-guilt you experience, it may involve making small changes in your own life to ensure you live in a more sustainable way. You can also engage in community activities that help others understand the catastrophic climate situation. And if you feel guilty about how you treated a friend, it makes sense to apologise and offer to help in some way.

If you are experiencing survivor's guilt, you may want to consider writing a letter of self-forgiveness, in which you detail what aspects of

responsibility you want to take, show remorse, apologise to yourself and try to make amends.

The key in all these scenarios, however, is to ultimately let go of the pain. The world isn't a fair place, and everybody makes mistakes sometimes. Endlessly blaming ourselves can be draining – and counter productive. To muster up the energy and drive we need to create positive change around us, we need to feel good about ourselves occasionally, too.

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