



Shame vs. Guilt: Why the Difference Matters for Healing

An explainer and reflection prompts · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
© 2026 Insightful Journey Inc. All rights reserved. Free for personal use. Not for resale or redistribution.

At a glance

- Guilt says, "I did something bad." Shame says, "I am bad."
- Guilt tends to motivate repair. Shame tends to make us hide, withdraw, or lash out.
- Learning to tell them apart is one of the most freeing shifts in healing.

Two feelings that look alike

Guilt and shame both show up when we feel we've done something wrong. From the outside, they can look the same. But inside, they lead in very different directions.

	Guilt	Shame
Focus	A behaviour: "I did something wrong."	The self: "Something is wrong with me."
Inner voice	"That wasn't okay. I can make it right."	"I'm a terrible person. Everyone will see it."
Urge	Apologize, repair, do better	Hide, withdraw, deflect, blame, or attack
Effect on relationships	Often brings people closer through repair	Often creates distance and secrecy
Over time	Supports growth and responsibility	Linked with depression, anxiety, and self-criticism

What the research says

Decades of research led by Dr. June Tangney show that guilt-proneness is linked with empathy and repair, while shame-proneness is linked with anger, defensiveness, and psychological distress (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). Compassion-focused therapy was developed in part for people with high shame and self-criticism, and helps build a kinder inner voice (Gilbert, 2009).

Where shame often comes from

Shame frequently has roots in early experiences: harsh criticism, being compared, being told you were "too much," or growing up where mistakes weren't safe. It can also come from cultural, family, or community messages about what is acceptable. In many families, including South Asian and other collectivist communities, worries about "what will people think" can make shame feel especially heavy.

Shame isn't proof that you are bad. It is often proof that you were once taught to believe it.

Tool: Shame or Guilt? Reflection Prompts

Think of a recent moment you felt bad about yourself. Move through these prompts slowly. There are no wrong answers.

1. What happened? (Describe it as a neutral observer would.)

2. What did my inner voice say about it?

3. Was that voice talking about something I did, or about who I am?

4. Whose voice does this sound like? (A parent, teacher, culture, an old relationship?)

5. If this is guilt: what small step of repair or learning could I take?

6. If this is shame: what would I say to a dear friend who felt this way?

7. One kinder, truer sentence I can say to myself:

Shifting from shame toward self-compassion

- **Separate the act from the self.** "I made a mistake" instead of "I am a mistake."
- **Bring it into the light.** Shame grows in secrecy. Sharing with someone safe often shrinks it.

- **Use your name.** Speaking to yourself in the third person ("Alex, that was hard") can create gentle distance.
- **Make repair if it's needed.** Healthy guilt is useful information. Act on it, then let it go.

When to reach out for support

If shame feels constant, keeps you isolated, or is tied to painful past experiences, therapy can offer a safe space to understand where it comes from and to build self-compassion.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Gilbert, P. (2009). The compassionate mind. Constable & Robinson.

Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2002). Shame and guilt. Guilford Press.

Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. Annual Review of Psychology, 58, 345–372.

Usage Notice

© 2026 Insightful Journey Inc. All rights reserved.

This resource is intended for personal growth and education purposes only. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced, shared, or distributed in any form, digital or printed, without prior written consent from Insightful Journey Inc.

This material is the intellectual property of Insightful Journey Inc. and may not be modified, resold, or integrated into other programs or publications.

For permissions or clinical use inquiries, please contact: info@insightfuljourney.ca

Insightful Journey Inc. | www.insightfuljourney.ca