GUILT AND SHAME

By: James E. Campbell M.D.

"Guilt upon the conscience, like rust upon iron, both defiles and consumes it, gnawing and creeping into it, as that does which at last eats out the very heart and substance of the metal."
South

"I never wonder to see men wicked, but I often wonder to see them not ashamed."
Swift

Some authors discuss shame and guilt as one entity while others see these as very different aspects of experience.: Shakespeare, a prolific writer who has commented on guilt, said "The mind of guilt is full of scorpions." "Better it were that all the miseries which nature owns were ours at once than guilt." "They whose guilt within their bosom lies, imagine every eye beholds their blame." "Though it sleep long, the venom of great guilt, when death, or danger, or detection comes, will bite the spirit fiercely." "Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind; the thief doeth fear each bush and officer." Guilt is considered a rather formidable persuader when it comes to directing human behavior. According to Horace Bushnell, "Guilt is the very nerve of sorrow." Blair said "Adversity, how blunt are all the arrows of thy quiver in comparison with those of guilt." Shame also carries a rather extensive regard by some; Platius concluded "I regard that man as lost, who has lost his sense of shame." Maria Edgeworth adds "Shame is nature's hasty conscience, and Thompson declared "Of all evils to the generous shame is the most deadly pain."

The individuals who come for therapy often carry their own visions of shame and guilt. For most, guilt is the feeling that they have when they believe they have done something wrong, are possibly going to be punished, or will evoke someone's displeasure. Shame, a less frequently used description of oneself, is the term conveying exposure of our faults to others. Traditionally shame and guilt have important psychological differentiations that should be kept in mind by the clinician if he is going to understand patients' communications. Patients, being unaware that "shame and guilt!" describe different personal experiences, do not use these terms clearly.

Most authors agree that guilt and shame emerge somewhere between the ages of two and five. Eric Erickson, in his Eight Ages of Man, sees shame as rising out of the second stage which he calls "Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt.” Autonomy being synonymous with control and a wish to have a choice. Shame arises from immaturity in dealing with life situations, or lack of ability to develop complete control. Erickson states, "Shame is an emotion insufficiently studied because in our civilization it is so early and easily absorbed by guilt. Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked

at: In one word, self-consciousness. One is visible and not ready to be visible; which is why we dream of shame as a situation in which we are stared at in a condition of incomplete dress, in night at-tire, 'with one's pants down'." Shame gives way in the third stage of development called Initiative versus Guilt. "Visual shame produces auditory guilt which is a sense of badness to be had all by oneself when nobody watches and when everything is quiet - except the voice of the super initiative is approaching what seems desirable and hoping for new responsibility. It includes things such as planning and doing for the sake of being active. The conquest becomes pleasurable in itself. The association with guilt emerges because initiative often brings one into conflict with others in such a way that one's capabilities are over-stepped. It is exemplified in the competitiveness of the small child with the adult. With initiative comes fantasies of one's powers and confrontation with one's vulnerability, a combination often leading to the castration complex and an intensified fear of failure. Guilt may be associated with many different factors and most agree it is a complex emotion, closely related to anxiety, disgust, and shame; and that it has elements of disapproval, fear of punishment, or loss of love. The anticipation and dread of the forthcoming consequences make it a painful experience may be the product of conscience or unconscious conflict. When unconscious it tends to stimulate abnormal behavior while the more conscious the conflict the more one experiences the sense of pain. Guilt and shame are thought by some to have a socially valuable side - being a necessary component in an individual's achievement of a true sense of socialization. (ie. Swift)

In clinical practice it is best to view guilt and shame as different entities. Shame can be considered the body feeling that comes when an individual is unable to live up to their image or expectations of themselves. These expectations may be part of their family code, upbringing, values interjected from early family experiences or ideas developed over their lifetime. When an individual experiences a need to be perfect it results in a sense of shame about day-to-day accomplishments. Individuals unable to raise their behavior to the level wanted will experience a sense of disharmony called shame. Helping individuals over this sense of shame means raising their level of functioning to better match the image they have or requires lowering the image, so it more closely matches their capabilities. Where an individual believes he should be functioning is relative and many who function at an extremely high level still experience disharmony because their perfectionism leaves them feeling that they are not accomplishing what they should.

Guilt can be seen as a body feeling that comes when an individual is unwilling to accept the cost or consequences of his decisions. Guilt in a practical sense has nothing whatsoever to do with the rightness, wrongness, goodness, or badness of any given act. It is purely the end product of the way an individual perceives his action. All decisions should be composed. of at least three parts: The first is an evaluation of the alternatives, the second is a consideration of the costs/rewards that a given action will bring, and the third is the action. There is no decision when individuals unwilling to evaluate the costs experience a sense of guilt arising from day to day "decisions". (ie.) An individual who goes

to Las Vegas and places money on the spin of a roulette wheel, will feel guilty only if he cannot afford the loss. An individual recognizing and accepting the possibility of loss will not be devastated like a person unwilling or unable psychologically to accept the cost. Costs are not all measured in money; a parent's disapproval, a wife's harassment, a boss' displeasure all represent potential costs in making decisions. An individual not considering costs are setting up to develop guilt. Eliminating the experience of guilt requires learning to carefully evaluate what the potential costs are in any given decision to see if the psychological attitude to accept the costs is present. Patients may be advised that if they cannot afford the costs of a given decision then perhaps, they should not make that decision. (ie. If one cannot afford to lose one should not bet)

Summary:
The mechanisms behind shame and guilt are quite different. Helping a person deal with these two different experiences requires few moments of time on a physician's part to elicit whether or not the individual is discussing shame or guilt. Even though the two may be co-mingled and may exist at the same time in a given individual, one must help the patient divide their experience into parts so they can apply the proper principal to bringing about a solution.

1. Redlich, Fredrick C., Freedman, Daniel X: The Theory and Practice of Psychotherapy, Basic Books, Inc.,
New York and London, 1966

2. Erickson, Eric: Eight Ages of Man. Childhood Psycho-pathology, Harrison, Saul I., McDermott, John F (Eds) International Universities Press, Inc., New York, 1972 p-114