



SELF-HELP EXERCISE: REPAIRING SHAME AND GUILT

INTRODUCTION



Shame and guilt occur when a combat or operational experience produces serious inner conflict. It can shake a veteran's confidence in their own, or another's, ability to act in a just, ethical, and fair manner. Shame and guilt can occur from witnessing immoral acts, failing to stop immoral acts, or doing things in war that go against religious, personal, military, moral, or ethical values.

Guilt and shame about things done or not done (or things others have done) in war is not uncommon. You are not alone. During war, the normal rules of morality and behavior are distorted. Service members are required to do things in the context of war that they would never do under normal circumstances.

Combat and operational experiences may cause:

- ★ Shame and guilt
- ★ Shattered trust in others
- ★ Less motivation to act morally and ethically
- ★ Reluctance to get close to people (e.g., "If you really got to know me and my history, you would reject me")
- ★ Loss of faith or spirituality
- ★ Strong negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness)
- ★ Difficulty feeling positive emotions, including joy, happiness, satisfaction, and peacefulness
- ★ Poor self-care, or self-harm (e.g., "I don't deserve to be happy," "I don't deserve to be successful," "I deserve to suffer")

It's hard for anyone to re-establish trust in others and themselves, to restore confidence in morality and ethics, to regain faith, and to forgive themselves or others after being exposed to war experiences that cause serious psychological wounds. Healing is possible. There are things you can do to create a new sense of purpose, hope, and goodness.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get clear on what happened and what it means moving forward.

If you are feeling guilty, chances are you have been doing some serious condemning of yourself or others. And, because these experiences are so painful to think about, you have probably been avoiding thinking about what happened and what it might mean.



**WOUNDED WARRIOR
PROJECT**

To help you move forward, consider writing about the situations that occurred when you were deployed, which may have contributed to your guilty feelings. Writing about your experiences can help you clarify what happened and be less condemning, especially if you consider all the details and special circumstances of war.



Also, try to write about the impact of these experiences on how you view yourself and others and how you think they should see you. Is this the only way this can or should play out for the rest of your life? What do you need to do to make it right? Is forgiveness impossible, and, if so, why? If you see others at fault, what needs to happen in your life for you to either forgive them or just move on?

Although it is completely understandable that you want to avoid thinking about these experiences, avoidance only provides short-term relief. Haunting thoughts resurface. When they do, they can be more painful and it can take more effort to keep them away. It is important to keep in mind that memories can't actually harm you, even though the feelings that surface can be extremely painful.

Find a path toward acceptance of your actions and those of others.



The fact that someone did something bad does not mean any other good he or she has done in life is invalid. It doesn't change who that person is at the core, and it doesn't change who he or she might become over the course of his or her life. You have to consider the totality of a person's life. Sometimes, good people do really bad things. A life is made up of many moments and many acts. The different parts do not cancel each other out; they simply co-exist.

It's also important to remember that war is a special case. There is no preparation for what it actually feels like to be in combat — the levels of rage, fear, guilt, and grief that often precede acts that someone might feel guilt or shame about after the battle is over. The very situation of war is abnormal and the rules of morality and behavior are distorted. In war, actions are required and taken that would never occur in peacetime. In war, these actions are often expected behavior and may lead military personnel to have to change their normal behavior. In these conditions, and under the pressure of intense emotions, the clarity between right and wrong is often blurred. Situations are extreme and atypical and the normal rules of morality and behavior can be distorted.



You might be motivated to try to go back and think about what could have been different. This will not, however, change what happened; rather, it may keep you stuck in the “what ifs.” Acceptance involves understanding, forgiveness, admitting that something has occurred, and not trying to wish it away. Instead of focusing on what could have been done differently before, you can make a commitment to try to be open to seeing goodness in others. Over time, this can help you heal.

Although this can't delete past acts, it can help you feel good about present and future choices you make.

Distinguish actions from identity.

Remember that a person can never be fully defined by his or her actions. People are too complex. Just because a person commits a bad act does not mean the individual is a completely bad person. Labeling someone as “bad” would erase all the positive things the person did in the past or could do in the



future. In other words, even if a particular act is bad or wrong, it is still possible for a person to move forward and create a life of goodness and value.

Can you imagine seeing goodness in others as you move forward with your life? Can you think of any good acts you can do now?



Pursue relationships and new experiences.

If you have condemned yourself or others and you can't see the possibility of goodness in yourself or others, you'll limit the number of options you'll have in life. You'll risk being isolated, especially from people who care about you. This will prevent you from learning that you and others are capable of goodness and still have worth and are worthy of positive relationships.

Slowly, but surely, try to break these habits and seek positive and healing relationships. Generate a list of the people who are (or were) important to you and who have (or have had) a positive influence in your life. Start by approaching those individuals whom you think will offer the most support. When you approach them, you might want to tell them exactly what you need (e.g., for them to just listen and not blame anyone), as they might be at a loss as to what to do or say.

Rebuild trust.

When trust is damaged, it needs to be rebuilt in small steps. Reconnecting with people will help. Take some time to figure out whom you can trust; you may find you can trust some people with some things (e.g., money), but not others (e.g., your emotions). Go at your own pace. Begin to increase your trust gradually, as it is earned.



Get involved, do good deeds, and allow good deeds to be done for you.

Another way to restore confidence in yourself and others is by getting involved in activities that are positive and rewarding. Doing something good for other people, through community service or connecting with peers, can change the way you view yourself and others. Also, being part of something and being accepted by a group can add meaning and purpose to your life.

If you did something you feel ashamed about, doing a good deed may not feel like it erases or evens out the wrong that occurred. It will, however, allow you to help other people and bring more goodness and decency into your life.



While it is impossible to fix events in the past, there is the possibility of making amends. To amend something means, literally, to change it. Making amends means drawing a line between past and present and in some way changing the approach to how you live and act, so you can move toward the positive.

Get professional help.

If nothing you try seems to help you feel better, remember that you don't need to do everything alone. Getting help from an expert may be the best way to get the healing process started. Clergy members have special training and experience in addressing moral concerns and are good people to approach in times of need.



- ★ Also, mental health professionals have training in helping people think through issues like these, so you can tell them what happened and how it has affected you. This is especially important if you have not disclosed the event(s) to anyone else because of shame or the expectation of blame or disgust. By sharing your story with a mental health professional, you will see that you can still develop relationships with people — possibly even those who know what occurred.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Healing from guilt and shame takes time, patience, and persistence. Over the next couple of weeks, make an effort to reconnect with people who care about you. This helps you rebuild your sense of trust and the potential for goodness in yourself and others.

You may not feel ready to talk about the experiences you had during your deployment, but connecting with other veterans who have had similar experiences may help you feel understood and less alone.

Know that there will be challenging times ahead — periods in which guilt and shame are at the forefront in your life and feel very painful. Plan for these times by thinking about whom you can talk to or what you can say to yourself.

