

Guilt, Anger and the Human Condition

By Sam Menahem Ph.D.

Are you a guilty person? Are you bothered by a nagging feeling that something is wrong with your life? Do angry people seem to choose you as their target for no good reason? Do you keep yourself very busy so you won't have to think about yourself too much?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, read on. If you answered "no" to all of them, you are either a very happy person...or you are in denial. Probably you are in denial. So read on anyway, you might decide to see that you have some inner guilt. After all, most guilt is unconscious. It is just too painful to feel the brunt of our guilt.

Psychologists since the time of Sigmund Freud have been trying to educate us about the ways in which we protect ourselves from feeling the pain of guilt. The number one defense mechanism on the hit parade is denial. Young children often deny doing things they just did, right in front of you. Even when confronted by adults they deny it. Only with maturity do people begin to admit what they have done. With even greater maturity they learn to accept the consequences of what they have done. This does not usually occur until adolescence, maybe later (sometimes never). There are those who never admit responsibility for anything. Schizophrenics, criminals, alcohol and drug abusers, narcissists all deny responsibility for their actions. The fear of the consequences of their actions is too great. To feel guilty is to think you did something wrong. In a court of law, guilt requires punishment. Life is like a court of law. If you think you are guilty, you will find some way to get punished for it. Most of the time the punishment comes in the form of other people, or life in general, giving you problems, situations and feelings you don't want.

If you are completely unaware of your own guilt and need for punishment, you will see no connection when the troubling person or situation gives you a hard time. For example, you may be criticized harshly by a spouse or boss. You react with righteous indignation or anger. "How dare he attack me. I didn't do anything wrong. I am angry and going to stay angry until he apologizes". I may rant and rave, or turn it inward and get depressed, or develop a physical condition like a headache, stomach ache or worse. I may also develop anxiety out of fear of retribution for my retaliatory anger. It is a vicious circle. The tragedy of it all is that neither party realizes that the whole conflict has to do with unconscious guilt and self hate. The one who is more aware of the guilt, sometimes called a depressive (or victim, loser, schlemiel) attracts another person with unconscious guilt. This person is so unconscious that they prefer to project out their guilt onto someone else. The angry person proclaims. It isn't my fault...it is your fault. This is projection, an attempt to remain unaware of guilt and self hate. The ball is now in the depressive's court. She might respond by counter attacking, getting more depressed, or getting sicker in some way. The vicious circle may spiral out of control, with all parties feeling misunderstood, victimized and unhappy. ***This is the dynamic behind all human conflict.*** It leads to the entire range of human misery, depression, anxiety, divorce, illness, and on a global scale war. All of it is caused by one simple human emotion.....

GUILT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Guilt is an emotional discomfort that arises when we feel we have not lived up to some responsibility or have done something wrong. It doesn't mean we actually did do something wrong, we just have to ***think*** we did something wrong. This is an important distinction. To paraphrase the great philosopher Rene Descartes, "I think I did something wrong- therefore I did do something wrong - (and I am guilty!)" Now if you think you did something wrong, you have to be punished, somehow, ***and you will find a way.*** Now why do so many, if not all of us, think we did something wrong? There are two levels to be explored, the psychological and the spiritual.

Psychological guilt develops as we are born into and adapt to the physical world. Psychologists call this process, "separation-individuation." This term means that in order to survive in the physical world, we need to gradually realize that we are separate individuals. We need to identify with our bodies, realize we are physically separate from mother and learn how to deal with and cope with all the other seemingly

separate individuals in this world of “blooming, buzzing confusion” (to quote William James.) Under ideal conditions, our caretakers show us warmth, love and compassion. They guide us through all the difficulties of toddler-hood and early childhood. They give us appropriate limits at each age and enforce the rules consistently. They never use guilt or fear to control us. We grow up to be happy, healthy, young adults with high self esteem and great caring for others. Will all those who were raised this way please raise their hand?

Now, as for the rest of us, we are raised by immature, inconsistent parents who had plenty of their own insecurities and issues. They tried their best, but were often overwhelmed by the process of making a living and raising a family. They tried to love us and set limits but did it inconsistently. Maybe someone drank too much, or took illicit drugs. They used fear and guilt to control us far too often, just as their parents did with them. They just didn’t know any better. Sometimes they treated us with outright abuse or neglect. The result is that we are traumatized. Each time we were yelled at or hit or told that we weren’t good enough, we took it to heart. The nature of children, is that they think the world revolves around them. If they are being mistreated, they think they deserved it. What do you think the result is? You guessed it...

GUILT!!!!!!!!!!

(The following is a parody of the introduction to the old 1950s Superman TV show)

“More powerful than a locomotive - able to destroy whole populations like an epidemic - look... out at the world....It’s GUILT...

Yes, its guilt, strange emotion from another planet with power and ability to destroy mortal man...guilt, who is disguised in every man, destroying all who feel it or deny it, suffer with fear anger, and the physical way.”

Seriously now, it is almost impossible to grow up without trauma, guilt and fear. Parenting is a very difficult job and most people stink at it because of their own problems. Most parents, however, are in denial that they stink at parenting. Consequently, the kids feel guilty because the parents tell them to be guilty (without realizing it.) Parental blaming, plus the normal narcissistic nature of childhood equals a very guilty populace. Am I blaming the parents, actually no!!!! This is just the way it is. And human life is difficult because of the way it is set up. Most of us grow up in the competitive world of school and work, trying to prove that we are good enough, while “knowing” inside that we are not (because of guilt and unworthiness).

Guilt is the Human Condition!!!

Now, this is much too painful for most folks to bear. They have to deny their guilt, pretend it doesn’t exist, and blame someone else. This is done by the previously mentioned defense mechanisms of denial and projection. I must, at this point, add in the grand daddy of all defenses-repression. This is the *automatic* pushing of pain into the unconscious. So we can be very guilty and not even know about it. ***The end result of all this inner guilt and turmoil in the outer world is fear, hate and conflict.*** Guilt is the source of all human conflict. I have just outlined the psychological reasons for guilt. Yet, that does not go deep enough. We must also explore the spiritual basis for guilt.

The spiritual basis for guilt is a feeling of separation from God (the Infinite, our Source). Our materialistic western culture would have us believe that we are nothing but biological creatures, with an ego to guide us through life, after which we are obliterated. This is the paradigm of life we are taught in the American school system. This is often taught side by side with some religious teaching which mentions a God who is basically loving and powerful but also judgmental. Since he knows all about us, he is punishing if we are bad. (Santa Claus?) If guilt is the root of all suffering, and there is some spiritual basis for guilt, let us root it out and heal it. The big point is....

A Feeling of Separation from God Causes All Suffering!!!

Therefore, healing the split with God is the central task for healing each person’s pain. Indeed it is the central task for healing the persistent conflict between individuals and nations.

We must stop projecting God out as a separate being who is punishing us for our guilt (like our parents on the psychological level). The ultimate answer for humanity is to wake up and realize that, on the spiritual level, we are One with God. That is to say, we are emanations of All That Is - our Source - God. God’s nature is love, peace and power. Thus, our nature is love, peace and power. But, since we are alienated and think we are separate from God, we feel guilt, fear and anger on a regular basis.

An Outline for Guilt

First, we must admit our underlying guilt and heal the emotions. Second, we must heal our relationship with God - develop our spirituality. Spiritual-psychotherapy can help. It involves releasing your feelings of separation from others (true forgiveness) and God. Meditation and prayer are invaluable tools in the process. They help us to promote spiritual values.. We need to learn to release the negative emotions and negative beliefs caused by guilt. As we make progress in letting go of negative emotions, we will develop forgiveness and compassion for others.

We must also look for the lesson and meaning in each life event., The human lesson plan is to try to pray away all problems and sail through life easily and happily. If that doesn't occur we begin to doubt the efficacy of prayer and the power of God. That is because of our misunderstanding about what prayer is and how God answers prayer. God simply has a different lesson plan.

To God, prayer is not a simple get rid of suffering technique. Rather, it is an alignment of our values with Spiritual values. Every time we have a problem, we need to align ourselves with God or Spirit better. If there is no spiritual learning, or "repentance" (rethinking) there may not be any change on the physical or psychological level - thus, the answer has been given. The answer is *No*. We haven't let go of the guilt, anger or fear yet, so we don't get healed yet. "Keep trying," God replies, "I will give you strength." Keep praying and the answer will be changed when we are healed *spiritually*. Remember, we are spiritual beings first and foremost. Changing physical phenomena is just an arena for spiritual learning.

The ultimate goal is a sense of oneness with the source, God. In more pragmatic terms this would mean feelings of happiness, joy, even bliss, not all the time, but whenever we are properly aligned. There is tremendous pull by our physical and ego selves to move away from spirituality and toward the pleasures of sensory gratification. We need to gradually move away from spending all of our time gratifying the senses and spend more time in contemplation of the spiritual side of ourselves. Spiritual therapy, prayer and mediation will, over time, show us what we really are, spiritual beings, on a human adventure.

It is time to let go of our hidden inner guilt, let it go and develop our spiritual side.

It is our only chance for real happiness.

The fate of humanity awaits our collective decision.

Sam Menahem, Ph.D. is a transpersonal psychologist in Fort Lee N.J. He is the author of "When Therapy Isn't Enough", and "All Your Prayers Are Answered" and is an adjunct Professor of Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is past President of the Association for Spirituality and Psychotherapy (ASP) in New York City. He has previously published articles in *The Quest*. Web site www.drmenahem.com. Mailing- 2083 Center Avenue, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Tel. 201-944-1164, Fax 201-944-1623.